

Two pictures. Two men.

In the first picture, there is pastor Kenny – round faced, eyes closed, collared shirt – leading a prayer over our youth group upon the completion of the subfloor to his house. The picture captures him in close-up in mid-sentence offering thanks to God for our efforts in helping him to finally realize his dream of being a homeowner. That’s picture number one.

In the second picture, there is foreman Robert – squared jaw, intense stare, barefoot – pointing and yelling at Danny Asper to move a 300lb. wheelbarrow of earth and stone up a makeshift ramp into the foundation of Kenny’s house. The picture captures Robert in mid-yell, Danny struggling to steer, and five of us bystanders looking visibly worried that we’ll be called on next.

Based on these pictures, who would you say we enjoyed our time with more in Belize? Kenny or Robert? The answer might shock you. Universally, we were rather lukewarm to Kenny who only showed up on the last day at the worksite. He worked for a little, didn’t say anything of consequence, changed his clothes as ours became increasingly covered in concrete, and only offered that prayer after I had asked him to do so several times before. Now, Kenny was probably out spreading the good news earlier in the week, and perhaps his gift-set is not as grounded in communication and outward gratitude – after all Paul does teach us that in the Kingdom of Heaven we all have various shortcomings and talents – yeah, but... we were still slightly off-put that pastor Kenny was not more, shall we say, pastor-like.

On the other hand, Robert, who would frequently call us by random American names (“Susan” to Cathy, “Bob” to Stuart) or make fun of our names altogether (Daylan, who he insisted on calling Dillon) became our BFF [do people still use that term?]. Robert was part human, part machine. The dude **ran** with those 300lb. wheelbarrows. He stepped through a nail and then had one of our kids hold onto his detached skin (they had gloves on, no worries) so that Dr. Drew could sew it back on later. He hardly took a break and he pushed us to our limits. He taught us about rebar; about make-shift concrete; about how to pour flooring; and yes, even how to weave baskets. He joked with us and talked to us, and not down to us, and treated us as his equal though we clearly weren’t his. And on the final day when we were leaving his village early in the morning, he waited for our bus and waved us down, boarded and thanked everyone, saying that *we* had earned **his** respect and that he really wanted us to know that before we left. Great man.

You see, pictures are taken in but a flash of a moment. And yes, they can show us things that perhaps we didn’t notice and they can preserve things our memories would otherwise forget, but without context they can also be misleading and yield inaccurate assessments, especially if you weren’t there when they were taken.

Now, lest we get off on the left foot, I should say that I really love pictures. Heck, I took 500 of them in Belize. But if you were to look through my 500, Ian’s 900, or the final 1,000+ that are collectively summed up from the others, you still wouldn’t get the whole story or the exact context in which we were immersed. There was simply something different about this trip. Be it that we were in a third world environment or that we were completely off the grid, it’s hard to give adequate measure to that which was our experience. And if you were to merely look at the photos we’ve posted on Facebook you’d probably get the wrong idea. For instance, looking at the first 30 pictures I alone posted, you might think we “vacationed” in Belize (a word I/everyone who has been on one of these trips truly despise – these are no vacations!), or that we stayed at a 5-star resort with private access to the Caribbean. You might ask, as did my Father, “what work did you actually do – I didn’t see that many pictures of work getting done.” Or you might even say, “wow hunny, by the looks of it, we should plan our next summer’s family vacation to Belize!”

That’s all well and good, perhaps, but let me tell you about the 87 bug bites on Paige Lawton’s legs. There’s no pictures of that, at least none presently in circulation. Nor are there any initial photos of the scorpions that graced our rooms at night. Or the cockroaches that took showers with us in the morning. Or the toilets that weren’t supposed to be flushed. Or the waste basket next to the toilet in which our “No.2” paper was communally placed. Or the mile and a half walk each morning in 90 degree weather and 100% humidity, and that same mile and a half walk back in the evening. Or the 7 hours straight of hard manual labor, each and every day, with shovels and pick-axes as blunted as your grandmother’s butter knives and spoons. Or the 4 foot ditches we dug and then got flooded in. Or the concrete and dirt we worked and then slept in. Or the one chicken leg and single scoop of rice for lunch... and dinner... and seemingly every other meal we shared. And on, and on and on.

