2/10/2007

Hello!

I hope this letter finds you all well and staying warm. Don't worry about me, I am plenty warm down here in my shorts and sandals. As usual things have been overwhelmingly busy for me in recent weeks.

Work has been crazy- in the busy sense and kind of in the literal sense, too- to the point of complete distraction. We had been so excited to get through the holidays, only to roll into a New Year that brings a hoard of annual report deadlines and new contracts to write. My work has been extremely clerical and stressful, even including some tax preparation. If anyone had ever told me that anyone would trust me with their taxes I would never have believed them, and now there is a whole agency trusting me. Thank God for software and knowledgeable friends, or we would be in big trouble! Along with this wave of numbers and statistics solicited by our funders comes the constant struggle to maintain a sense of reality and hope. I am being asked to calculate the percent of our clients who need food that are Multi-Racial Mexican Female Head-of-Households from zip code 33033. I don't know these facts off the top of my head and, frankly, I don't care. I know my clients- their stories, their families, their struggles, their humanity- and I want so badly to give that to the state to process instead. It is far too easy to dehumanize numbers. I don't have that luxury and I don't want it.

My work is hard. Every day I see into a world, a life that is absolutely foreign to me. It is frequently ugliness, hopelessness and pain manifested in an aching human soul surfacing in tired brown eyes. Often the lives that cross mine on a daily basis here break my heart, sometimes small miracle pass by and fill me joy and hope. I thank God for all of it. I get frustrated when I am confined to a desk in an office to calculate the people that I care about so deeply into generic statistics. It is valid, important work because without such tedious calculations for our reports we would not receive funding, but it is cold and lonely and it is hard to find the face of God in a computer screen. It doesn't help that the agency where I serve is going through a very difficult time right now, addressing one staffing or funding crisis after another. There is a lot floating around that distracts us from our most basic ministry, which is loving our neighbor as ourselves. I find myself wondering why something so simple has to be so complicated- Jesus didn't have funders or grants or a paid staff with benefits and his ministry didn't suffer.

In an effort to fulfill this yearning for simple, true ministry the other volunteers and I decided we would make lunches and take them out to the day laborers and migrant workers that line the streets of Florida City one morning last week. We were excited! We woke up around six (now THAT is dedication!) and loaded my car. We drove to Lucy street, a well known day laborer pick-up spot, and started our distribution. Our Spanish was somewhat broken, as one of my roomies is just learning, but we asked, "Are you hungry? Do you want a sandwich? Do you want some water?" No takers. Excitement dissolved in discouragement. We walked up and down the street, only handing out a handful of the fifty or so lunches we had. Our heads filled with concerns: Are we those high and mighty white people providing an occasional hand out just to prove our righteousness? Is this humiliating? Patronizing? Presumptuous? We had good intentions… what were we doing wrong?

Later we were told our mistake was not packaging the lunches properly. We were commended for our efforts and advised on how to do things differently next time. Lesson learned. We could have been bummed, and were a little, but we decided to have a live and learn approach to it. One day when we are all acclaimed (but humble) servant-hood gurus publishing books on how to serve Jesus to the best of your ability this can be our first chapter, explaining that a lot of service is trial and error, especially when you are in a different culture. Until then we will have to embrace our place as truly humble, usually confused, but earnestly trying to serve and seek God new-kids-on-the-block, even though we have five months under our belt and feel like maybe, by now, we should have the hang of this. Guess we really don't ever stop learning.

I am attaching a few pictures. Two of them are pictures of me trying a pickled hot sausage. Yes, it sounds gross. Yes, it is gross. The kids I work with eat them all the time and finally talked me into trying one… never again. I almost died. Two more of them are pictures of the football tournament that Branches (an agency I work with on weekends and that my roommate Tony works for full time) hosted a few weekends ago to raise money for camp this spring break. These kids LOVE football, so we play two hand touch 4 on 4 double elimination tournaments. Each team pays $5 to enter and we sell concessions. The tournaments are growing in popularity and we are running out of officiators and fields. Then there is a picture of Erin (one of my roommates) and I with three little boys all wearing cowboy hats. The Homestead Championship Rodeo (the southernmost rodeo in the continental United States) came to town. A generous man from our church donated a few tickets and we took some of the elementary schoolers from Branches. WE had a really great time!