

A couple of weeks ago when I went to church in Maryville I heard a friend of mine give his testimony about his life and how he came to know Christ. Somewhere in the middle of his story I began to think about my own story and how I came to know Christ. I don't know if any of you ever lose focus when the speaker is talking, but I tend to do that a lot. So I'm sitting there organizing my thoughts about my journey of faith. I realized that I've been a Christian my whole life. My parents took me to Sunday school and church every week. I've heard stories where people who didn't know Christ were on a rough road. They were doing some bad things and hurting everyone around them. Then, when they were asked to go to church they found Christ and their lives changed forever. I've never experienced anything like that. I've never had that life changing moment because I've known Jesus my whole life and He's always been a part of me. Ok, so my story may not be too eventful that touches your heart, but oh the places that you'll go.

I first came to know Jesus after attending Sunday school and church at the Clarence United Methodist Church. I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Keely, we know this part of the story. We've watched you grow up here. Move on to the next part." I just want to give you an example of how you as a church have made an impact on my life. Once a month I help out at the KIDS afterschool program in Maryville. They put me in charge of the music. As I was sitting in class trying to think of some songs to teach the kids that would fit our theme, which was "Fruit of the Spirit." Finally, it came to me.... "He's a peach of a savior; He's the apple of my eye." Then "I've got peace like a river." Then "His banner over me is love." If you've noticed, those three songs all have actions to them. I didn't realize that it's easier to remember a song if it has actions with it. I'd like to thank Sharri and Jeanna for all the time they spent teaching us those songs. They certainly made an impact on me if I could remember the words and actions 10 years later and be able to teach those songs to kids. Actually, I'd like to thank everyone who is

involved with the children's ministry, whether it be Sunday school, children's story, the after school program, or Vacation Bible School. I know it's a lot of work and I know that some of you have been doing this for a long time, so just remember that it definitely makes a difference. Those were some of the greatest times of my childhood. It would be a shame if the children today don't get the same experience as I had. Children should have an equal opportunity as adults to know Jesus and grow in their faith. They couldn't do that without your help.

The next place we go to on my faith journey would be Camp Jo-Ota. Ever been there? Ever watch the sun rise over the lake and see the geese fly in and land on the pond? It's a wonderful place to witness God's beauty. Have you witnessed God's power, His love and grace sweep through the campers at campfire on Friday night? Some of you haven't. Picture this, there's a large group of about 60 teenagers worshipping in a barn. They're singing with the band, they've got their hands raised up in the air, and their eyes are closed. Some of them have this urge, this need to go up to the altar and have a moment with God. The song ends, but worship isn't over. We bring out the torches and follow the path through the woods and up to the living cross. A fire is burning, and the glow of the light is up on the cross. We sing another song and then we hear the message. A message so powerful, so moving that it touches every single person at campfire. Try to imagine what that's like. I can't tell you what happens after that message. Mostly because I feel like it's a camp thing. You have to be there to witness it yourself in order to know what happens. Just know that those 60 teenagers are experiencing God's power of love. This church is wonderful about supporting the campers financially. For some, you are the only way they could afford to go to camp. However, I'd like to challenge you to take a step further. You should go to camp and be a camp director or a counselor. Volunteer your time and witness

the heart of Jo-Ota. Camp is an amazing place to meet new people and to participate in different activities while learning about God.

Finally, we come to the present where my faith is currently growing, the Wesley Center. When I first began college I had heard that several college students stray away from God and grow apart from the church. They lose focus on their faith. That became my biggest fear about college because I did not want to distance myself from God. If anything I wanted to become closer to Him. So I made sure that happened. I went to the Wesley Center for Midweek Worship every week and I became involved with their weekly activities. The first Bible study I have been a part of was their Advent study. I was amazed at how much I learned from the other students and from the Bible itself. After Christmas break we continued our study about Epiphany. Fun fact for the day: Mathew is the only Gospel that tells the story of the wise men. I have never read the Bible from start to finish, and even if I had I wouldn't have noticed that the wise men are only in one Gospel. It's amazing what you can learn from the Bible. One night after Bible study Don Ehlers, who is one of the campus ministers at the Wesley Center, pulled me aside and had a little chat with me. He told me about the Minister Internship that Wesley has and about how students go to a church, lead worship, and give the message. He told me that he thought I would be a good person for the internship. He said, "It's just something for you to think about. I'm just planting the seed and giving it the opportunity to grow." Well Don I know all about planting. My daddy taught everything about it. You got to wait until the ground is dry before you put the seed in, otherwise the tractor gets stuck, and we tend to have bad luck when the tractor is stuck. Then, after all your crop is in that's when you pray for rain. Don said, "No Keely. I'm planting a seed in you, and giving you the opportunity to grow." Wow. No one has ever said anything like that to me before. I like the sound of that. "Planting a seed in me." Do you remember how I said I was