Now, having said all that, the pictures also don’t tell the full stories of optimism and grace and love and fellowship. For nowhere is it truly captured the satisfaction which came from completing a task which at first seemed impossible. Nowhere is it perfectly documented that internal feeling of oneness and equality when the village children jumped into our strange arms. And nowhere is it adequately archived that moment when I was asked to bless a newborn child I had never before seen, nor when we were all worshipping together in that distinctly foreign church – I swear singing those hopeful hymns with some of those kids holding our hands was the first Holy Spirit moment of my life. No then, there is really just not enough context supplied or justice done to our trip by the pictures alone, no matter how good Ian’s may be. But that’s not to say they are not worth looking at or viewing when we debut our video on October 13 – they are, but just know that they will never tell the whole story.

Now... Brian... is this really going to be a whole sermon on photographs and a rather simplistic and shallow commentary on context? Well, yes actually. For in case you're living way back in 2010, pictures and shallow contexts are the new waves of communication these days. Slideshows have replaced blogs. Selfies have replaced journals. Instagram now has 130 million active monthly users and 45 million new photos are posted in a single day, mostly of the photographer themselves making ridiculous faces in different angles of light. Our Facebook status' read: "working out cuz I'm AWESOME;" "took out the trash – it smelled;" "this day officially sucks, my DVD of Django Unchained still hasn't arrived even though Netflix said it would!;" or "bummed, my parents said they will pay for college, but I need to buy my own books – guess I need to get a job ☹️." And it's all rather indicative of what our society, at least in these parts, has become. Namely, we are now important, "famous" from Blue Bell to Flourtown, the mayors and statesmen of our own little bubbles and our own paparazzi to the masses. And there we blissfully tuck ourselves in at night, insulated from life as it exists nearly everywhere else such that problems as buffering speeds and paid tuition to state schools make up our complaints.

And sadly, these sins of our self-absorption have even found a way to spill over into the domain of helping others. And I'm particularly guilty of this. See, when I first saw pictures of the villagers we were going to help, the only ideas that flooded my mind were the ways in which *I* and our group could help *them*. The amount of supplies and materials we could pack to assist in their project. The amount of money we could raise that could make their lives easier. The amount of stuff we could bring to make their lives better. Little though did I realize that just maybe they didn't need exactly what we have in order to live better lives. To be happy. And that maybe, probably, we don't either.

The last two days of the trip were particularly trying for me. I was so upset with Kenny for not saying 'thank you,' for not being more pastor-like to our kids, for not showing and telling them just how far their efforts had gone for him and his family, that it polluted the reality of everything the experience and that little village of Gales Point gave to us. Just like our text this morning from Hosea ("It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms, but they did not realize it was I who healed them"), it wasn't immediately apparent just how much these people had helped and changed me. How greatly they reshaped what it means to be alive, how to make the most of my time, and how to be just so grateful for all I've been given. It wasn't really until we touched ground in Philadelphia that it finally began to click. I remember thinking: there wasn't a single moment when Conway Galvez was not smiling and giving thanks to God for *all* that he had, even when he was working for free and running around with no shoes and wheelbarrows full of concrete mix. How then could I not do the same now that I'm back home, in my car, now that I've returned to a place like this in Chestnut Hill?

Truthfully, nothing has been the same since being home. Mike Elwell joked that it's going to be like the end of season three from LOST with one of us returning to the airport screaming that "we have to go back!" The AC has been off. Bags with clothes and stuff are being filled to be given away. We've been eating less and some of us are still on that chicken and rice diet (looking right at him!). I used to come home and say to Anya, boy what a tiny house we live in. Now it feels like a gosh-darn palace. Doing emails however has been miserable. Where are the shovels? Where are the villagers and the kids holding our hands? Truly, no picture can supply a proper context to these feelings, neither to the good news we were given nor the gospel we helped a step along the way. Really, the only thing that comes close in providing an adequate parallel is our word from Colossians...namely, that our old selves have been left behind and we have been made new. Through perhaps the most unlikely of sources – Gales Point, Belize – we have found truth in the words that Christ, and indeed hope for change, is all and in all.

My friends, trips and experiences like this do change us. They help us to refocus and reexamine just what the snapshot of our lives should be, what the context that makes up our narrative should say. Without your help, this un-filmable feeling would have never been felt. Without your support, none of this would have been possible and we potentially would've just stayed online taking selfies, Snapchatting and making pointless 6-second videos on Vine. Thank you for helping to renew and save us. Especially from that. And may we all continue to grow in ways of substance, depth and character, even here, in the bubbles we call home.

God bless and Amen.