

Pastor's Corner: 3-23-2019 – Whine Less, Appreciate More

Amy and I met my friend Tobin Dodge in the Anchorage airport where we had a brief layover before flying out to Dillingham where I would be speaking for a weekend campmeeting. Tobin was the one who had extended the invitation for us to come up and he was preparing us for what was to come.

“Your cell phones probably won’t work,” he informed us. Ok, no problem. “Also, all travel is weather dependent. We brought someone up for campmeeting in another area and they were stuck there for 2 weeks.” Well, great. It was too late to turn back now so we thanked Tobin and got headed to our departure gate.

Dillingham is one of the main ports for commercial fishing in Bristol Bay. Every year hundreds of thousands of salmon make their way through the bay to their spawning grounds. Along with those fish come thousands of fishermen. Driving around town it seemed as if boats were more plentiful than cars. The wintertime population is about 2500 but that number balloons during the summer when salmon season begins.

There is a highway that connects Dillingham with other parts of the state but the town itself has no paved roads. While we were there the temperature was in that sleet/snow range and everything was a muddy mess. We quickly realized that we didn’t pack the right kind of shoes.

My first impression of Dillingham was that it felt very, shall we say, rough around the edges. I didn’t see any fancy houses or cars. There’s no name brand stores or restaurants. Wells Fargo was about the only familiar face. There’s trees and mountains nearby but it was hard to call it beautiful with the grey skies and muddy roads.

The people in the Dillingham church were all very nice. The congregation is a mix of Caucasian and Native Alaskans with a few other minority groups thrown in. They fed us well and even sent us home with some canned salmon. The sanctuary was a little bit bigger than what we have here in Bismarck but there was only a handful in attendance. Apparently, the church was built with summer populations in mind and a lot of Adventists come to Dillingham to fish.

For the campmeeting I was speaking about the sufferings of Jesus and how his suffering makes him our perfect redeemer, advocate, and judge. We focused on texts that remind us that we can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of what Christ suffered. We talked about how he was tempted in all manner as we are, how he bore our iniquities, and that it is by his wounds we are healed.

After the campmeeting I sent Amy back to DFW while I flew out to Togiak, Alaska. Togiak is a small (800 population) native village that is an hour flight from Dillingham in a small 6 seat airplane (this is the only way in or out of the village). When I landed I saw a couple guys on 4 wheelers come rolling up to the airplane on the runway. It was John and Beanie (the local mission pastor and a member of the church) coming to greet me. They waved me over and told me they would meet me back at the church. I climbed into the courtesy van (my term, not theirs) and waited for them to take me to my destination. We drove for about ¼ of a mile and the van stopped in front of an unmarked tan building. “Seventh-day,” the driver called out. I guess it was my stop.

If Dillingham was humble, Togiak was, well, it was whatever is more humble than humble. Nothing is paved, there was a practical river running down the muddy, pot hole laden, streets. The village is about a mile long, maybe less. The houses are little more than what appear to be run-down shacks. There are as many rusted out derelict vehicles as there are operational ones and most people get around by 4-wheeler. Boats sit dry near many houses awaiting the fishing season that begins in the spring. There’s no rhyme or reason to houses and no clear subdivisions or property lines. Hardly any signs mark buildings except for the post office and the 1 grocery store (food items are a good 2-3x more expensive than what we pay down here). I was definitely in the bush.

Togiak is a strange mixture of rural and inner city. It is low tech and high tech at the same time. What I mean is that while it is a completely isolated rural village, they have many of the same issues you find in urban ghettos. There’s little access to affordable, quality food. Jobs are scarce. Alcohol and drug abuse are high as is physical and sexual abuse. Many, if not most, of the folks are on government assistance. The houses look like run down shacks but people have satellite dishes and cell phones. Togiak has one significant natural resource – salmon. But most of the natives can’t afford commercial fishing licenses and so the big

money ends up on someone else's pocket. The natives live a subsistence life. They fish for food and hunt moose, beaver, seal and walrus. In the spring the herring lay their eggs on the kelp and they will collect that for food as well. Or you can buy a \$15 cheese burger at the only restaurant in town called Happy's.

For all this the people were kind and joyful. They are soft spoken and they laugh easily. It was mostly teens that attended the week of prayer and they were well behaved and attentive. I enjoyed my time with them and was just starting to get to know some of the kids by the time things were ending.

The mission pastors are John and Lynette and their primary work seems to be providing a safe place for the kids to come hang out. Starting at about noon they will have people drop by just to be at the church (which also has a 2 bedroom parsonage attached). They will spend hours at the church just hanging out in a place where they are safe and Christ's love is present.

The difference between Dillingham and Togiak was night and day, for me. Dillingham was a pretty standard Adventist church, but Togiak was the mission field. Togiak felt like front line work for Jesus. The needs there are great.

My main take away from this experience is that I need to whine less and appreciate more. I only spent a week with the people of Togiak but I quickly realized that we take an awful lot for granted here in the "lower 48." We are often discontent even with far more at our fingertips than what others enjoy. I think we would be better off if we cultivated appreciation for the blessings God has given us and train ourselves to complain less about the things we don't like or don't have. We truly have an abundance here in Bismarck, an abundance of wealth, food, jobs, and talent in our church. With such blessings we should be the happiest people around.

Pray for the work being done in Togiak. It really is the mission field.

Happy Sabbath,
Pastor Tyler