

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 6, July 12, 2009, dedicated to Mary, JJ, Jessica, Megan, Eddie, Randy, Dale and Shelley and to all the people of West Virginia who touched our lives, to the Appalachian South Folk Life Center for hosting us, to Adeline and Madeline on their baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Almost Heaven”

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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From June 14 to 20, 13 teenagers from First Church, along with five adults, spent time in the southern mountains of West Virginia. We were close to Pipestem, and through the efforts of the Appalachian South Folklife Center, we worked four five days on Mary’s home in the town of Hinton. Hinton is a former lumber town located at the confluence of the Greenbrier, New and Bluestone rivers. I’d like to share a few thoughts about that experience.

On a snowy winter day in 2007, Eddie almost lost his life. He was working in his store when some boys in town stole his snowmobile to take a joy ride into the mountains. The snowmobile was parked in front of his Auto Parts and Paint Store in Hinton.

He was working inside when he heard it fire-up unexpectedly.

Eddie walked outside to see what was happening. What was happening was wrong and the young thieves needed to be stopped. So, Eddie took off on another snowmobile in hot pursuit. Winding their way through the mountains, Eddie started catching up to them. Suddenly, he hit a bad ice spot, spun out and headed off the path down the mountain. He was knocked unconscious with severe injuries.

Remembering nothing until awaking in the helicopter life-flighting him to Charleston, Eddie now remembers losing lots of blood, and experiencing amazing pain from broken legs, back and ribs, along with punctured lungs.

That day, Eddie almost died. It was questionable whether he would get out of intensive care. Then doctors wondered if he would regain the use of his legs and arms. His life saved, for months Eddie laid in hospital beds and finally in bed at home. Through perseverance, he recovered and began to walk again. But, he found himself addicted to pain medication, which caused changing moods and a sinking state of depression. Eddie knew he was addicted to pills and he prayed to God, asking the Lord to help him beat his addiction. In the end, Eddie locked himself in his house, went cold turkey, and beat his addiction to drugs.

Hearing this story on a hot June day sitting at the counter of Eddie's Auto Parts, he opened up and shared his faith. Standing nearby was Randy, who was listening with great respect and interest to his friend and boss as he relived this traumatic story as if it were yesterday. Eddie had opened up to me because he was preparing to talk to his Vacation Bible School children that evening, as the men of the church do every year.

While stopping into the store (which was next door to our work site), we had struck up a conversation about faith (imagine that – me

striking up a conversation about faith, Jesus, life, church with a complete stranger!). As an elder in his Baptist Church, Eddie worships three times each week – twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday night. He is a witness to Jesus Christ in his daily life. He is kindness, hospitality, giving, sharing, generosity to us reached beyond measure.

I asked him, “What will you say to the kids at Vacation Bible School tonight?” He answered after some thought, “I will tell them my story. I will tell them to be honest about their lives. I will tell them not to steal from people. I will tell them to do the right thing by people. I will tell them to love God and their neighbor with not only with their words but with their actions.”

God blessed 18 of our members for one week last month. You all blessed us by sending us with your blessing to our neighbors (and now our friends) in West Virginia. They blessed us the rest of the way.

We all fell in love that week with a beautiful 4-year-old named Megan. Being raised by her grandmother, Mary, Megan worked right beside us painting her own room and the house’s exterior, plus her front yard wishing well. Her aunt Jessica, 18, worked right along side us as well. At first she was shy about helping. But with just a little encouragement, Jess jumped in. Let me say this (with all respect for our guests from Pleasantville UCC): the First Church youth are the hardest working group around!

We learned a lot in West Virginia. The motto of West Virginia is “Mountaineers are always free.” We experienced the free spirit of the mountaineers for one week. Mountaineers are fiercely proud and independent people. They are strong and honest people. In a state known for its exterior beauty in 24,000 square miles of territory, and 150 years of coal mining under these mountains, I came to realize even more fully than before, in West Virginia there is a lot going on

under the surface. While you may take that to mean whatever you want, I want you to take it this way: Coal and people run deep in southern Appalachia. The people are reverent and tough. They have persevered through hard times and can laugh about it nevertheless. Like Eddie, they have deep sense of fairness and honesty. Like Dale, our crew's chief, they wrestle with the issues of life and faith in clear ways and seek help and guidance in holy scripture and one another.

Bert Cook and I were talking about West Virginians yesterday. He said, "Theirs is a 'people justice.' They do the right thing by people. Through it all, they have a deep sense of perseverance and reverence. It's a reverence for life, for others, for the land, and for God."

Whether you know it or not, you and I owe a great debt to West Virginia. This church was built in the late 1920s with money from the Jeffery family, which made its fortune through the Jeffery Mining Company, an industrial powerhouse that made mining equipment and mining delivery systems. But the Jeffery family also owned and operated mines in southern Ohio and West Virginia. In part, this is a house built with coal and through the hard work of coal miners. Cathedrals are never built from sand and rock alone, but from the lives of others. Ours is no exception.

As I was reading the writings of Don West, the founder of the Appalachian South Folk Life Center, I came across a book of his poetry and prose, titled *No Lonesome Road*. In the book, Don chronicles the radical history of southern Appalachia, to which we also owe a great debt. You see, the roots of the abolitionist movement were not born on the streets of New York and in the pulpits of the north. They came from the mountain people of the southern Appalachian range. The Appalachian mountain people were horrified at the treatment of slaves on the plains and flat lands between the ocean and the Appalachians. Before they were organizing mine workers, camps were formed to train people to take slaves and hide them in the mountains. More than

250,000 men from Appalachia, from Alabama to southern Pennsylvania, volunteered to fight for the Union during the Civil War in their battle against slavery.

Remember as well that the roots of the civil rights movement came from camps and training centers in Tennessee and Kentucky where white, black and native American people worked together from the early 1800s on. Rosa Parks and John Lewis were trained in nonviolence in the mountains of Tennessee, not in Alabama and Georgia.

All of this is to say that we have a lot to learn about our mountaineering brothers and sisters. I was proud to be part of a group that traveled to southern West Virginia to learn and to serve a few weeks ago. You should be proud of them as well. We learned from our neighbors to the immediate south that faith is deep in the mountains and in her people. We learned that with a smile, a hug, and time to listen, you will hear stories about the mountains, the rivers and the people who live there. It's almost heaven. It's West Virginia.

As we go, let us carry out the wisdom of Eddie in our lives: "I will tell them my story. I will tell them to be honest about their lives. I will tell them not to steal from people. I will tell them to do the right thing by people. I will tell them to love God and their neighbor with not only with their words but with their actions."

Thanks be to God for the blessings of growing in faith with the mountaineers who indeed are "always free." Amen.