

Artfully Done -- St. Dominic Grade School retreat day -- a Thursday made Holy

When a principal calls and wants to meet prior to the program, you know immediately that something very “right” is going on in that school. Joan Agresta did not want Beacon Street to just fill the time or entertain. She wanted a retreat experience during the Holy Week of the school year. The students would be dismissed from this assembly and carry the message home.

The theme was “service,” in the spirit of Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples. Students K thru 8 would be invited to carry one another’s cross and share each other’s joy. Set aside a little time for lunch and the rest of the day is up to Beacon Street. Looking after each other’s needs does not come naturally, even to kids in a Catholic school. In fact, most school contacts for the past two years have been asking for programming that will encourage youngsters to be kinder to one another. “There are too many rough edges around here,” one principal remarked.

One of Beacon Street’s co-founders, Kim Manning PhD, said the rough edges phenomenon is rampant in every school system since 9/11. Kids do not feel as secure as they would like, and their aggressive behavior is an indication that all is not well within. Anything that fosters collaboration and instills peace would be a good antidote. Because there is such diversity in an elementary environment, we decided to gather the whole student body at the beginning and the end of the day, but provide a separate program for K thru 4th grade and 5th thru 8th late in the morning.

Old Turtle returned to alert the older students that they were created to be “reminders of all that God is.” Old Turtle’s own words suggested they would be “messages of love from God to the earth, and prayers from the earth back to God.” Peacock feathers got them to their feet and joy filled the room. “I can balance this thing on my nose,” one 7th grader bragged, half-surprised at her own dexterity. Sometimes it is the simple thing that

brings home the most profound truth – we are awesome. Wonderfully made. And even “Finding Nemo” made the scene, too. Taking risks to save another’s life seemed reasonable enough on the silver screen. Perhaps our “lucky fin” (and we all have one) will help us as well.

The younger students were invited to be sheep with socks on their hands. Not a ba-a-a-a-idea. The excitement was palpable when the lost sheep was returned to the flock. If we save their place it tells them we won’t be complete without them. They enjoyed the refrain from the Prodigal Rap: “Open your eyes. It suits you well to be wise. You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone. Ugh.” The gospel invites us to cherish each other. It feels like good news to be on either end of the cherish.

After the kids fueled up at lunch, the entire school reassembled for the Stations of the Cross. Each grade level had been assigned a station or two with a few directions and simple props – gloves. Cotton gloves, some of them died primary colors, were worn by all. Their hands would tell the story of the Passion by the way they moved, joined, wrestled, or lifted each other. In between there was music, song, story, rounds, poetry, and even a short game of “Simon Says” after the fifth station. It took longer than we had planned, but no one left early. They all had a part. They were part of the beginning and the middle. They would stay until the end.

It was a good day. I heard so from some parents. The students, K thru 8, made the day Holy by becoming wholly involved. They had energy with and for each other. Participation was wall to wall and there was much laughter as there was silence. Reflective silence. Months from now they will be able to recall many parts of the day, and the “hand” they had in making it one Joan Agresta hoped it would be.

“NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL COMMITTED CITIZENS CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.
INDEED, IT’S THE ONLY THING THAT EVER HAS.” MARGARET MEAD