afraid of growing apart from God when I started college? Psalm 34:4 says, "I sought the Lord and He answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." Here's my chance for my faith to grow, for me to come closer to God, and learn more about the Bible. How could I turn this offer down? I preach at least once a month at Skidmore United Methodist Church. For those of you who don't know, Skidmore has had some unfortunate events take place there. Although bad things have happened in that town, the people there are some of the nicest people I'll ever meet. They've welcomed me with open arms and I've experienced God's love in a new way.

Today I'd like to try something new. Instead of singing a special, I'd like to share a reading with you. I heard it at the Ash Wednesday service at Wesley and since then I've felt the need to share it. It's called Significant Encounter.

I saw him there
his sun-bronzed skin
glistening from the toil of a
summer day.

Unseen I watched him
working with the nets
laughing with his friends.
Strange it seemed to me
he was not master of the
ship
yet leader he was among
them.

They looked at him as if
each word
was a treasure
to be pondered at length
before being put to
memory.

In quiet thought he
wandered

down the beach
until his eyes
were cast in my direction
and I pretended
not to know him near.

He spoke in quiet tones
that reached me
as a whisper on the breeze.
The words embraced me
breaking the barrier
of isolating thoughts.

*Come to me
lonely and forlorn one.
Sit with me this hour.
Rest the burden of your
heart
upon me
and in our sharing
make it easier to bear.*

Each word he spoke
caressed away the time-set
lines of worry and despair
and torrent of words
spilled forth
as though the dam
of all life's hurts
had broken.

*Life is cruel, Lord.
All are strangers about me
with no care.
Their words sting
and their hearts
are fickle
and filled with deceit.
They feed on me
like vultures
until I am weak and torn.*

As gently as an autumn
leaf
rests upon a quiet pool

he placed his hand
upon my head
and told me that each hair
thereon
was numbered by our
Father
and that my worth was
counted
greater than the angels.

He spoke to me of love—
not that which covets
darkness
nor seeks fulfillment
of urgent desires
but a love which
gives the gift of peace.

He brought sunshine to
being
within me
and I listened
until the noisy gulls
were but black slivers
against the setting sun.

The days sped swiftly by
and as each sunrise
merged with sunset
I followed
listening
to his stories of life
reaping his wisdom
gleaning the fields
of knowledge and hope.
Until the day I saw him
riding upon an ass.

The crowds broke
branches
from the trees
and threw them before him
and their clothing
upon the streets.

They shouted "Hosanna"
and for this day
he was popular, exalted, a
hero.

The crowds
led him quickly past
and in the shadows of his
passing
I felt a chill
and was afraid.

The multitude embraced
him
and he was beyond my
reach.
For days I could only
hear his voice
in far-off echoes
from the temple halls
as the people clustered
close
to hear his words.

But as the darkness of each
day
surrounded him
he'd walk
alone
into the quiet countryside
toward the Mount of
Olives.
Determination was in his
step.
He moved as a man
set on a mission.

I saw him there
hanging with the others,
his bronzed skin drawn
and damp
from the agony
of torment and suffering.
Unheaded I watched
as they struck at him

and gambled for his
clothes.

Slowly as he bled
and as life left
the human shell
my anger tore my heart
as a great claw
tearing flesh from my body
and I hated those
who had nailed him there.

In my anger
and my hurt
I screamed out *Why?*
You had a choice
but allowed this to be.
And through the darkness
that had gathered
as a whisper on the breeze
the message came:

It was for you
lonely and forlorn one.
It was for you.

Through the tangled web
of pain
beyond the veil of sadness
at once I knew.
Where there is such love
there is no death.