

TRYING SMALL

Brian Palmer – ELCA Pastor/Missionary serving in Totota, Liberia

Pizza versus Greek Salad and Fries

Most weeks I spend at least one night in Monrovia so as to tend to the LCL School System. This gone Wednesday (yes – that is the Liberian way of saying it), while in Monrovia, I gave Helen a call and asked her if she was willing to have a chat over dinner. Helen is a Methodist missionary who has been serving the Methodist School System in Liberia since 2008. Recently, I've had several folks point me to her for answers to some of my frustrations. As my stomach growled for a pizza that never came, Helen chowed down on a Greek salad and fries. As she ate, she talked. She talked and talked and talked and never addressed any of my questions or concerns. She had a lot to say...and it was all about Jesus. Her salad and fries looked pretty stinkin' good but that was not where her mind was. She definitely heard my questions about teachers and resources and training, but she kept bringing it back to Jesus. In Helen's mind the purpose of the church affiliated schools is to make disciples and to the extent a good education helps that, so much the better.

I envy Helen. In my teaching at GST and LTBLMTC it is easy to keep the Gospel in the center and I am constantly reminding students of the Lutheran definition of the Church: The Church is "the assembly of all believers, among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel." In my work with the school system, I've been consumed with administrative questions and frustrations as well as my own preconceptions about the purpose of school and I have forgotten the bigger picture. Two days after dinner with Helen I had what was supposed to be a difficult meeting. Oddly, what I expected to be confrontation became collaboration and I believe my dinner with Helen was in part responsible for my improved countenance. I still got a hankering for that pizza, but I think Helen has shown me the better way.

Go Dog Go

Just this morning I visited several classrooms in the Lutheran school in Totota. The teachers have been warned I might stop by at any time so they had better be ready. It will take a little while before they come to realize my true intention... to encourage and assist. The last thing we need in the schools is more criticism and condemnation. One of the classes I visited was a combined 1st and 2nd grade. As a rule, in Liberia, teaching the lower grades is not taken seriously and the teachers are therefore underpaid and underappreciated. Most of them don't stay long.

Upon entering the class all the students jumped to attention, "Good morning Mr. Brian/Rev. Palmer /Uncle Brian, how are you today?" Trying to sound as much like Mr. Rogers as possible, I said, "Good morning boys and girls. I am very fine. It is such a blessing to see you. Please have your seats and continue to do your work." The children sat and resumed copying their spelling words. I noticed word #1 on the board was "dictionary" and the rest of the 15 words were of similar length and difficulty.

I was torn. On the one hand we have a young woman who is trying her best to do a thankless job and is in desperate need of affirmation and on the other hand we have 20 or so students, many of whom will fail to be promoted to the next grade due to ill-informed expectations. What's the answer? I landed on combination of praise and promise. I thanked the teacher for all her hard work, for being on time, for having lessons prepared, for keeping the children occupied etc. I told her I wanted to see her succeed as a teacher and that the way teachers succeed is by having students who succeed. I made her two promises, one spoken and one unspoken: Spoken) She would receive a list of grade appropriate spelling words. Unspoken) She would be invited to an extended workshop for 1st – 3rd grade teachers that will be held during the break. We shall see.