



Thoughts on the Journey...

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St. Ann Church on Town Branch Road was a small mission church nestled at the base of one of the mountains in Manchester, Kentucky. It was home for a handful of Catholic volunteers from the Cincinnati area who participated in evangelization projects in the early 70's in several rural Appalachian communities. It was there that I had my first glimpse at the richness of poverty.

For two weekends a month and four full weeks in the summer we would travel to this mission place. The first week we would canvas the back-roads to visit with the families and invite them to the Bible Schools and the second week we would transport the children to St. Ann's where we would conduct Bible Schools for grade school and middle school age children. On this particular day, we caught word that there was an 'un-churched' family with five young children living back in one of the hollers. So we took the lead and headed out on the roads that twisted and turned as we made our way to this remote place, competing with the coal and lumber trucks that flew by at incredible speeds. You had to pay close attention so you wouldn't miss a turn; the deeper you drove into the mountain, the fewer the road signs to guide you.

It was clear that we had arrived at our destination. Sitting at the edge of a creek was a log home where all five Wilkinson children were playing in the yard. They gathered together quickly as they saw our car approaching the house. It took a split second and their mother came out of the house landing a protective stance on the front porch. It was always risky business on the first visit. Before getting out of the car, we introduced ourselves and extended the invitation for her children to come to Bible School. Her stance softened and she invited us to come in. The house was humble, tidy, and seemed very small when everyone was assembled. We visited for about an hour, explained the details of our mission, and she graciously accepted the invitation for her children to attend the upcoming Bible School.

The following week we returned and three of the five children were standing at the end of the road eagerly awaiting to come to Bible School. Two of the children stood on the front porch in bare feet waving sheepishly. Mamma Wilkinson came out and explained, without apology, that there weren't enough

shoes to go around, so two of the children would have to wait their turn until the next time. There was no crying or pouting by the two children left behind - just a complacent acceptance. They all waved lovingly to one another as we pulled away. I don't ever think I will ever forget the image of those two beautiful children with second-hand clothes and first-rate attitudes standing next to their mother who obviously taught them the virtue of *letting go* with grace.

So, what is the greater poverty? To have no shoes? Or, to have so many shoes you can't possibly wear them all? To have two people living in a space that's built for a small village? Or, to be content to live humbly and simply? To have all the trappings of wealth and prestige but live in spiritual poverty? From what I have witnessed, it seems to me that true happiness lies in letting go of the emptiness of expectation, competition, status, appearances, power, control, and success as defined by our secular world.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus teaches that we should be aware of those who parade their wealth, status, and self-importance. He called his apostles and held up as a symbol of virtue, a poor woman who contributed to the treasury all that she had. He said to them,

"Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty..."

We live in a day and age where the concept of '*less is more*' is difficult to grasp because we are barraged with messages to the contrary. Sometimes we seek to be fulfilled and satisfied by things that don't bring us lasting happiness. When we come to understand the richness of spiritual poverty, and begin to embrace the virtue of 'letting go', we will begin to understand true contentment, acceptance, and the real wealth of peace in Christ.

Two little children with no shoes in a mountain holler in Kentucky- who would have thought they would be the bearers of such good news?