

I've got to say, it feels good to be back! Back to my wife and child. Back to my colleagues. Back to all of you: my family. It's been four weeks since I left for our work camp in South Dakota, and it's been four weeks since I've been in this Sanctuary. And while that sounds like only a short time away, man, it feels good to be back home, right here at PCCH. Now, truth be told, at first I wasn't really feeling all that great to be back. I wasn't really feeling "at home" that first morning I woke up. In fact, my precise thought was actually, "*Where is my youth group?*" I mean, Anya went off to work, and there I sat, in the quiet, with Vincent and Seth just staring at me. Peter Butler wasn't there laughing with me. Tommy Rebeck was missing at the chessboard. Nicholas Wagg wasn't there being Nicholas Wagg, and my adult advisors were nowhere to be found. Nor could I hear any form of communal prayer, no, no morning song either; no, nothing but a grunt and apathetic look through my kitchen cabinets as I grazed for scraps of food.

Now, don't get me wrong. It was great to see Seth one week older, and Anya another week ageless, but, there was also just something not altogether right with me. And I kind of always feel that way when I get back from one of these trips where we spend a week, mostly out in nature, following in the footsteps of Jesus doing God's work helping strangers. Like Jeremiah in our OT text called to be God's prophet, the experience of being away called into service, always feels like I'm coming into closer contact with that divine claim on my own life, as compared to this more organized and industrial approach (*which I also love, don't mistake the point!*). And this particular experience, in South Dakota of all places, was just so memorable, that I was depressed to see it come to an end.

I mean, just picture this: Rolling green hills; sun-kissed hills and misty woods. Mountains, almost where they didn't belong, rising clear out of the stillest water; and roads so open it was just you, the Holy Spirit, and the highway beneath you. There were wild horses, wild bison, open prairies and prairie dogs. Rushmore, Custer, Mickelson, and Crazy Horse. And The Badlands, my God, The Badlands! Its color. Its size. Its irregularity. It's impossible to describe. And did I mention the sky? No? Well, good Lord, that sky! The big sky, the night sky. Where the blood moon rose like Apophis from out of the underworld, and the stars danced as if part of some grand celestial performance at the amphitheater of Olympus.

...Suffice it to say, when I drove back from the airport, on I-95 and 309N, there was kind of, like, something lacking. And honestly, my mood suffered because of it. My spirit dimmed. And neither were helped along when I got home, where I was greeted not by my wife, child, and dog (*they were at my in-laws*) but by a flood of emails, the first of which received from one of those annoying, aggravating kind-of-friends. You know, the kind who sees you ascending to cloud-9 and determines it pious of him to be that splash of cold morning water. In short, his email was about the pointlessness of short-term work camps, and one-week mission trips. That they are a farce, and more for the group going rather than the people staying. That in actuality, they do more harm than good, in that jobs rarely get completed and that sustainable education typically is not broached; such that ultimately, you're not actually helping people, but only making yourself feel better, while perpetuating the problems in their lives.

Well... damn. Like Jesus, after healing that poor woman on the Sabbath, only to be confronted by the authorities reading the letter of the law back to him, my high was immediately extinguished. And my first thought was: *Come on, man. We just spent a week out of our comfort zone, working virtually every morning and afternoon to help others, and you're going to say we did more harm than good? That it was all a farce? Nah, I don't buy it.* But then, as so often happens, time passed, and his words, once an affront, suddenly made me second-guess my own position. I began to reconsider his point and investigate if it held any water. And so doing a little research of my own, I came across an article on Live Science that, much to my dismay, seemed to affirm his point, even if taken from the broader discussion on the efficacy of charitable acts. The article reports, "After donating to a major environmental fundraiser in the Netherlands, the same participants, in a new study, became less interested in behaving in an environmentally friendly manner. The idea being that: people may feel good about themselves after acting charitably, such that they then feel like they have a license to behave a little worse later on."

Yikes. So even if South Dakota produced one week of good, Christ-like, behavior out of these kids, it seems they could just as easily follow it up with one week of debauchery. Certainly to the point of my annoying friend, and not, my intended outcome. But let's consider, even if just for a moment, that this pattern is unavoidable, which I would contest that it's not, but whatever. Let's say Sizzy Lawton, after a week of playing the saint, goes home and indeed behaves like an idiot. Does that mean that all of the hard work she did on the trip, and all the good she accomplished for the people in Lead and Rapid City was, in the end, meaningless, or somehow less valuable? – I would think not: after all, those people were still helped; their lives still changed, even if in some small way, irrespective of how her life continued after the fact, of which, they would know nothing about anyway. Moreover, let's say Jeff and Liz Podraza volunteer at Our Brother's Place because "helping people makes them feel better about themselves." Ok, well, even though that itself could be construed as a selfish motivation, would that change the fact that people would be fed, their day made slightly better, because of said selfishness? Ultimately, I guess what I am really asking is, does the intention of the volunteer matter if the outcome is nonetheless beneficial to the recipient?

