

Feedback from Workcamp, July 11, 2010

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and Russell Willems

We have wonderful scriptures today that provide strong reasons for undertaking efforts like the annual youth workcamp trip. The Gospel tells us to "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself", which speaks to the essence of helping others. Love God and you'll be lead to love others. And Paul's words to the Colossians almost provide a prescription for surviving workcamp. "...as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father."

As we work through each year's cycle of scripture, we hear regular reminders from Jesus, James, Paul, and others: to Love God, Love Others, Do Good Works. It seems so simple; almost a formula really: loving God, leads to loving others, which leads to doing good works. That's probably true, and it probably makes doing good work easier.

But those of us that have been to workcamp, and the many others that have done mission work, have learned a secret. The process isn't a formula to doing good works. It is actually a cyclical process to loving God. Loving God, leads to loving others, which leads to good works, which actually opens your heart to loving God even more.

As you will hear from our youth today, the trips to workcamp that this congregation generously helps support lead to transformations in the lives of those who attend. What goes on there that this can happen? It is probably hard to fathom workcamp without actually attending; but in a nutshell, it is 400 people — both high school students and adults — coming together for a week, to live on the floor of a school, go out during the day to help the less fortunate repair their houses, have fellowship and praise services at night, and participate in two devotions a day around a scripture theme. You start the week lost and unsure and end the week transformed and closer to God.

But don't take it from me. Listen to what the youth themselves have to say. Joan Albrecht, Alexandra Berthiaume, Laura Flint, and Russell Willems will share their experiences at this year's camp in Buffalo, NY:

++++++ *Joan Albrecht* ++++++

When my mom asked me last year if I wanted to go to workcamp, I said “no.” I didn’t care if my older sister, Mary, had gone the last two years and loved it. I didn’t care that my twin brother, Fritz went last year and said how much he loved it. I didn’t believe them. I wanted to stay at home for the summer and hang out with my own friends, and do my own things. I thought that was way cooler than having to work! But the fact is, I just didn’t understand.

The opportunity came up this fall, however, to attend this year’s workcamp in Buffalo. My mom asked me again, “Are you sure you don’t want to go?” She reminded me again how much my brother and sister loved it... and then she asked me again or rather, **told** me, “Why don’t you just go!” Well, I didn’t reply “yes”, but I didn’t reply “no”, either. So she signed me up and said I was going. I didn’t scream at her and tell her I hated her for ruining my life as I might have done last year . . . Actually I was a little curious. Maybe helping people would be a good thing . . .

The time came to depart for Buffalo and I was really kind of nervous. I didn’t have any friends. Everybody knew my older sister, and not me . . . In fact, the first day at workcamp WAS terrible. I hated it. I didn’t have any friends. I

felt alone. But something happened on the second day . . . We started working, painting a house and I noticed how my work crew mates, who were all from Wisconsin, used terms that just seemed kind of funny, they called the water fountain a “bubbler”. I started laughing, and we started talking.

Not only that, but they turned out to be the coolest people. Nobody cared what I was wearing. Nobody cared what I looked like. They liked me just because I was ME. We could just be ourselves and have fun. It wasn’t even work. We painted and had fun!

The saddest thing however, I mean, the very worst thing EVER happened on the last day: Workcamp was over and we had to go home!!!

++++++ ***Alexandra Berthiaume*** ++++++

Hi, I’m Alexandra, and I’ve been on two workcamps so far. Every year, there is a certain theme for the camp, which it, and especially the evening programs, center around. For example, last year was “Reveal” – revealing God’s love for us and helping to reveal that same love to others. This year, the theme was very specific: “Undeserved: The story of the prodigal son.”

It focused on a parable about a young man who, quite rudely really, asked his father for his inheritance early (pretty much implying that he cares more for the money than the father himself). This son (in a nutshell), goes off, spends the money, gets totally deserted by all his so-called friends, and, having utterly nowhere else to go, returns home, expecting nothing. And yet, his father is overjoyed to see him and throws a huge party to celebrate, which the older, responsible brother is *not* very happy about.

This story was presented to us in the form of some short videos reminiscent of a 50's sitcom. Bart (the prodigal son). Starting on Sunday, during the evening program, we would get a new "episode" corresponding to what was the main focus that day. Also during devotions in the day, a part of the story would be discussed. As we got more in depth with the parable, we started to understand the greater theme – Undeserved.

Also, every day we had a mimi-theme. On Monday, "Myself." We covered how a person that is wrapped up in himself can't be good to others, and how we should focus more on the people around us than ourselves. On Tuesday, "My Friends," talking about how a bad friend can lead you down a wrong path, like Bart's friends left him alone after

encouraging him to spend his money extravagantly. On Wednesday, “My Family,” discussing family problems and tangles, always a hard topic. We talked about how your family is the group of people that God’s placed you with for a reason, and how they can sometimes be a bit trying, but in the end, you have to love them (most of the time). On Thursday, we discussed “My Faith,” talking about God’s way of always accepting us back, even when we don’t deserve it, and all the gifts He gives, most of all Jesus. In a very moving evening program, small rings were handed out, symbolizing coming back home to God. The last day, Friday, focused on “My Future,” how after the camp we would continue to be open to God. At the end of the parable, the last sentence is “So the party (the one to celebrate the younger son’s homecoming) began. In accordance with this, we all shouted, “Let the party begin!” at the end of the evening program. It was a great way of saying that “I, from now on, am going to live my life in God.”

