

The Power of Mark's Gospel with Teens

An Interview with Andrew Thompson of the Duke Youth Academy

Editor's note: In the summers Duke hosts teenagers at the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation. Tracy Radosevic has been a featured artist in their program. We asked one of the directors to tell us about the program and the impact Tracy's telling had on the youth.

The Duke Youth Academy (DYA) is a two-week summer program that hosts about 50 rising juniors and seniors in high school who are interested in exploring a deeper expression of the Christian life. We invite them to come and live on campus in an intentional Christian community, where our days follow a monastic pattern of shared meals, worship, study, work, and recreation.

If this sounds like the kind of thing that would bore a 17-year old to death, then you might be surprised! We often sell teenagers way too short when it comes to thinking about what in Christianity attracts them. And I also think our high speed, overly technological lives may be robbing all of us of something very important --namely, the way the Christian life is intended to be. Our program is designed to help youth encounter Jesus as they eat, pray, worship, and serve together.

Our schedule at DYA is intended to expose our students to a wide range of formational practices. In addition to the daily activities of breaking bread and joining together in worship, we also expose our students to teaching sessions from top-notch seminary professors at Duke, small group mentoring and off-campus service projects.

The area I work with at DYA is called "Christian Practices," and it makes up another component of our program. Through both Prayer Practices and our Arts Village, our students learn about aspects of the Christian life they've often not encountered before. In Prayer Practices, we offer teaching-and-participation sessions on different forms of prayer within the Christian tradition. Over the course of the two weeks, students might have the opportunity to participate in lectio divina, engage in centering prayer, learn the Catholic tradition around praying the rosary, and try their hand at prayer journaling.

To facilitate the Arts Village component of DYA, we invite four professional artists each summer to live in our community as artists-in-residence. They lead our students in sessions around the particular art form that they practice, with the aim of helping them see the deep interconnectedness of art and the Christian faith. Both in teaching sessions and in worship itself, our artists open up new insights for our students to see how art is inherently theological--and how theology is inherently artistic!

I'm a bit biased here, but I think the Arts Village is perhaps the most exciting aspect of our program. It's also challenging, though, because we're asking our students to think about how faith is expressed in ways usually quite new to them.

Our culture is generally impoverished when it comes to incorporating the arts into our daily lives (not to mention in our worship

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lives). But all we have to do is go to Genesis 1-2 to see how artistic the creative work of God is in bringing the creation into being. And then a text like Isaiah 64:8, which describes God as the potter and us as his clay, points to the way that each individual person is a unique creation of a creative God. “We are all the work of your hand,” Isaiah says, which is simply another way of saying that God is the master artist.

Tracy Radosevic, dean of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int’l. Academy for Biblical Storytelling, has brought her considerable talent to DYA as an artist-in-residence for the past seven years. Her teaching always shows our students ways of proclaiming the word of God in ways they had never considered before. The forms of communication that go into expert storytelling--from emotional content and nonverbal expressions to the overall approach of inhabiting the narrative--can be quite revolutionary to students’ understanding when they are applied to biblical texts.

At our summer session in 2009, Tracy told the Gospel of Mark “from soup to nuts” as she described it! Over the course of the two-hour presentation, the



light coming through the windows waned until it was almost completely dark. Everyone there was spellbound, and when she ended at Mark 16:8 (“They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them,

and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid”), we all sat stock still. It’s a little hard to put into words what that felt like. The youth were awed by the power of the gospel proclaimed in that way. We take evaluations from our students each summer and this past summer Tracy’s telling of the Gospel of Mark ranked a perfect 5 out of 5. It was the only component of the program that was marked that high!

One of the students wrote: “The Gospel of Mark storytelling was one of the most amazing things I have ever experienced!”

Storytellers have the ability to renew oral culture. Because they tell stories live and in the flesh, they have something to offer that no film, audio recording, or YouTube video can match. There is an “incarnational” quality to biblical storytelling, and teenagers are definitely drawn to it.

Andrew C. Thompson is a United Methodist pastor, currently working on a doctorate at Duke University. He is a Ministry Coordinator at the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation.

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