It depends. (On what?) *Well, Immanuel Kant argued that morality...* (You know, I used to care what Kant had to say, but that was like 9 years ago during my first sermon as a Seminarian.) *Very well then, but what of our friend's charge about these work camps? That they are more like experiences for our own group, rather than for the people we are claiming to help?* (Well, why can't it be both?) *I am your inner voice. You don't ask questions. I ask questions.* (Fine, but his conjecture seems to imply that the act of helping others ought to be an utterly joyless and selfless endeavor. And isn't that just a tad ridiculous? Shouldn't helping others, in turn, make us happy? Or are we all to go about looking like Jacob Marley when we offer our hand? And anyway, wouldn't we want our young people to explore this form of happiness in their summers, rather than say, outright hedonism? Moreover and less dramatically, doesn't helping others, even if just one person, or just for a single week, offer more to these kids' lives, their futures, and their character development, than say, learning how to perfect back-spin on a little green ball?) *So we admit then, these trips are as much about our kids as they are for those we are helping?*

(Yes. I'll confess to that. For it is also true that by having a scheduled free-day, we are taking time away for ourselves, and out of the community. But this too has worth. You see, I believe that too many of us, adults and kids alike, live these sheltered little lives, in these manufactured palaces of pixels, steel, and drywall. And it's by escaping from these plastic prisons and getting out into the vastness of nature, unspoiled, that we can come into closer contact with the Divine and the Original Creation. And anyway, these are just excursions. They are not the entirety of the trip, the purpose of the trip, or even the main event of the trip. The main event is the work that we do.) *We built a Frisbee-golf course this time.* (Well, yes, partly yes, I guess. And I admit, the optics of that seem strange. But you wouldn't believe the amount of hard work and manual labor that job entailed. We were felling trees, for crying out loud. Driving backhoes. Mixing and pouring cement, etc. Also that disc-course, which we started and finished, will be used by under-privileged kids given the opportunity to stay at that beautiful, rustic, Presbyterian Camp. And as Jason, the camp-director showed us, the golf-course itself is like a labyrinth through the elements of nature. Through earth, wind, and water. Thus bringing children out from behind their screens, these simulations created by man, out into the natural wonder of the real world created by the Almighty. Besides, we also worked with the group, Love INC. Love In the Name of Christ. And it's there, I think, that we did our most good. The main event, so to speak.) *I agree.* (Good.) *Well, tell them, not me, since you are me, and I am you anyway.*

Okay, so for three days we also worked with Love INC of The Black Hills, whose vision is "to see people thriving in healthy relationships where they know their value, purpose and place in Christ and the community." And there we partnered with volunteer coordinator, Caine Sagla, as we embarked on a joint mission to "walk side-by-side with people on their journey to wholeness, through mutual service, education, friendship, and prayer." I mention Caine by name because he relayed his astonishing story to our youth. You see, Caine had hit rock bottom. A meth addict. Alone. Homeless. And then one day, he was confronted by a friend who told him about Jesus Christ and from there everything changed. In a moment. In a day. A single person, spreading the grace of the Gospel, was able to help Caine turn his entire life around. *(And short-term mission trips are said to be pointless?).*

And it was Caine who tasked our group with calling on families, which lived well below the poverty threshold, setting up visitations for later in the day, when we would deliver furniture, books, and requested materials, while also sitting down, talking, and praying with them. A mother, in particular, stood out to me. Her name was Karina Bald Eagle. She was born and raised on a local Reservation, where she quickly became trapped in a cycle of violence and unspeakable abuse. Miraculously however, after 18-years *(the same period of affliction for that woman Jesus heeled in our text)*, she was able to escape, though not without scars and wounds. Now a single mother, Karina holds a job with the government, and she spends her free-time attempting to rescue her siblings from off the reservation. After hearing her story, which I've only told you in brief, I was overcome with raw emotion. For here was a beautiful young woman, in her mid-twenties, whose entire life was spent mostly shrouded in darkness, roughed up by the very people who should have been looking after her well-being. Her childhood was non-existent. The innocent, if not ignorant, bliss of youth was replaced with fear and pain. And so as I stood there, praying with her, surrounded by our own teenagers whose childhoods are filled with so much love, luxury, and opportunity, I was just overtaken by the disparity of it all.

And as we neared saying goodbye, I stood there, in a bit of a trance, just marveling at her... thinking about all that she had overcome, her astonishing strength, her will that simply would not be broken... Breaking the spell, she leaned over and whispered that she couldn't believe that teenagers, white teenagers no less, would want to spend a week of their summer doing things like this, volunteering for the sake of mere strangers. And incredibly, there she was... marveling... at us. And as she said this to me, I looked around, and there to my left I saw Lauren Elwell with her arm around Karina's daughter. To my right, Colin Asper, Hannah Calistri and Nicole Huertgen were still moving furniture off the truck. Behind me, Anna Rebeck was tending to her cat. And somewhere, over in the distance, Carolyn Wilde and Luke Brzowski were playing with the neighborhood children.

I simply don't buy it then. No, I simply don't buy that these trips do more harm than good. I don't buy that at all. For so much good can be done in a week. In a day. In a moment. And all it takes is us wanting to do it. Honestly, my dream is that next year we all take an Adult Mission Trip. Like how awesome would it be if on a given Sunday PCCH was entirely empty? A note on the front door saying, sorry, but our entire congregation is out answering the claim on our lives, doing the work of God, serving others in need. See you next week.

Now, wouldn't that be sweet? Right? But even if that is a bit naïve, wouldn't it be great if we all spent just some of our Sabbaths working for the betterment of others? Even if that means simply writing checks to disaster relief funds, or donating to groups like the Syrian White Helmets¹ -- you know, the volunteers who are on the front-lines, risking their very lives, so to rescue little boys from the rubble... did you all see that photo of little Omran Daqneesh covered in blood and ash? ...*Heartbreaking.* Incredibly so.

My friends, we don't need to give up our careers to become prophets and ministers. Nor do we have to spend a month away in order to incite change. For really, even just a little, here and there, with some modicum of frequency, can truly make a world of difference.

Amen.

¹ www.whitehelmets.org