

Faith in the Kiski Valley

by
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As a newcomer to Apollo seven year ago, it was evident to me (as I was sure it was to most) that the area was economically-challenged. Having worked in Phoenix, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Albany and Pittsburgh previously, I experienced varying degrees of economic prosperity within big cities. I was not sure what I would find in the Kiski Valley but I looked forward to experiencing life in a small town.

After a few months, several things jumped out at me. The first was the work ethic of the people. The majority of people in the Kiski Valley were some of the hardest working people I had ever come across. The second was the low crime rate. I expected to see far more problems in an area where unemployment was so high. And last was the volunteerism, commitment to the community. I thought it was so wonderful that so many took part in making the Kiski Valley someplace special.

But that was only a superficial perception of my early impressions of the Kiski Valley. There was something more whose importance I could not quite understand or begin to articulate. It was the driving force for almost everything positive that I experienced within this community although I could never make the connection.

It was not something I pondered or thought about. It just hit me like a ton of bricks one day. I was invited to a Lenten luncheon sponsored by the Apollo Ministerium which seemed innocent enough. But after it was over I was thunderstruck by something very profound: The churches of the Kiski Valley were the foundation, the cornerstone of the community.

I have no doubt that people without faith can do wonderful things. Conversely, I have no doubt that people exist who proclaim faith yet do terrible things. However, there came certainty to me that day that most of the fabric that made up the collective community consciousness of hard work, honesty and volunteerism was largely inspired by the churches in the community.

As a Catholic, I have always treasured the book of James and his instruction on social justice. It is there that James so eloquently instructs us to act and not merely say words. And it is there that James points out through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we are nothing unless we help those that are less fortunate than ourselves.

At the Lenten luncheon that day, a couple ministers stood up to say that the economic hardships our area endured were a social justice issue. They encouraged us to go out and act for justice. Most attending hung on every word.

The best Christian testimonies I have ever heard were the silence of someone helping a disabled person across the street, or the quiet work of packing a van with meals for the shut-ins, or the hush of someone opening up the anonymous donation that came in to help someone in need.

Those examples are commonplace throughout the Kiski Valley. We may not always trace what appear to be our instinctive reactions to our churches. We may not always analyze or recognize why we do good things that are done. But my observation is that the churches here have a tremendous influence on what we do and what we are like when we are doing.

Whether I am listening to the flame of the Rev. Darrell Knopp at the Presbyterian Church in Apollo or the fire of the Rev. Barbara Gunn at the First Baptist Church in North Vandergrift or the blaze of Fr. Simboli at St. James Catholic Church in Apollo, God's Spirit is present. Collectively their faith and the faith of many other wonderful ministers here influences our community tremendously.

I was taught at a young age that you never discuss politics or religion at work. Well that went out the window the minute I came to work in Apollo. I cannot speak to the antics of local politics, but faith is such an influence on so many, it accidentally comes out, sometimes a lot. I think that the churches rarely get the respect, esteem or recognition in the secular world that they deserve here.

What makes the Kiski Valley special is the people. And what makes the people special is the faith that quietly resonates within so many. Economic development in the Kiski Valley requires the effort of business, government and the schools to work together but perhaps most importantly, it requires the recognition of our churches.



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