As I write this, we are recently returned from our yearly vacation to the bluegrass festival in Winfield, Kansas. I like to tell people that when we go, we’re camping with 25,000 of our best friends. It’s a joke, but it’s also kind of not a joke.

Because it’s a community. A temporary one, built of tents and campers and easy-ups and music and late night jams and conversations and early morning coffee. And everything in between. A community built of beloved songs sung together, and new songs learned, and sometimes even newer songs written. Of first-timers and old-timers sharing space together.

My family, and our friend who came from Colorado this year, have camped in the same spot for longer than I’ve been attending - and this was year 20 for me. (My first year was 2005 - my only “miss” was when the festival was cancelled due to COVID in 2020.) When we first camped in that spot, my dad and his friends had been adopted in by a larger group from the Winfield area, mostly an extended family and close friends. Then the patriarch of that family died, and everyone brought their funeral clothes to Winfield that year. Other folks moved away, and that camp was replaced by another group who we are getting to know.

The same folks camp down the hill behind us each year, and have for as long as we've been in “our” spot - probably longer. We grieved with a member of that camp who lost his wife to cancer, and rejoiced with him when he found love again.

And we welcome new people. Someone pulled in this year looking for a place to stake a tent, and there was room next to our camp - so she camped next to us. A vendor at the festival, she was busy all day every day, but we saw her most evenings, at least for a few minutes. And we were thankful for the relationship that we began to build with her, as she told us she was thankful as well!

And we give thanks for the presence of old friends, people who we know from life outside the festival, who make a point of stopping by to visit. To renew and strengthen those relationships.

And most years, we spend time listening to artists we love, artists we look forward to hearing, and discovering the gifts of artists we may never have heard of before, but who bring music that enriches our souls and broadens our world. Music that gets us dancing or brings us a measure of peace or helps us feel that emotion we’ve been needing to feel.

It’s not an escape from the “real world” and we wouldn’t want it to be. But I do think it’s a reminder of what community can look like, when we choose to be welcoming. When we choose to see the best in each other. When we choose to live among each other the way God intends.