

Youth Sunday: Discipleship, Outreach, and Mission

February 12, 2023

Part 1 – Youth Retreat

Today we are continuing our series on things we are thankful for or excited about. This morning our message will look a little different than normal, as I will be sharing three things happening in our youth ministry that I'm excited about, centring on the themes of discipleship, outreach, and mission. So, grab your imaginary shovel and let's dig in!

As you may know, three weeks from now, our youth group will be heading to Southern Alberta Bible Camp for our annual weekend retreat. This event is a highlight for both youth and youth leaders alike, and this year anticipation is especially high as it is our first retreat since March 2020, which was literally just days before the world began to shut down due to covid.

The retreat weekend is designed with discipleship at its core. We have in-depth lessons, upbeat times of worship, and plenty of time in small groups for discussions, conversations, and prayer. Our goal is two-fold: to help youth connect meaningfully with God and with one another. The retreat format allows us to do this in ways we simply cannot in 2 hours on a Wednesday night. There is something about getting away together as a group for an extended period that helps facilitate a deeper relationship with God and allows for the strengthening of current friendships and the formation of new ones. And, of course, it wouldn't be a youth retreat without lots of fun activities. We'll have largescale wide-games, various contests and competitions, and we'll enjoy lots of time in SABC's massive gym. We'll also be spending hours chasing each other around playing nerf – and if I'm being honest, I'm not sure who's more excited about that – the youth or the youth leaders 😊

Now each year we select a theme for our retreat – something our lessons, discussions, and times of worship all centre on. This year our theme is "radical hospitality," which will focus on challenging the youth to express the radical welcome of Jesus to those around them – to love others in the same way God has loved us. We believe this is not only important at youth group and at church, but also in day-to-day life. We are surrounded by people who need to experience the love of God, and as Jesus tells us in John 13:35, the world will know we are His followers if we love one another. This is to be our defining characteristic and we want the youth to embrace that.

As we head into the retreat weekend, which for the leaders will consist of long days, little sleep, and countless cups of coffee, we ask that you please keep us in your prayers. We will need energy, health, wisdom, patience, and the empowering of God's Spirit to name a few. It is a lot of work organizing and running such a large event, but it is so worth it. We can see the difference it makes. The leaders and I were especially moved by one youth who shared that she experienced God at one of our retreats and felt closer to Him that weekend than she ever has in her entire life. That's really exciting and we can't wait to see what God will do at this year's retreat.

Part 2 – Pizza Outreach Lunches

How many of you like pizza? It's basically the perfect food, right? It's delicious hot or cold, it's inexpensive, and there are endless combinations of toppings – except pineapple, pineapple does not belong on pizza – and you will never change my mind 😊 It's also a food that teenagers love to eat, which leads to the second thing in our youth ministry I'm excited about – our pizza outreach lunches.

On the first Tuesday of each month, we host a free pizza party for JR and SR high students. The goal of these lunches is quite simple – we just want to connect with teenagers. It's an opportunity for us to reach new youth, to build community, and to have fun over food. And what's really neat and really exciting about these lunches is that while Jordan, Maryanna, and I host the meal – it is our youth who are the ones telling their friends and inviting them to come. Consistently, only about ¼ of the youth who come are from our church – the rest have no connection to us outside of these lunches and may never have come into a church otherwise.

A few years ago, I was reading *Dare to Lead* by Brene Brown – which is a great book if you are looking for a new read, and in it is a quote that really inspired me and helped cast a ministry vision for these lunches. I'm paraphrasing a little, but we want these lunches to be a place where “all students can walk in and, for that hour, take off the crushing weight of the pressures and stresses they carry, hang them up, and open their hearts to truly being seen”¹ and known and cared for. This very much reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28 where He invites those who are weary and burdened to come to Him, for He will give them rest.

As you probably can imagine, being a teenager today is incredibly difficult. They are facing pressures, stressors, and issues previous generations never had to deal with, or at least not to the same extent. Struggles with identity, mental health issues, bullying, abuse, and controversies around gender and sexuality all abound, to name a few. But as a youth group we want to provide a safe place for youth to be themselves and to be accepted and cared for – and as I wrap up this part of the message, I want to share a story that illustrates the impact we are having.

At one of our lunches, I noticed a high school girl who was sitting amongst her friends but looked despondent. So, I went over and just started making small talk with her – how is school going, how was your weekend, and so on. We had never met before, but she obviously felt safe and sensed that I cared, because within minutes she began telling me about the painful things she was going through at home and at school. We didn't have much time, and all I could really do was just listen. But as the conversation went on, I noticed her demeanor improve and even though I could still tell she was carrying a lot, she left looking a bit more relaxed. Over those 10 minutes I had with her, she was able to take off the heavy burdens she was carrying and share them with someone who cared. In those moments, I humbly believe Jesus was working through me to help give her some hope...all because one of our youth invited her to

¹ Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (New York, NY: Random House, 2018), p. 13.

come eat some pizza. Similar to how Jesus fed thousands of people with just a few loaves and fishes (Matt 14:13-21; 15:29-39), it never ceases to amaze me how He can do so much with so little.

Part 3 – SERVE Mission Trip

So far, we've covered our discipleship weekend, our outreach lunches, and I want to conclude my message by sharing a third thing I'm excited about in our youth ministry – our upcoming summer mission trip.

On July 2 we'll be waking up at an hour no one should ever have to wake up at, to travel to Kelowna, BC to take part in SERVE – our denomination's annual youth mission trip. Each year a location is selected and hundreds of youth from Baptist churches across Western Canada converge on the city and, as the name suggests, we serve. The tasks and projects vary each year, but usually centre on manual labour, seniors ministry, and vacation Bible school. In addition to days spent out in the community helping others, there is also a guest speaker who shares each night, energetic worship, games, and even a talent show. It's a full week, but a good week.

For me, there are several things about this trip that make me excited, and I want to share a few of those with you...

- By hosting SERVE in western Canada, it helps show the youth that there is a mission field right here at home.
- We go out into the community and do actual mission work, meeting and serving non-believers and those in need.
- Youth get to join with others to form new friendships and find encouragement in knowing there are others their age who love God and want to serve Him.
- Most of the planning and organization of the trip is done for us, so the youth leaders and I can spend our time connecting and serving with our youth.
- While safe, some of the projects will take youth out of their comfort zones and cause them to step out in faith.
- We get to see God at work in new and unexpected ways.
- Those on the team grow closer together and also have a lot of fun.

In God's Word we are commanded to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8), to be His ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20), and to be a light that shines before others (Matt 5:16). Trips like SERVE provide youth with the opportunity to do this, and I am so proud of them for putting their faith into action to benefit others like this.

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