

The Christian life is a journey.

TrailNotes speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the “landscape” we are passing through in this trail-laced wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. *TrailNotes* is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we’re learning and doing.

ELDER TALK: Shared human suffering and the glory of God...intertwined

JON VEGA

I hear voices in my head as I work from room to room during my morning rounds at the hospital. Usually, it’s one of medical podcasts I listen to on my commute to work to get my mindset in gear, or the prayer I’ve prayed every day since nursing school in hospital elevators on my way from the car to the wards, a cherished and sincere “pregame tunnel” to get my attitude focused.

Lord, let me be a light for You. Guide my hands, my heart, my mind as I care for Your creation today.

This particular morning, as I am dressing a patient’s swollen leg (I myself dressed in an isolation “moon suit”), the voice I hear changes to part of a Walt Whitman poem I’d read the night before, as I was calming my mind for bed between shifts.

*Thus in silence in dreams’ projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread
my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify
with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark
night, some are so (old),
Some suffer so much, I recall
the experience sweet and sad...*

In the next room, while the aide and I wash a sedated and unaware patient from head to toe, (I always remind myself to watch and learn from experienced aides about hands-on-care), verses from Matthew’s Gospel begin to intersperse themselves into the dialogue that always hums inside me.

“When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

Several hours later, adjusting the rate of a medical drip in the third room with my most stable patient as sunlight starts to peek in the window, I begin

to wonder about broader questions. Circling back in need of focus, I silently pray for the specific needs of the patient in front of me and then the needs of the previous two.

Lord, please bring Your peace, love and healing to this patient. Please guide my hands and mind and the hands and minds of the rest of the team in the care of this patient.

I switch gears after my first rounds and begin to chat with my patients about the local non-political news, about their pets, their kids, their grandkids, or the latest football scores and predictions. Until this season, I’ve often watched Browns fans and thought of a quote by the amateur painter, Winston Churchill: “I cannot pretend to be impartial about the colours. I rejoice with the brilliant ones, and am genuinely sorry for the poor (Cleveland) browns.”

I even talk about sports with the sedated man in the second room and let him know what medications he’s getting through the tube in his nose, the X-ray he’ll get later, the call I got from

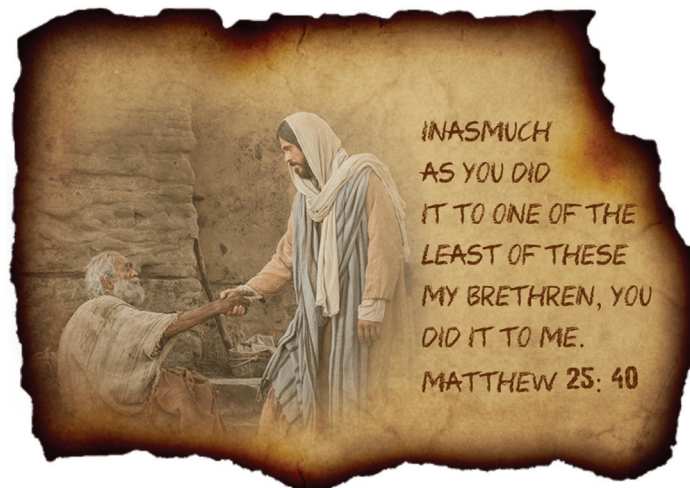
his wife and kids checking on him. I speak to him as if he can hear and understand every word, because the voice I hear now is that of a former patient. He too had been in and out of sedation and delirium. He said it had been the most terrifying experience of his life. His only respite had been the anonymous hands that had held his and the kind voices he heard but couldn’t understand. So I talk to the man in the second room, pat him on the shoulder, and squeeze his hand before I go.

After morning rounds, I have to escape to a quiet corner of the cafeteria. I either watch a cartoon on my phone to think of “nothing” for a short time, or I read a bit more of my books if I need to chew on something. Today I chew.

“I pray to the God within me that He will give me the strength to ask Him the right questions.”
– Elie Wiesel (*Night*)

For the rest of the day, it gets me thinking all kinds of things as I lean over commodes, feed patients, and get to know the families over the phone. Why am I so restless? What can I do

(concluded on page 2)



INASMUCH
AS YOU DID
IT TO ONE OF THE
LEAST OF THESE
MY BRETHREN, YOU
DID IT TO ME.
MATTHEW 25: 40

Artwork from Wellspring Christian Ministries
<https://wellspringchristianministries.org/matthew-2540-the-aroma-of-your-heart/>

FEBRUARY 2021

- 4** Women of Grace: “*The Struggle is Real*” with Laura Byrom, 6:30 to 8 pm. at GFC.
- 7** Pastor Eric Byrom preaching: Mark 1:1-20.
- 11** Game Night training, 6-8 pm.
- 14** Elder Jon Vega preaching: Mark 1:21-48. 
Circle Leaders meeting 2 pm. Zoom.
- Happy Valentines Day!**
- 18** Women of Grace, 6:30-8 pm.
- 20** Men’s monthly breakfast, 9 am at GFC. Bring a sack meal.
- 21** Eric Byrom preaching: Mark 2:1-17.
- 25** Game Night training, 6-8 pm.
- 28** Eric Byrom preaching: Mark 2:18-3:6. 

