

Eyes Open
Matthew 9: 9-13

August 12, 2018
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Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

2018 SIFAT Youth Mission Trip

In July of 2013 I was hired as the Minister of Youth here at Weatherly. Our youth had just returned from SIFAT, led by Linda Meigs. I heard about SIFAT that summer when I arrived and had decided that it was not a trip that I could see myself going on. Over the past several years the youth have shared their experiences at SIFAT and thanks to Lillian Pinke and Kendall Rodkey, they convinced me to return this past summer. This was the most difficult and intense trip I have been on with a youth group but also the most rewarding one. Kendall and Lillian did an excellent job this morning sharing some of their experiences with you. I would like to take a couple of moments to share some observations as well.

I must be honest; I was not impressed with SIFAT when we first arrived. There was no schedule presented to me prior to the trip from the camp. I had no idea what to expect or how the week would look, other than what the girls had told me from their experiences. As one who works hard to prepare for trips and be organized, this was very uncomfortable to me. After several hours there at SIFAT, we had an adult meeting and were given a schedule that we were not to share with the campers. The first two days were very vague. The schedule said village experience and slum experience. We were told as adult leader that we would all be taken care of but this was a very intense experience. Some would struggle with that but they were prepared to help campers work through that. We had dropped our stuff off at our lodging and gathered together for the group meeting. We were given a potato sack and told to pack what we thought we would need for the next 24 hours. We were required to bring a sleeping bag, water bottle, and flashlights. Anything else was up to us to fit in our potato sack or carry.

We gathered together with our groups for the week. They had split campers up into groups with other churches and put adults with each group. We began our trek to the global village. We walked through the woods for what seemed like an hour and half. It was probably more like 30 minutes. When we came to the global village we had to go through customs. It was not a pleasant experience. There was a security guard standing watch. She separated the males from the females. We had

to stand in a straight line silently. We looked ahead as each person would approach the inspection station. Often the guard would take the potato sack and dump the contents on the ground or table. Extra clothes, cell phones, pillows, blankets, food and other convenience items were confiscated by the guards and we were not allowed to take them into the village. Sometimes the guards would even eat the food of a camper right in front of them.

Eventually we made it through customs and into the global village. Each group was assigned to stay in a different village. Each village group was a different continent and each village house within the continent was designed to authentically represent a different country. My group stayed in Ecuador. For dinner we cooked over an open fire and enjoyed a hot meal of quinoa and salsa. When we ran out of water we boiled water from the creek to refill the water bottles. That night, I slept in the Philippines hut. It was NOT comfortable at all. We slept in an elevated bamboo hut. I would not advise that you ever sleep on bamboo. I woke up what seemed like every 15 minutes. My entire body seemed to sink into certain points and the weight was too much. Others slept on a wood floor or on the ground in the mud. Some even resorted to a rock to serve as their pillow for the night. In the morning we continued as those in a traditional village would live. The women were expected to stay at the village, make the fire and cook the breakfast while the men did work around the village. The village experience was intense but it was well worth it. We experienced what it was like to authentically live in a third world country. Access to water and access to clean water is difficult. We boiled our water over the fire but while it was safe, it was not tasty. It tasted like smoke because there was no lid. It was like we were drinking a campfire with every drop we tasted. We were also told that one of leading cause of death for women in the world is smoke inhalation and we could see how that was the case.

If the village experience wasn't enough, we moved from there to the slums. Lillian has shared a good report with the slum experience. I will just say that our family fared well. I found work helping in the food kitchen and in exchange for washing the dishes at the creek they provided me with bowls of food that I shared with the rest of my family. Plain rice and salsa never tasted so good. Some of the young men in our group found manual labor in the slums and some of the ladies in group were sold into prostitution. There were other groups that did not do so well. Some got kicked out of their slum because they did not make rent. Some groups did not eat or barely got anything to eat because they could not secure the funds. In the moment, the slum experience was very tough, but looking back, what an eye opening experience to see the struggles that occur each day for those who live like this.

