

Ingredients: a 17 hour bus ride, four adults who just pray to make it through the week with 13 excited teenagers, one Mercedes Benz Super-dome, some 36 thousand Lutherans, and a touch of #Lutheranswag. Mix together in one big pot and let it simmer in 95 degree heat for eight days. And there you have it! A recipe for the greatest pot of gumbo you will ever taste. Now if Jesus was able to feed thousands upon thousands of people with only 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, I have no doubt that this pot of gumbo we have here is enough to feed the faith of, not only the entire city of New Orleans, but 36 thousand Lutherans and all the people of their congregations in their home towns as well.

In the 6th chapter of John, verse 7, Phillip expressed his concern to Jesus that “Six months of wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little,” but Jesus knew they would have enough to satisfy all the people who had come to them. Six months of going to church each and every Sunday may not give every person enough faith to know that God is by their side. But spending two hours on a Wednesday night, surrounded by more than 30 thousand people who are just like you, and ending a prayer with more than 30 thousand simultaneous “Amen”? There's no way one could not feel God's presence among them. It's more than a slap in the face saying “I'm here to forgive your sins because it's what I do,” but more like a hand laid on your shoulder and a whisper in your ear saying, “It is I; do not be afraid'. I'm here for you, and I will be by your side in the good times and bad. Take this moment, this feeling, and my presence, and never forget it.”

It's moments like that, that change lives. In the bibles we were given along with our backpacks to use throughout the gathering, the first few pages are dedicated to the topics we discussed in our "Final 15's" each night. After our first amazing experience at dome we were asked: "God is always communicating with the world, but we aren't always tuned into God's

voice. How were you tuned into God's presence today?"

After being incredibly blessed to have attended 2 ELCA National Youth Gatherings in New Orleans, I truly feel God's presence in my life more than I ever thought I would.

On that first night of dome, we were introduced to Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber (a.k.a. The “Sarcastic Lutheran”), who turned out to be many of our group's favorite speaker of the gathering. Nadia began “House for All Sinners and Saints” with 8 people in her living room just 4 years ago. Now she has a congregation of about 180 people. Nadia was raised in a church that was very strict and traditional to their standards, and she just didn't fit into their “flavor of gumbo”. She spoke to us about how when she finally had the courage to leave that church, she had come to hate Christianity. She had thought “good” or “nice” Christians were more of a myth and less of a reality. When her, now husband, convinced her to attend his Lutheran church in California, she thought she had arrived at, as she described it, “the Kingdom of Heaven.” She got a taste of a very new and diverse pot of gumbo and came to the realization that these mythical “Lutheran Unicorns” she had heard about, ACTUALLY EXISTED.

Nadia learned in her adult confirmation class, “God's grace is a gift that is freely given, we don't earn it, we just try and live in response to it.” For me, God's grace has been given to me in the form of a 17 hour bus ride to a city full of people who were ready to teach me how to spread that grace among others. Just like Nadia, I felt I had been called to offer what I have been given, to other people. One of the themes for the gathering was the phrase “God's work, our hands.” This meaning, it was our duty as gathering participants to spread the word of the Lord through our thoughts, words, and actions to all the people around us.

For our “Practicing Peacemaking” day, we spent the morning in worship and the afternoon

in the interaction center, using every opportunity we had to spread amazing grace and peace. Some of contributed to the more than 1,193 pints of donated blood to save lives, others donated money to the “100 Wells Project” that raised over \$400,000 to bring clean water to those in need. Some of us tried to walk in the shoes of a young girl who had to carry a heavy jug back and forth from their home multiple times a day. It was 3 miles one way on foot. Some of us contracted malaria along the way, but had to keep going because the lives of our families depended on that clean water, and others spoke out against racism, rape, and poverty. And all of us participated in sacred high-fiving ritual of the gathering. If one high five can spread enough grace to let someone know they are loved by God, then the one guy I passed on the second to last day who had counted? I was his 4,992nd high-five, I could tell that he too had been called to New Orleans to spread God's grace.

I not only found God's grace in the hundreds of high fives I gave in that week, but I found it in a simple smile. Whether it was a smile from Natalie while she cheered me on as we climbed 36 floors of stairs to our hotel rooms because the elevators broke, or from a woman whose life was washed away by hurricane Katrina, as she thanked us from her porch for coming to read with the children of her neighborhood.

During our “Practice Justice” day, I found an abundance of God's grace in the smile of a little 4-year old boy named Laurence. Laurence spends his summer days at his neighborhood's community center with other happy kids just like him. When he walked into the room we were in, I saw his face light up with a big smile as he saw all of us big kids in bright orange shirts.