Shared Human Suffering...

(continued from page 1)

about it? Why has church felt so cold this year? Why do I feel a calling here, but struggle lately at church?

As I drive home, I still don’t know the right questions, but I know I’m tired. My ears are tired. I try to quiet the various voices of the day. I open my ears and listen because I want to hear the silence.

I hear the sound of my tires rolling over uneven road repairs. I hear the sound of a bass-beat in the car next to me. I hear the loud rumbling whoosh of the ODOT truck and the pelting of its salt. Something stirs in me and I pray outloud. “**Thank You.**” I say it to my dashboard. I say it to the cold wind as it rushes past my closed windows. I say it to the only One who’s listening. I say it four or five times. I’m reminded of Elijah:

“Then the LORD said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD. Behold, the LORD is about to pass by.’ And a great and mighty wind tore into the mountains and shattered the

rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, and then a fire. But the LORD was not in either of them.” 1 Kings: 19:11-12

Then I hear it - a gentle whisper from the Scriptures saying,

“Rejoice that you share in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed at the revelation of His glory.” 1 Peter 4:13

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.” Matt. 25:40

I get home just as the snow begins to fall. I think about the day I’ve had. Right now in the ICU, it seems like I see more suffering than glory. I can feel the weight of it in my soul, but **I know that human suffering and God’s glory are intertwined.**

“More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame because God’s love has been poured into our hearts...” Romans 5:3-5

Without suffering we would have no endurance, no life left to “finish the

race” set before us. Without shared suffering, we wouldn’t feel the love that gives hope piercing through the terrors of this life. Without Christ bearing the weight of our sin and suffering, we would be lost, without hope or love. I drift off to sleep, repenting of my hermit Christianity and praying for a great yearning and reawakening of shared community in His Church both in my local church and in my own heart, determined to transfer what I’ve learned on the front lines of healthcare to a greater walk with Jesus and His people.

May you and I be willing instruments in His glory through sharing the suffering around us.

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because He first loved us.

1 John 4:18-19

Jon Vega is an ICU staff nurse at UH Samaritan Medical Center in Ashland, Ohio and also serves as an elder at Grace Fellowship Church, Mansfield, Ohio.



Original art work by Michelle Greene Wheeler (Romans12DeSigns)



Long time no see! お久しぶりですね!

Greetings from Japan! It has been quite some time since the last update was sent to you. I thank you for taking the time to read these newsletters. As always, hope is that this will be informative to you in 1) sharing the experience of living in a foreign country, 2) encouraging you in your own walks with Christ, and 3) keeping you up to date when you wonder how Andy is doing in Japan.

2020 Adjustments: 2020年の調整:

In the last editions, I had mentioned how the pandemic was affecting the team over here in our work and ministry. I will now provide a clearer understanding of what exactly we have done in the last year.

For one, schools did shut down in Japan for a month's time, per the order of the Prime Minister of Japan. The country explored options of virtual work while at home, and self-quarantining. Those who were outside wore masks, as was already common in the country for flu season. Beforehand, if a foreigner was seen wearing a mask, it was thought that he or she was very sick. Now, it was expected of everyone, including foreigners, to wear masks.

The school year was ending a few weeks early, so the kindergarten had to have a selectively attended, all-mask graduation. Thankfully, I was allowed to attend, as long as I wore a mask myself, which the school provided. Many other schools did not even have graduations. I heard many students created their own via video game platforms (*Minecraft*) to fill that gap.

Senior teachers that were called to return to the U.S. were able to leave just before the countries had closed their borders. Also, the three newest teachers were able to make it to Tamura City, though a two-week quarantine was required of them.

We as teachers were asked to stay in town for the time being while the schools were closed. I personally got depressed during this time as I was not seeing my students. We were allowed to go to the grocery store and walk around town as long as we wore a mask. Given it was cherry blossom season, walking around was a wonderful activity for passing the time. Our Japanese friend, Yuta, wanted to help make the American teachers feel at ease, so he asked me to help supply my kitchen as a place to make sloppy joes and to deliver it to the American teachers' homes. It was a good time and a fine way to encourage everyone!



Yuta cooking sloppy joes for us!

