



Photo by Audrey Shandick

THE GROWING NEWS

Fall 2025

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We were looking for a hole in the ground in the middle of the forest. Dressed in cover-alls and helmets with flashlights—in broad daylight, no less—we must have been quite the sight. Nerves were high and so was the excitement. I've gone caving countless times and I never get tired of how this experience impacts students.

In the cave, we enter unfamiliar territory. Nothing appears as it does in the world above, which means our senses must reorganize. I lead the students to a "room" large enough to sit on rock ledges above an underground stream, and ask them to turn off their lights. Not one of the 50 or so students I took with me on four occasions in August could even see their hands in front of their faces. "My eyelids are freaking out," one of them said. "Open or closed, everything's the same!"

Normally, this darkness exercise would last a few minutes before we explore the cave, but Mark 10:17-22 has been on my heart, so we lingered longer than usual. In this story, Jesus is approached by a man with a question. It's a question all of us ask in our own words, something like, "Am I doing the right things? Are you happy with me, God? Will I hear, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'?" Jesus sees behind the question and sees the man himself in his particular situation. In verse 21 it says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him."

Powerful words. What does it mean to be looked at and loved, especially when what is seen is far from perfect?

In the cave, we talked about underground spaces, private spaces, broken spaces that all of us have and few of us know how to navigate, whether from shame, ongoing sin, or loneliness. If I were to slip away into the darkness with the students' lights, they would have no way out. What Jesus does is love in those spaces where we think there is no way out. How profound. How full of care.

One student, after 20 minutes of quiet guided conversation in the dark, said, "I'm trying not to cry, because I wish I had relationships that ran deep like this—where we see each other in meaningful ways. But I don't."

Pray for Alaina and for so many other students who find themselves in the dark. Pray for them to experience hope in Christ, the one who looks at them and loves them.

I wanted to send a letter weeks ago but the semester filled up with retreats, mentoring, planning—all good. I went backpacking last weekend with students and their new CCO campus minister, digging into Hebrews 10:24. This weekend I go again with a campus minister who wants to build relationships with new students.

Julie and the girls are doing well, and all of us seem to be experiencing growth in various ways. Praise be to God. May you find yourself in a similar place, saying yes to whatever the Lord has for you next, even if that involves heading into the dark.

Eternally grateful,



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