Perhaps most importantly, the word “Serve” was highlighted within the word “Undeserved”. Throughout the week, this was also an important theme – the fact that, even though we are undeserved, and have done many bad things,

we can still serve and be open to God – and try our best to be better. This theme was most apparent on Thursday.

This week, for me, is like my fuel-up every year. When I start doubting, and not focusing enough on my spiritual life in order to give more attention to other, more “important” things, I gradually end up slipping away from Jesus.

Workcamp this year helped me to apologize for this and come back. Despite the gym floor, communal showers, and rain, workcamp is possibly one of the best things that could happen to any teenager – most certainly me.

++++++ **Laura Flint** ++++++

When I first opened my Workcamp packet in April of this year, I looked at the theme and felt a bit let down. “Undeserved.” No one likes being told they are undeserving of God’s love, that they don’t try hard enough, love enough. Maybe all of this is true; maybe it isn’t, but either way I would have to listen to 4 devotions a day hearing ideas basically revolving around the same points. I am unworthy, I am a sinner, and nothing I can do is enough.

So maybe I did not have the best attitude toward the worship services when I first arrived at workcamp. But I was going to make the best of it. Fortunately, I happened to be

assigned to an amazing resident this year, named Jennifer Crowdey. Jennifer, as she asked us to call her, did not live at the house we were working on, rather it was the house she grew up in, and she was unwilling to let it go. Her son, daughter, and niece lived on the bottom floor, and she rented the top floor out to tenants. She made it clear from the very first day how much our being there meant to her. She made sure that we had water and drinks and gave us cookies and treats throughout the week. So maybe we were undeserving of her love, and that's where the theme played into all of this. I tried to apply the theme to what was going on around me, maybe make some sense of it. So are we all undeserving of God's love? Even Jennifer Crowdey, who greeted us with hugs on the first day and prayed for us at devotions? And the story of the prodigal son, which we had been focusing on all week, how does it play into undeserved? I didn't know. And I still don't understand completely. But maybe, I was focusing on the wrong thing. Maybe the fact that we are all undeserving of God's love was not the real theme of the trip; maybe what we were supposed to take from it was reassurance. No matter what we do, no matter what we did, God's love for us is undeserved. We can run away from home, spend the family

fortune, then return, and he will still be there for us. The word undeserved was not there to berate us or make us feel guilty. Rather it is a promise, from God to us, that he will always love us and we can always return to him. We are all prodigals, and we can all come back, because God's love will be waiting for us, undeserved or not. So as I turn my back on the week in Buffalo and move on, I can take a little assurance with me that no matter how undeserving I may become in the future, God will always be there for me.

+++++++ ***Russell Willems*** +++++++

I enjoy workcamp. As ridiculous as it sounds, every year I look forward to spending my time and money so that I can sit in a hot humid car for several hours to go somewhere I've never heard of to help some random people. When my friends ask what my plans are for the summer, I boastfully respond that I'm going to workcamp. Often met with a funny look, I go on to explain. But just giving the outline of what workcamp is in no way does it justice. What you don't see at first glance, is what makes workcamp a life-changing experience. It's the people you meet, the relationships you build, and the spiritual growth that keeps you coming back.

I like to think of workcamp as a week to recharge your batteries both spiritually and mentally. Being a youth in the world today, I am more than aware of the challenges of keeping religion as part of every a life. And yes, there is church every Sunday, but that's only a brief few hours a week. Now don't get me wrong. Church is a great thing. But workcamp is different; it's a solid week of being able to focus on God and your relationship with him. You find yourself surrounded by people who have true faith. You constantly see God's work being done all around you, and the impact He is having on the lives of the people there. It's amazing to see how much of an impact God has on the people there; I have yet to meet a person at who didn't have a smile on their face, and was not enjoying being there at workcamp. Being in that kind of environment is an uplifting experience, and that's just around the campus. The work site makes the trip worth it all on its own. The work site is where the building gets done. Yes, if you're actually building something that's where it's done, but more than that, it's where relationships are built with your crew and resident. One week does not sound like a lot of time, but you'd be amazed at the impact it can have. It's not even one week. It's five days. Five days to complete a task, five days to help make a difference in

someone's life, five days to develop friendships. Five days is not a lot, but it's amazing how much can be done. And you will remember those five days for a long time. In the year to come I will look back and reflect on those five days.

++++++ ***Conclusion (Don Mullins)*** ++++++

That's God at work: touching the lives of those we helped, and through that, our own.

We usually stay at churches on the road the night before and after the workcamp. Whenever possible, we attend a Sunday service. At the Episcopal church in Williamsville, NY, we heard a thought-provoking sermon. The rector tied his remarks into our efforts, telling the congregation that we were on a journey. He told the story of how he learned the importance of mission trips, both for the journey's sake and for the transformation within. He then shared how he had learned from another priest on a similar Sunday talking about journeys, to dispense the communion bread with the words: The Body of Christ, Bread for the Journey, which he then did.

To me that's what workcamp is all about: Bread for the Journey. The journey of: loving God, loving others, doing good works, so that we love God even more. Amen.