In mid-late May, schools were able to open again. This included the classes at the English school. With the mindset of the "new normal," we changed the distance between the desks in the classrooms, had handwashing rules made for the students entering the building for the first time, and everyone, including the teachers, would wear masks. Eventually, the idea from another American teacher of the use of face shields instead of masks became appealing to me. Nowadays I wear a face shield in order for the students to see my mouth for pronunciation, as well as my facial expressions and smiles. It became a joke for a time to the students of the odd headpiece I would be wearing, but eventually was fully accepted as a norm when classes returned as the routine.

Eventually, public schools loosened their guidelines on social distancing, once we were certain cases of the pandemic were not in our town. Some students even refuse to wear a mask (until they see a foreigner enter their class, which they usually then comply). Regardless, the Americans continue to wear our masks to set a proper example of love and understanding for the difficult times.

Recently, in the last couple of months, Japan has been hit hard with its third and worst wave of the pandemic virus. Despite this, the country has yet to shut down the schools again like it originally did, so much of the prevention is left up to the people. It looks like we will not be allowed to travel anytime soon like it was during the summer vacation this past year. *(continued on the next page)*

Summer Vacation: 夏休み:

Surprisingly, we were given a summer vacation, despite a long period of no school in the spring. The time off was shortened a bit to make up for the lost days of school in April and May, but it was still a good amount of time to travel. At the time, most of the Tohoku region had collectively around 200 active cases of the virus. That was unheard of compared to many other places in the world, especially as late into the year as August! We were given permission from the Board of Education and our employer to travel, if only in the six prefectures of the Tohoku region. It is my goal to visit and stay in every prefecture one day. With this in mind, I turned my gaze to two prefectures up north I haven't been to before: Aomori and Iwate. Both prefectures also had the least cases of the virus in them at the time (Iwate around 6 cases, for example). As long as I took precautions such as not talking to strangers, keeping social distance, wearing a mask, and washing my hands frequently, I was permitted to visit these new areas!



Mt. Iwaki 岩木山 (5,331 ft.)

In Aomori, I was able to see the beautiful views of the Mutsu Bay. While in Aomori City, I was able also to visit the Nebuta Festival museum which houses the uniquely crafted, glowing parade floats that are used in the Nebuta Summer Festival parade (which was unfortunately cancelled this year). I also boarded a former transportation boat that was converted into a museum describing the old methods of transporting cars, buses, people, and even trains between Aomori prefecture and the large island of Hokkaido. This was the way people were able to travel across the waters before the Shinkansen tunnels were built to bridge the gap between the two landmasses.

While in Aomori, I also went to visit the cities of Hirosaki and Hachinohe. In Hirosaki, I was able to admire the views of the landscape and mountains, especially Mount Iwaki. I also saw the Hirosaki Castle, Botanical Gardens, and former Samurai districts on a hot but beautiful summer day. In Hachinohe I was able to enjoy delicious Vietnamese food and came across a public street performance that was substituting what would have been a large summer festival.

Afterwards, I traveled to the city of Morioka in Iwate prefecture, which had beautiful views of its tallest mountain, Mount Iwate. I enjoyed BBQ, a museum describing the history of the city, and hiking around the parks and streets of the city. I even came across a university campus that was deserted for the summer. Unfortunately, rain came that day which prevented any further exploration, so I went to a Japanese style hotel in the countryside that had wonderful nature views in the morning.

I consider myself truly blessed to have been able to travel as much as I did during the summer, given how difficult it has been for many around the world to not be able to do so. One day I hope to return to each of those prefectures for more adventures, but not for now. It will have to wait!

Classroom Highlight:

教室のハイライト:

Class 5A2 will be our noted class for this newsletter update. It was originally two classes last year that both belonged to different American teachers at the English School. This year, the classes merged and I had
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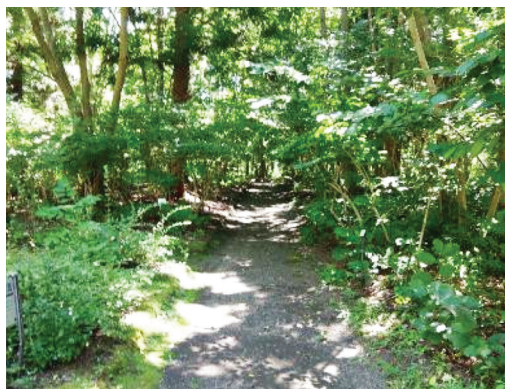
Japan Newsletter (concluded)

taken up the spot to teach them. This group consists of nine 5th graders, four boys and five girls. This class is impressively one of the smartest classes we have. They are currently where the 6th graders are in the same textbook material, but a year sooner! The skills the students show in their writing, speaking and reading are superb for their age.

