

THE ABUNDANCE OF GOD'S GOODNESS

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Last summer, I served as an intern at First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Each year, the Davidson College Chaplain's Office selects five rising seniors who are interested in exploring ministry and pairs them with places of worship of different denominations and religions across the country. As a Ministry Fellow, I got the full view of parish ministry from pastoral care to leading worship and even stewardship. Reading the parables from Matthew 13, I was reminded of my experience leading a youth mission trip in Baltimore, Maryland as a First Pres intern. We partnered with The Center Baltimore, a PCUSA non-profit that seeks to revolutionize mission work by focusing on social justice as a pillar of reformed tradition.

Our team of three adults and five high schoolers worked closely with Latin American immigrant communities in the city. Any of our initial shyness and hesitancy as strangers to the city and our new friends was quickly erased. After each long day of volunteering and traveling, our church group would have nightly reflections. One of the questions we always asked each other was where we saw God that day. Many of us answered we saw God in worshiping and praying in union as two different communities come together, in reading Bible stories to children and seeing their faces light up with excitement and wonder, and even in playing soccer and corn-hole outside on several hot, muggy Baltimore afternoons. In other words, we saw and felt a wholeness made of different theological beliefs, languages, abilities, places of origin, and ages.

Our mission team also worked at a large farm and community garden run and used by fifteen different immigrant families. We spent our mornings trying to keep the sun and sweat out of our eyes as we weeded in the soil and laid mulch by hand. The farm was itself an example of Creation's abundance. Peppers, parsley, radishes, squash, and almost every vegetable and herb you could name were growing alongside each other. Beside us, fluffy sheep strolled past the fences lined with trees to watch us work—probably taunting us a little from the shade. After our hard work, we shared a meal with the farmers and their families prepared for us by one of the farm managers: hand-rolled tortillas and rice and chicken steeped in a broth made with ingredients picked from the farm. These moments of communion nourished our bodies with energy and our spirits with conversation and the presence of friendship and fellowship.

Like the seeds in the farm in Baltimore that sprouted alongside each other and shared the same land and air, God's Kingdom welcomes a place for all of us to grow together in peace and prosperity. In the parable of the mustard seed that Jesus tells his followers, we hear God's Kingdom flourishes with unity in nature. You could say God's Kingdom is the vision of abundance and diversity: it is where vegetation, animals, and all of Creation experience the peace of wholeness. These parables from this passage in Matthew likewise reflect the growth and prosperity promised to God's people that start with just a tiny speck of faith, like a mustard seed or bit of yeast. Sometimes God's goodness can surprise you, as in the case of the man and his hidden treasure or finding the value of a pearl. This last piece of scripture affirms an overcoming goodness against the bad that seeks to hold us back: it states the Kingdom of God throws out the bad to provide for a proliferation of goodness. Peace, prosperity, and unity are the products of a promised goodness.

Our time in Baltimore occurred during the week in July that it came to light the separation of migrant children from their parents by the current administration. While we had kept in mind Baltimore's history of racial injustice, redlining, and gentrification during our trip, we realized more tangibly the fear and vigilance of being a person without documentation today in the United States and the precarious bodies of some of our neighbors whom we met through the service of God. This realization makes it hard for us

to reckon the overwhelming bad with any promise of good preached in the Matthew parables. This is not the tolerance and the compassion Christ teaches us; this is not the abundance of security and unity we hope for in this world and expect in God's Kingdom.

But still, as Christians of this particular denomination, we are taught that all good in the world comes from God. The Christian mystic Julian of Norwich writes in *Revelations of Divine Love*, a fourteenth-century book of devotions and visions, "the Goodness of God is the highest prayer, and it cometh down to the lowest part of our need... For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the whole, so are we, soul and body, clad in the Goodness of God, and enclosed... the Goodness of God is ever whole; and more near to us, without any likeness." As she proposes, goodness not only surrounds us but lives within us. Our God judges us with love, patience, and redemption providing us with abundance of grace and comfort and sustaining us with the goodness we so need and deserve. Therefore, we must believe that hate and violence do not have the final word. The bad can be cast out in the net if we let goodness prevail. To quote Albus Dumbledore, another figure (though fictional) important to me and many of my generation, "Happiness can be found in the darkest of times, if only one remembers to turn on the light." In darkness we feel when we read the national news or in the micro of our communities, there is light yet in God's goodness.

As some of you may know, Davidson's campus suffered expressions of Neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and homophobic hate speech about a week and a half ago by alleged students of our community. Many of us were in shock; how can this be the campus I've come to call home? How, in the conversations we have in our humanities, social science, and justice, equality, and community classes, with friends, and professors, and invited speakers could students still feel and project this vitriol? Many others acknowledged that, as painful as it is to admit, these students do not make up an isolated event in the history of our country, our state, or even our city or college. It is a reminder of an ongoing struggle against fearful bigotry and towards tolerance and justice.

As a student in my fourth year, I have witnessed an overwhelming amount of sadness and injustice. This is true. But I have also been privileged to the joyful bond of fellowship and the gracious dependency of faith during these times. At Davidson, outlets for religion, interfaith, and spirituality have become some of the most rewarding exemplars of goodness. In fact, these are the spaces, like DCPC and UKirk, and the people I go to for refuge and reflection in times of doubt and uncertainty. I am grateful to have a church that supports me and other students, a diverse and rich religious and spiritual life, wonderful friends and professors, and a home away from home with my Adopt-A-Student family. I am proud to have witnessed and experienced communities of students and of faith that mobilize to speak for goodness and act against oppression. When we unite to share in a common good, whether to express God's love, build community, resist hate, or share a meal, we resemble the birds that flock together in the branches of a mustard tree. This is an example of God's Kingdom. I must believe these are the products of an overflowing of God's goodness and love, for all that is good is God working through the world.

As communities of faith in Baltimore, Davidson College, DCPC, and the greater communion, we come from different walks of life but we are always strengthened in unity by God's abundance of grace and goodness. We are the imperfect children of God. Undoubtedly we will experience doubt of mind and spirit; we will question our communities, ourselves, our loved ones, and even our faith. But we cannot doubt the abundance of goodness that comes from the will of the Creator, the grace of the Redeemer, and the comfort of the Sustainer, the Holy Spirit. As I move forward and physically leave this community after graduation, I know I will take with me the goodness I've experienced here wherever I go. The goodness that comes from or in spite of the bad is when we receive a taste of God's abundance that brings us closer to the image of Kingdom. Friends, we are all blessed with the possibility of a communally shared peace to flourish and heal us in wholeness. Glory to God in the highest! AMEN.