



This upcoming Labor Day weekend will not be the same for many across the country, including for several of us who grew up together in our small hometown in northwestern Ohio. About ten years ago, we started to take the first weekend in September to do an annual gathering, of sorts, from our distant places throughout Ohio and Michigan, and meet up at one of the group's parents' condo on Catawba Island. Eventually, we moved on to other spots around Ohio, just catching up face-to-face and, perhaps, some random

shenanigans, for good measure, during the few days together. It will not be the same this upcoming holiday weekend, but it is already not the same for one in our group, whose name is Pete.

Almost five years ago, Pete started working at Flying Horse Farms, "a medical specialty camp that provides healing and transformative experiences for children with serious illnesses...[It's] located in Mt. Gilead, Ohio [about 45 miles north of Columbus]. [The] camp first opened its gates in 2010 and [now] hosts about 900 children and families each year." The children could be dealing with cancer, as well as rare diseases and disorders of the heart, lungs and more, leading some of them to face post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and other mental health illnesses as a result of their diagnoses. Nevertheless, all the activities at the camp are meant to "ensure every camper can participate and feel a sense of pride, accomplishment and freedom" from whatever disease defining their life.*

However, the best part of all is that it is absolutely free, and part of the reason why it was at no cost to these families who have been through more than their fair share of struggle, was because there was someone behind the scenes making connections with all these businesses and hospitals in Columbus and throughout the state, raising funds to underwrite the cost of camp. That someone was Pete, until just over a month ago, when, of course, the pandemic hit the economic realities of Flying Horse Farms as well, not being able to do the usual full-scale summer activities on site; so, Pete was let go from his position.

Pete has always been one of the generous souls in our group, not just with his time at Flying Horse Farms, but, also for the years he worked at Hiram House Camp (about 10/15 miles to the E/NE of us), not to mention when he traveled down south with a group from graduate school after the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina. Now, some of that service-focus comes from his younger years in the Boy Scouts, which has certainly helped with many of our group gatherings, as he has been our de-facto campfire starter. So, I couldn't help but think of those special sitting-by-the-fire times when considering the rather interesting wording at the end of the Romans reading this morning, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Because, evidently, in ancient times, putting coals on your head was a sign of accepting remorse. Now, for our group, it didn't get quite that far. Instead, sometimes it just takes a night-long conversation around a fire that ends up in those burning coals, of sorts, as a fulfillment to time well spent in hearing stories to remind each other of such amazing hospitality still well at work in this very world.

One such story that would more than qualify comes from Pete's time at Flying Horse Farms with a young boy named Omar, who dealt with a pulmonary disease, not to mention a condition in which he was born with no legs. So, he needed a wheelchair for mobility, and he required assistance to turn over in bed every two hours overnight. To make matters worse, this was to be the first night away from his parents, so understandably, he was wrecked with homesickness. Nevertheless, with the help of camp counselors, as well as his fellow campers, he grew to enjoy his time there, even to the point of being overcome with sadness to see it come to an end. That would be fantastic enough on its own: how Omar overcame such devastating adversity in his life.

Except, Omar enjoyed the experience so much that he returned the next year, when plenty of other campers were in his exact position from before with intense separation anxiety: struggling being away from home for the first time. Omar could have focused on maximizing his own time there, to pull off even more joy and excitement than the year before, but he chose to be there for those other campers with an empathy well beyond his years. They could bond over shared experiences with countless medical procedures at such a young age, as well as the fears and worries for the first time being away from the people they knew and trusted to take care of them. In a way, Omar brought to life the words that would lead to the emotional equivalent of hot coals on our very souls. They were not enemies at that camp, but they were strangers to each other, at first: no reason whatsoever for Omar to help them at all. Other people could do that for them. And yet, Omar saw they were hungry for comfort, thirsty for understanding, and Omar gave them exactly that and more.

Of course, Paul sets all this up in the Romans reading this morning with, "Let love be genuine." Omar most certainly pulled off a most genuine love, but, today, we are, also, mindful of the most genuine act of love for the whole world when Jesus Christ took the cross all the way up a hill in a victory march over sin and death to ensure that those conditions of our humanity would not define our life, either.

Better yet, our Lord does not carry it all out of a guilt to be thrust upon on our heads with a piercing fire of shame, but with a most grace-filled love to convince us that we are more than worth it: worth even death itself, worth living right by our side, including through the times when we manage to do our part of Omar-level compassion for one another. This isn't about making us feel full of remorse over not doing enough in however many instances in our life. This is about our Lord who took on a crown of thorns on his head and still refused to stop in saving us, in saving the world, then, now and forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

* Flying Horse Farms: <https://flyinghorsefarms.org/about/>