The downside to having a class that is so excellent in the study material is that they often find themselves bored when they have finished their work, or they are reviewing something they already know. The class is also at the age where games that amuse younger children are less appealing to them, so finding activities to practice the material is a challenge.

The class is also split half and half with being very quiet and being disruptive. The louder students, while equally as intelligent, are quick to point out how they feel when things are not going their way. The limited use of Japanese I know proves to be a hindrance to understanding and communicating with these students. The quieter students, however, maintain the peace and do their work, trying not to choose a side between the class and the teacher.

5A2 overall is a challenging class for me this year, due to being more advanced than I am used to, new students I have not known in previous years, and classroom management skills to be applied often. Despite this, there are wonderful moments in the lessons where the students are open to teach me words in Japanese and how to work effectively with them to further their studies in English.



Final Thoughts: 最終的な考え:

Despite the difficulties of the calendar year, life here in Japan has still been happening. Certainly, the new year has not promised to be any better or worse than the previous one, but whatever may happen, I personally will continue to take each day and its challenges one at a time. Whether that challenge is overcoming learning curves in the classroom, within myself to show grace and forgiveness in mistakes or with the world in how to respond to the current state of living, I will overcome as long as I continue to keep my eyes on Jesus. After all, He has called me here for a time and I will continue to find strength as I remain dependent on Him.

Thank you for those who have read up to this point, as your prayers and support in this adventure over here mean a lot to me! I look forward to being able to meet again in person and share in much more detail of everything God is doing over here!

Prayer Requests: 祈りのリクエスト:

- Continue to pray for the hearts of Japan to be receptive to God's love and acceptance of them.
- Pray for the current building up of a more formal outreach program within the team.
- Pray that I continue to strive to be a better teacher for each of my students.
- Continued safety for our families back home, students and their families, coworkers and ourselves.

Until next time **またね!** [See you later!] *Andy Brubaker* アンディ・ブルベーカー

From our 'Snowbirds' in Florida



From Linda Mathias:

"Happy New Year! I just read the latest edition of TrailNotes and again, I thank you so much for your faithfulness in this much appreciated endeavor. We always look forward to getting it by email and we often want a hard copy too.

"As we are in Venice FL for the winter, we will still be able to join with our church family partly through your efforts. We have missed seeing you both as this pandemic has caused so many changes in our lives. Still God is faithful and He urges us on to love one another and remain connected through Christ.

"I really appreciated the insights about the houses of Bethlehem...some things I did not know. The shared article of political insights regarding the election was also very interesting.

"We love you and miss you. John 1:2, 3, 'Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health. For I rejoice greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth.' Love, Linda and Jerry Mathias"



From John Caldwell:

"I was up early, reading, and found the article below in the daily feed I had not been able to read yet. I receive these daily snippets from the archives of T. Austin Sparks, an English church leader who often spoke at the summer Keswick "deeper life" conferences from 1930s and beyond. I read this one and felt the message of a living Christ was so encouraging. I was surprised to think of this and TrailNotes as a possible match..."

"Please review and stash for a time when needed. Look it over and let the Lord lead.

"I don't think I have ever told you how much I appreciate your TrailNotes and all the efforts you two expend. It is a work of love and commitment that is obvious. It blesses Lynette and me. We are poorly skilled for such work as you do, but if there is ever a need we can help meet, let us know. We can pray for any specifics or give moral and physical support.

"Thanks for all your work. I trust you will be led what to do with this piece, even the waste can. It's your call.

"Thanks again, John Caldwell – January 16, 2021"

Open Windows

T. AUSTIN-SPARKS

"Because I live, you also will live." (John 14:19)

Relationship with God today in so many directions, and over such a wide range, is not a living relationship. There is an acknowledgment of God, there is a form of worship of God, there are rites connected with God; yes, there is a recognition in a greater or lesser measure of a kind of devotion to God, worship of God, acknowledgment of God, perhaps desire for God, but all short of a living relationship with God. Yet that He is the living God means that those who are related to Him should live. He would say, *"Because I live, you shall live also."* A living relationship with God is possible...

It is not a relationship with some dead order of things, but with a living Person. But I must ask, Have you that living relationship? Are you following a system, an order, are you in living fellowship with a living God? The Lord desires that such a relationship with Him shall be living all the way along. It is a great thing to know that you have access to the living God. Ask Him; He is open, He is accessible, He is alive; you can have dealings with Him. Just to enjoy a living relationship with a living God is how He wills it to be. The desire of His heart is that you should treat Him as being a living God. *"He that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."* We must believe, when we come, that He is; not feeling out into the universe, the vacant, empty universe. No, we are coming to a living Person; we believe that He is! There is nothing vague about that.

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