**Dragons and Burros Oh My!**

Before school started we visited the little elementary school a half mile from the church. As we dropped off school supplies and backpacks, the ReadAloud program was mentioned. My ears perked up. Would I want to volunteer? I imagine you already know the answer to that question. I now read once a week to a first grade class at the elementary school.

Why would a pastor read books at a public school for 30 minutes a week? I don't get to promote the church or tell these children what I believe. One reason is that the reading scores in schools in WV are not very high. There is a great need for intervention in helping children learn to read. If a child learns to read Dr. Seuss today, tomorrow it could be a science or math book or even a Bible.

These children I am privileged to read to are just beginning their adventure of learning including learning to read. Some like reading, some don't. Some are really listening, some are wiggly and distracted. In our 30 minutes together we share stories and adventures. We go places we wouldn't go if we didn't have the books. This week we traveled to the hills of Columbia on a burro to bring books to children who own no books. We traveled around the US and even to the ionisphere where some aliens were traveling. We even imagined a far-away place called Honalee. All through some books from our local library.

I've been learning a few things in these weeks too. The children pay close attention to what I say - especially if I misspeak! And this class loves music so I bring my guitar and sing the story in song. This week is was Puff the Magic Dragon. I have found they will learn the words of the story we just read, even better when we follow the book with singing.

And I've been so amazed at how their teacher uses this half hour to ask questions about what we read like what a word means or the concept of whether a date is in the past or the future. Even our fun reading can become a lesson she spontaneously creates.

As a pastor of a small church with only a few children and our empty nester status, I realized in reading each week how much I miss spending time with children. Jesus spent a lot of time with his 12 disciples but he always made time for children. He blessed them, fed them and held them in his arms while he taught his disciples lessons.

The children in our world desperately need people outside their families who care about them and are willing to help them succeed. It is important for each child to know there are people who care so they know they are not alone in this educational experience. When I come to ready they learn more than how fun books are and a few new words. They also learn they are loved and I, as part of their community, support them as they learn. I pray that as I help them have fun learning; they will not give up on learning as their learning becomes more challenging.

Our Children need our blessing too. As I spend time with them each week, this time blesses them as I listen and invite their comments. I am blessed too as they reach out to hug me or wave at me as I arrive or as I’m leaving. ReadAloud reaches beyond their ears and eyes and thoughts and down to their hearts.