

P6A 2023 Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The group of us who were at the service camp program to do hurricane relief in Florida just got back last night. So, I spent a good part of last week feeling weary, carrying burdens, and needing rest. Here are some of the things that happened on the trip:

In Maryland, about two hours into the 18 hour drive, our bus broke down. It took five hours to get back on the road in a new bus. We discovered that neither Domino's nor Papa John's will deliver to the closed weigh station on Interstate 270.

When we arrived at our host church in Florida, the director of the camp program had no schedule for us, and no confirmation from our first work site, but instead started our orientation with a ten minute safety talk on how to identify Florida's venomous snakes and evade alligators, which we were told to assume were living in every body of water.

Mostly because of the holiday, the schedule changed, and changed, and changed again. The five former camp directors and other adult leaders were more than a little irritated by the chaos. The youth better understood our frustration after the day they were promised time to sleep in but then were woken up and sent to breakfast two hours early.

The reason they were supposed to get to sleep in was because we anticipated getting back late after fourth of July fireworks. That was even before we found out—as we were being dropped off—that the bus wouldn't be able to come back to pick us up because the road changed to all one way after the show. As it turned out, the bus couldn't have back come for us anyway, because it also broke down—our second broken bus. So when we did find a bridge to walk off the island and meet the bus, we spent another hour, stranded, waiting for one.

One of our projects was supposed to be unloading a food truck at the church where we were staying. The truck broke down on the way to the church and didn't make it before we left.

The big outing of the week was a boat ride to a sandbar to hunt for shells and swim near dolphins. We were about to anchor when an electrical storm appeared on the radar and caused the captain to head for home. It felt like our first bit of good luck when, 20 minutes later, the storm blew over and we got to go back to the sandbar after all.

Our original bus driver, Tim, didn't make the trip home with us; he's still waiting in Sarasota for a mechanic. About half the youth said the worst part of their day was finding out Tim was leaving the trip early.

Somewhere in the swapping of the buses, we lost the box of devotional Books we intended to use with the youth.

But here's what also happened:

When we were broken down in Maryland, within five minutes of striking out with pizza delivery, we had two local connections from seminary who offered to pick up pizza for us, plus another pastor who stopped with his family to drop off drinks and snacks on their way to vacation.

During the whole trip we saw zero snakes and only one alligator—from safely inside the bus.

On the 4th we got to watch the sunset on the beach and spectacular fireworks then enjoyed the night hike in the surf by the light of our glow sticks.

For just one of our projects we packed 865 meal kits for hungry children.

On the boat, when the storm passed we saw the strangest rainbow, and when we got back to the sandbar, two dolphins swam right by us. We sang during the whole boat ride, even when we thought we were going to get rained out.

We each had a paper bag pinned to a bulletin board at the church to use as a mailbox for writing each other notes of affirmation. When Tim left us with the new bus driver, we gave him his bag of affirmation cards, and he was visibly moved that the group had thought to include him in the 1000+ cards that were exchanged.

On a personal note, I didn't end up in the hospital on this trip like I did last year.

And after all the delays and debacles, when we finally got to the closing worship service on the beach, two random passersby joined the circle as we were singing; they asked the host pastor to baptize them in the Gulf along with two of the campers.

Some of the things that happened—though not my fault—were my responsibility to help handle: We had to find food and a safe place to wait when we were stranded. We had to find an alternative route off the beach when the road was closed. When we lost our transportation we had to work with the other group to shuttle back and forth to work sites. When plans fell through and the coordinator was content to settle for free time, we brainstormed to come up with projects for the very eager, very willing workers in our group to do.

But the burden that was *not* mine to carry was the worry that because things didn't go according to plan, because reality didn't match *my* expectations, that the trip would be a waste, or that we wouldn't accomplish enough, or that the Spirit couldn't move hearts and minds in our unexpected circumstances. As an adult, I carried a lot of anxiety about how the youth would handle what seemed like a lot of chaos; yet they never failed to find God in the midst of our weird and unplanned adventures. Thank you Father, that you revealed these things to *them*, so they could remind *me* that Jesus was walking with us all the while.