Camden is love. As simple as a statement that may seem, I think it best describes both what I learned during my eight weeks in Camden, New Jersey and my feelings toward the experience I shared with the people there. The area, while still a scene of many great tragedies and social problems, was not the cold, completely dangerous city I had imagined before my arrival. Instead, Camden and my neighborhood of Cramer Hill quickly became a place I could call home, even after living there for only eight weeks. The buildings were not beautiful, the rate of poverty was quite high, and there was a large lack of opportunity for proper education and for jobs and careers; by the standards of any other American city Camden was lacking by a great deal. Yet the spirit and love I found in the people there was present in large amounts. It seemed to me that even though it was not the ideal place for most Americans to live or associate themselves with, maybe, despite its problems, Camden should be considered the exemplary model.

The deeper I searched, the more I found love in all of the relationships that I had formed in New Jersey. I had entered in as a complete outsider and had not expected to form such close bonds with the people I worked with, but soon I realized that it would be impossible not to do so. The people showed such care, such concern for my well-being, and they barely even knew me. Parishioners of St. Anthony of Padua invited me into their homes for meals, my neighbors checked on me daily, and in a very meaningful moment for me, the Francis House, an outreach ministry for those with or affected by HIV/AIDS, took me into their family without hesitation. While it does not live up to the perfect image of the American dream, there is certainly God in Camden and the proof was in the loving relationships that I
formed there. To me, the people I met during my eight weeks became the visible presence of God and his care for me in the world; there was simply no other way to explain the kind of love I received in Camden. While I was there in service to their community and to act as a steward of the Lord, I soon realized I had also gone to Camden to complete a journey of reflection concerning my faith and my place in the world. The community I found led me to become reenergized in my relationship with God and in my service to the world through their incredible amounts of love they shared with me.

There was nothing more powerful than gathering at noon on every Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday at Francis House for circle. Hand-in-hand, all guests, volunteers, and staff would come together for a time of petition and thanksgiving to the Lord, and the noon prayer always ended with the simple statement “Let God’s will, not ours, be done.” Every time that was recited, a sense of calm would wash over me and even the most complex of problems looked simple, even if for just a brief moment. Michael Himes shares that “holiness consists in bringing one’s thoughts and will into line with God’s judgment” (41). No one at the Francis House, most certainly including my own self, could be considered holy in a traditional sense of the term, but I believe they certainly are a community that is working toward holiness in the sense that it is what one achieves as being in line with what God wants for one’s life. The stories of many of those who call Francis House home are absolutely heartbreaking, yet they have risen above their own situation to give into the life that God is now calling them to lead.
I could not imagine being a person with HIV in a society and a world that often outcasts you in fear and misunderstanding. Listening to the Francis House guests discuss what they have suffered through simply due to their health is astounding and life changing. Many have been disowned by their families, rejected by those who had once been their significant others and life partners, and lost their former jobs and homes, but despite it all they continue to love. The atmosphere of care and concern for one another that I experienced daily at the Francis House was simply unlike any other feeling and expression of love I had ever known. It was not a feeling commonly mistaken for love that is sometimes forced out of empathy, this was as true and deep and selfless as I had ever witnessed love acted out. At the Francis House, true relationships full of love were valued over all other things, and I believe that this is what brought about such a strong healing power within the community: “Whenever we experience- in ourselves or in others- a deep, intimate and loving relationship, there is our primary experience of God.” (Himes 91).

It did not matter who you were or what you had done in the past, because the Francis House guests seemed to only focus on the present, on their time together as a family. After just a few days of spending time there, they had already opened up their family to include me, and I was beginning to have that “experience of God” which Himes speaks of. Before my time in Camden, I think what I was getting wrong about my relationship with God was thinking that God was some distant figure acting on my life and giving me strength. I did not realize that God is actually the love that I shared with the people I met; God is not distant, but rather constantly in the present through the relationships I form. I took on the love that the Francis
House had shown me, and I began to give fully of myself in the love that I returned back to them and all I met in Camden. In his article “A Habitus for Globalisation,” Herbert Anderson writes, “When we offer hospitality to a stranger, we welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives that has the potential to expand our world” (34). In my case, my world was expanded through a better understanding of God and a deep connection to so many strangers who quickly became trusting friends.