We arrived back to the main campus, not to shower and clean up, but to head straight to dinner at the cafe. We were so relieved to get a full meal. We had been 30 hours without a good full meal. As we entered the cafe we were given a colored chip. Some got the red chips, some blue chips, and some white chips. I got a red chip. As we walked through the doors we were told if we had a red chip we were to sit at the round tables. Those with a blue chip got to sit at the banquet table in the middle that was eloquently designed. Those with a white chip stood along the wall. At first I thought this was their system for serving us. There did not seem to be enough seats to seat everyone and so we had to eat in shifts. That was not the case. The director got our attention and informed us that some of us would not eat dinner tonight. Those standing along the walls would not be allowed to eat dinner. Those at the round tables were given 1/2 of a very dry tortilla and those at the banquet table were allowed to eat the full meal, a Mexican fiesta. I have never been so mad on a youth trip than I was in that moment. I thought, seriously, we have hardly eaten anything in 30 hours and some of these kids and adults will not get to eat. Time passed and several at the banquet table begin to finish their meal. There was grace shown and there were a few at the banquet table allowed to trade seats with someone standing on the wall. And then they began to eat.

The director reappeared and congratulated us for surviving the hunger banquet. This was meant to be representation in the world of how many people actually get a meal at the end of the day. After a full day of hard work and labor, some more difficult than others, some would not have a meal waiting for them. She also reminded us that in the time we went through the hunger banquet, less than an hour, several thousand children had died due to the lack of food.

It was in this moment that everything began to click for me. My eyes started to become open to what we were experiencing. I was focused on the intensity of the whole experience while I should have focused on the intentionality. Everything was being done with a purpose and if my eyes were open, I could experience a glimpse of the hurt and pain that is seen through the eyes of God. God's people are hurting and seeking hope in hopeless situations. Most of us in this room have received a blue chip. Our seat at the banquet table is available to us. But as we know, there are those in this world, in our own country, in our own state and in our city, some across the street at Weatherly Elementary, who have been given a red or white chip. What are we, who have been given a blue chip, doing to extend our banquet table? In a few weeks we will have the opportunity to extend the banquet table. We will have the challenge to pack hundreds of backpack snacks to feed children for a week at MLK elementary school. Some of you provided snacks this past week to help feed kids at Weatherly Elementary School. As you know, we

have many foster children in our city, over 300 cases in Madison County alone. There are opportunities to extend the banquet table to them as well. Lincoln Village Ministries works to extend the banquet table as does Manna House. The list goes on and on. Are our eyes open to the opportunities before us?

There is so much more to share with you regarding our SIFAT experience. I hope you will continue to engage our youth in meaningful conversations about their experiences. The theme for our SIFAT experience was Eyes Open and was from the 9th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The portion of the text I selected for this morning was done so for several reasons. Notice who Jesus calls in this passage, Matthew, a tax collector and despised by many. Jesus went to Matthew's house to dine with him and many tax collectors and sinners joined him. Jesus met Matthew where he was. He meets us where we are too. And more importantly He calls us to meet others where they are. He calls us to go to broken, the heavy hearted, the hurting and the forsaken.

Jesus is asked why he chooses to dine with tax collectors and sinners. He responds that it is not the healthy that need a doctor but the sick. We are to go and learn what this means. Jesus desires mercy, not sacrifice. For Jesus came not to call the righteous but the sinner. Who do we dine with? Who do we surround ourselves with? Where do we choose to send ourselves or allow ourselves to be sent?

We have all heard sermons on calling and following. I know I have preached one or two before. But one of today's questions is this, how are we living that out each day. How are we continuing to keep our eyes open to the opportunities that are placed before us. While I am guilty of sometimes keeping my head down and my eyes focused on what is in front of me, there are a few thoughts that come to mind as we seek to look up and look out for what God is placing in front of us. The more we say no, the more God gives us opportunities to say yes. Look and listen for those times when you continue to say no and God continues to nudge you to say yes. We can see them as a nuisance or an opportunity to expand God's reach. Don't let the no's outweigh the yes. What God calls us to will be difficult. It will require sacrifice and it will require us to keep our eyes open and focused upwards.

May God open our eyes and our hearts to the needs around us. May we be ready to receive the work set before us. May Christ's mercy and grace be enough. Amen.