When I was paired up with Laurence, I asked him how old he was and he told me he was three, but then changed his mind and said he was four, but almost five! I could tell in his voice that he felt

bad when he told me he couldn't read and that he wanted to be like the big kids who could read the chapter books. I could also feel the joy in his voice when I told him the four books I brought to him were his to keep and practice reading with his dad at home.

Laurence, like many of the children at that center, had never had books of his own before. I knew that God had called me to that moment to give a child not only the gift of reading, but also the gift of being able to say “This is MY book.” Eager Laurence told me he wanted to read ALL 4 books with me before we had to leave, but first picked out a book entitled, “I STINK!” a book about a garbage truck. We didn't actually read much of the book. Megan and I spent most of our time with Laurence responding to all of his “Why?” questions as a typical 4 year old would ask. At first the questions were clearly related to our book...

“What does a garbage truck do?”

“He eats up all of your garage”

“Why does he do that?”

“Because he's hungry”

“Why is he hungry? Why does he make a 'ROAR' noise? Why does he stink?”

And so on...

In the middle of all these questions he asked me if it rained in Iowa during the winter time. When I told him that it usually snows, as I expected, I was met immediately with the question, "What is snow?" And when I told him it's the white stuff that falls from the clouds, his response was, "It snows in real life? Like FO REAL???" Laurence had never seen snow before, just like he had never had his own books. It's moments like this that I just knew I was ther, with Laurence, for a reason. He reminded me exactly why I want to become a teacher and teach kids like

Laurence all these new things they have never experienced before!

I know 6 months of my wages from working at Pancheros isn't enough to bring books to every child of New Orleans, but little Laurence sure made me wish it was possible. Laurence is 4 years old, but almost five! He didn't go out and work to earn those 4 books. They were given to him, through me, by God's grace, and now it's his turn to try and live in response to that grace. In New Orleans, most children's education levels are 2-3 grade grades lower than kids their age here in Iowa, but I know that someday Laurence will be reading those chapter books.

Our "Practice Discipleship" day was spent with 960 other members of the Southeastern Iowa Synod. Before that day, I had really just thought of a disciple as a part of Jesus's "posse". Someone who was always by his side and helped him spread his grace to all people. But I learned that day, that to be a disciple is to "cover oneself in the dust of their rabbi." Meaning not only to follow them, but to embrace their wisdom and teachings so that you too can teach others what your rabbi has taught you. That really stuck out to me, because it sounded a lot like what I had been called there to do. To not only spread God's grace and all that I had learned to the people around me, but also to receive the grace from others. Laurence gave me the most adorable grave I could have ever asked for that day.

Some individuals we heard from last week included Tony Memmel who was born without his left forearm and hand. It took him 8 years, but he taught himself to play the guitar. He perseveres every single day to fashion a duct tape cast to his arm that secures his guitar pick so that he can bring the gift of music to the lives of others. Another speaker was Leymah Gbowee, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year. She spoke of hope and how each of us has something unique inside of us. And how awesome to know now that one week after we saw her speak in

person in the Lutherdome, she was carrying the Olympic Flag in London this past Friday night! Another motivational speaker was Jamie Nabozny is a strong anti-bullying advocate. He was invited by the ELCA to speak to us about, based on the severe bullying he experienced in his youth, how important it is for us to stand up for each other. Jamie is an openly gay man and was asked to speak to a generation who strives for equality. We strive to break down the walls that confine and define us.

In our time together, they told us many times how important it is for us to take what we had learned and experienced during our week at the gathering back to our home congregations! 6 months of wages would have bought us more than enough beignets from Cafe Du Monde to bring back to all of you. God's grace sure does come in the form of heavenly, delicious, powdered sugar drowned, doughnut like pastries. Just ask Collin! What we're bringing back to St. Andrew is more than souvenirs and pictures. There are 18 of us who went on this journey, and so many of you. 6 months of time spent sharing with each of you all the amazing things we experienced on this trip isn't enough for you to be able to get the full effect of what it's like to be in that dome surrounded by all those "Amen", or to participate in a choreographed dance to One Direction's "What Makes You Beautiful" with 36 thousand people around you, and thanking God that you're not the only crazed "Direction-er" in the building.

We have brought no loaves of bread, or fish. We have brought the dusts of peace, justice, discipleship, and the love and grace of God that we have covered ourselves in from our rabbi's Nadia, Tony, and Jamie. We have brought back a message of hope to all those who feel trapped within a set of walls. God's grace has slipped through the cracks of the bricks and it's time for us to break down those walls.

Walls define and confine us, but through what we all experienced at the gathering, we were able to break down some personal walls and become one with 36 thousand other Lutherans! Ephesians chapter 2: verses 19 and 20 says; "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone." Leaving the Super-dome for the last time after communing with over 36 thousand people, it brought me to tears knowing that those 36 thousand people are no longer strangers to me, but that we all fit together perfectly, connected by God's grace, in one great tasting pot of gumbo.