The love that exuded from the Francis House seemed to spill over into every aspect of life at St. Anthony’s of Padua. The amount of smiles, hugs, warm greetings and kind words astounded me. How could this be so? After all, the blocks of Camden were filled with abandoned and condemned buildings, drug deals were made on front porches and street corners, and violence was certainly still a problem in the area. The people that I worked with at St. Anthony’s could not escape the truths about their city, but they found strong comfort in doing all they could to help change to all the powers of their ability. Together, they were able to center their lives around God, whose presence was so strong because of their service to each other.

The people I worked with did not need all the material possessions that the American dream might have told them were necessary. Instead, their strength stemmed from the love of God and the love of one another, and from that strength they had hope. Hope to change some of the social problems and injustices within Camden. Hope to finally be able to move their family into suitable and safe housing. Hope that their children would grow to not only do the work of Christ, but to also one day gain the proper education that they had been refused. As Pope Benedict XVI
shares, "It is, however, hope- not yet fulfillment; hope that gives us the courage to place ourselves on the side of good even in seemingly hopeless situations, aware that as far as the external course of history is concerned, the power of sin will continue to be a terrible presence" (156). The people of Camden had no choice but to love, it was their only chance to overcome the struggles and suffering they fought on a daily basis.

As I spent time in Camden, at moments the world seemed to rush around me: the speeding traffic, loud music blaring from the local stores, the roar of the four-wheelers and motorbikes, the noise of local barbeques and block parties. Yet in these moments I somehow felt a calm inside of me, a sense of tranquility that could only have its source in God. I began my summer journey searching for something more in life, and this simple phrase of Himes seems to capture so much about my time in Camden: “You will find out who you are and who God is by giving yourself away in loving service to others” (44). I gave myself to the city of Camden, and it gave me more than I had ever anticipated. It wrapped me into its love, showed me the wonderful and beautiful warmth located just past its troubles that are pasted all over the news, and gave me an opportunity to make small changes in service as an outsider that soon thought of myself as a local. “The Kingdom of God is a gift, and precisely because of this it is great and beautiful”, and through my service I found Camden and its citizens to be the amazing, glorious dwelling of God that they are (Benedict XVI, 155).

In talking with my site supervisor and pastor of St. Anthony’s of Padua, Father Jud Weiksnar, I was truly able to complete the connection of seeing Camden as the
Kingdom of God enacted within our world. The disparity between the characteristics of Camden and the characteristics of the American dream is quite obvious, and this, too, got me thinking during my meetings with Fr. Jud. Perhaps the American dream is not what our world, not what I, should be striving to achieve. During my eight weeks of service not a single bit of the joy I found in my life or the love I shared in my relationships was caused or based in material possessions. I was taken to a place of simplicity, and I found that the love there was true and was real. Many of the problems caused by an excess of material things were not there to hide behind; life felt more real to me than it ever had, and it was exhilarating. I felt truly loved, truly enveloped in the presence of God. I realized my time there was not about completing huge projects of service that I could cross off my to-do list, but rather just working in daily service with and for others. Spending time together with the people of Camden as humble brothers and sisters in Christ became my main focus, and it led me to feel like there truly is hope for our world, despite the problems and injustices.

I still continue to struggle with not only finding an intersection between the Kingdom of God and the ideal American way of life, but also how to find practical solutions to the issues that Camden, and so much of the world, faces. We can hope for less violence and drug usage, better education, and a way to provide safe housing and reliable jobs for the area, but how to go about enacting those goals is a completely different thing entirely. I am now restless in my journey to continue service that can help solve these issues, and I understand that my want to help will never be fulfilled. In fact, my journey in service will never be fulfilled, for my life can only be fulfilled in the full glory of God. However, it is this hope of fulfillment, the hope of perfect love that keeps
me going everyday. The presence of God I found in Camden truly confirmed that it is a place of God, that it \textit{is} God. “What happens when you serve your brother or sister is that you are enacting the meaning of the word “God”… God is the doing, the loving” (Himes 18).