Good morning. This summer we travelled to the ASP center in Wise County, Virginia. We brought three vans, cleverly named: Julie Vandrews, Vanley Tucci, and (my personal favorite) Van Diesel. I would like to start off by mentioning the theme of the 2021 ASP trip which was Galatians 6:9 which states, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” so Summing all that up into one word would just be: Onward. I interpreted this as: don't get tired and keep being kind and being a nice person because in due time it will pay off and you will be rewarded in one way or another. So just keep that in mind here while I give you a little run down of my experience on ASP.

Before I signed up for this service trip I honestly did not have very high expectations for the overall experience. I am a lazy homebody by nature and I had heard stories from my brothers and other parishioners who have gone and heard about their experiences and my main take-away was: it's hot, there's a lot of bugs, and you play a lot of cards. And for the most part, that's accurate. But what they failed to mention was all the little fun moments that I would love but I'll get to that later on. My brothers have gone and my dad has gone and so this just seemed like something I was expected to do and it would be a good way to complete my community service hours required to graduate so it seemed like a win-win situation. But, the downside was, that it was a week away from my job that I loved (lifeguarding and teaching swim lessons) and the kids that I taught that I loved and a week of not swimming in the middle of my own swim season. Safe to say I was not really looking forward to this trip. But nonetheless I would still go and try to make the best of it. Though the idea of a 15 hour road trip did not sound very appealing. But nevertheless The ride down was not too bad, certainly more lively than the ride home. I think we did about 12 hours the first day and about 3 hours the second day. But as soon as we arrived we were greeted sweetly by the amazing staff at the center. They were so inviting and kind and accommodating that it almost felt surreal. Like, we don't really have that southern hospitality vibe up here in New England. So Never before had I embarked on such a journey and been welcomed so easily by strangers. Anyway, We got settled in and discovered that we were the first church of three to arrive. This meant that we got the first pick of bed location in the gym where the sleeping quarters were located. Naturally we all picked spots around the outside and closest to the outlets.

On the first night we arrived, I don't remember exactly what I was doing but I was off walking somewhere or doing a chore or something and when I walked back into the sleeping quarters, all the girls from all of the parishes (so st pauls + the other 2 or 3 parishes) were sitting in a big circle playing a huge game of UNO. And the way they were playing was so when it got to your turn there was an ice breaker question that you had to answer (for example: favorite movie, favorite ice cream flavor, name, age, etc.). So when you put down a card you were also getting to know the people around you. It was amazing getting to know these girls and what their life back home was like and how they got there and why they were there. This was when I realized that it was God who had brought us together and called out to all of us to bring us together. I had the epiphany that I would have never met these amazing young women if it were not for our shared faith and I think there's a lot of food for thought there. Like, if it weren't for coming to this church my whole life I would not know most of the people here and that’s a crazy thing to think about. How would my life and your life be different without the people that you met through your relationship with god?

The site that I was working at was a trailer home that belonged to a lovely woman named Sandra. She was quiet and reserved but so grateful to ASP for making the needed repairs on her home. Despite the fact that every time she came outside to say hi we were sitting on the ground drinking water and taking a break, she managed to thank us endlessly. On her house specifically, the group that was there before us had the task of putting up vinyl siding and soffits over the new insulation that was just installed on all four sides of the house. However, they did it incorrectly and did not have enough time to fix it so it became part of our job to correct their mistakes. So for the first day or two, it looked like we were just taking everything apart and making a mess of the backyard. But we promised Sandra we were actually doing work and that it would look a lot better soon. So that’s how we spent our week. Each day going out, setting up the ladders, taking the old stuff down and hammering in the puzzle pieces of siding and finishing up the rest of the original project we were assigned. It sounds very monotonous, and in some ways it was. But seeing the finished product and being able to see what we (a group of people with little to no experience or knowledge of construction) had accomplished was incredibly gratifying and rewarding.

On a different note, a little background that may be helpful in understanding what I am talking about and why I am up here is that Appalachia Service Project(ASP) is an organization with the mission of creating a warmer, safer, drier environment for people in need in the Appalachian region. Things like Poverty and natural disasters plague the region like no other and it is wicked difficult to find decent-paying jobs. In addition to this, basic necessities like grocery stores and markets are a day trip away that needs to be planned in advance. Most households are multi-generational and have a single car shared amongst the family. This makes it hard to make long journeys because figuring out priorities becomes a big decision. The question of can I pay my rent or should I get groceries for the week and can I pay for gas? Is asked way too often. This made me do a lot of reflecting on my own life. Throughout the whole trip all I could think about was how much I take for granted in my everyday life. There is so much that I thought was just a natural right to have but yet some people struggle to procure such things. For example, at one of the evening gatherings, which was just like a meeting that the leaders at the center would hold after dinner on some days with all the groups to have big discussions and stuff like that, one of the center leaders told us a story of how there once was a family that lived off of three buckets of water from their well per day. I believe it was a family of four or more and they all shared three buckets of water per day. Now if you’re anything like me you’re probably thinking, there's no way that's true like that's crazy how do you shower and drink and wash your hands or go to the bathroom with only three buckets of water. But then I learned about a thing called a privileged mindset. I have lived in Bedford my entire life and Bedford is a very well off town and I am very privileged to be able to live here and go to school here. But I realize now, that this has sheltered me from some other more drastic and unfortunate realities that some people have to go through every day. And now that I have witnessed this other side of things, I can appreciate all the things that I get to have and that I get to do a lot more. And that I can't take these things for granted because there are people who dream about living like we do here in our community and I am so lucky to live here with such supportive and bright people around me.

In today’s gospel they tell the story of how one time people were bringing their children up to Jesus and asking him to bless them and when Jesus saw that the disciples were turning them away he told them to stop and let them come. Then he says, “… whoever does not relieve the kingdom of God as a little child will ever enter it.” And I sort of interpret that as a similar situation to ASP. In the sense that young adults get to come and explore their faith and do god's work and help build a community. ASP could easily be an adult-only organization; in fact I think things would get done a lot faster if it were, but nevertheless, it is not. They encourage teenagers to join the team and learn the ropes and build their faith. I believe that a big part and one of the most important parts of one's faith is a strong community and having supportive people around you. And at ASP I was forced to get to know a lot of people that I otherwise would not have gotten to know or been willing to branch out to just because I tend to stay within my comfort zone with people that I already know rather than expanding my circle. In fact, after we got back from asp, as in later that night, I got a text from Adam saying it was nice to see me being extroverted for once which was interesting to say the least and very unexpected but I digress. ASP was a great way for me to build my supportive community and get better acquainted with my fellow high school youth but also explore our faith together and really deepen that connection that you don't get a lot these days. So I will wrap up by just leaving you with a little piece of semi-cliche advice and that is: be open to new ideas and allow others to explore new ideas just as they come and go. Amen