

In Truth and Action
ASP Welcome Home Service
1 John 3:16-18
Northminster Presbyterian Church
June 28, 2017

The better part of a roof ready to protect a home from the elements with the added benefit of being able to hear the patter of rain on the tin roof as she drifts into sleep after a hard day.

A 10-foot square porch and a gate that will make that porch a safe and wonderful playground for a newborn and her young parents.

A stable floor where once there were holes and threats of collapse.

New walls, painted, a sparkling white ceiling and a shiny laminate floor where once there was rot, darkness and damp.

Love in action, indeed, as 20 work groups and four vans of roamers toiled through heat, wet, ticks, snakes, mud and fatigue to make homes warmer, safer and dryer.

But then again...

A great-grandmother who sets aside the idea of quiet years of rest from a life of hard labor.

A mother of many who nevertheless takes in the children of her relatives when times are hard or addiction or incarceration threaten to tear families apart.

A social worker who gives her all to find a place for homeless folks to lay their heads.

A daughter of a home rocked by violence and addiction, who refuses to reject those whose failings hurt her so, but who is determined to love her sons in ways no one loved her.

These are just a few of the stories of the people we were helping, people who live love in action every day, often in ways we cannot imagine.

Laying down one's life — that's a high standard set by this first of three letters attributed to John. And I suppose you could say, looking over this amazing

group of 120 people, that for the last week we laid down lives we had here in Evanston and trekked almost 1000 miles south and east to spend time in Magoffin and Knott Counties ripping out, preparing, rebuilding and building relationships with one another and the families we served. But we also know that in the last 18 hours, most of us have been able to pick back up most of those lives and that tomorrow things begin to get back to “normal.”

But for that great grandmother, that social worker, that daughter, that mother — the only life they have to claim is the one they are already offering to others, have already laid down for others every day.

John’s high standard is a challenge for all of us, whether you went on this trip, helped fund it, or are only really learning about it today. To lay down one’s life for another is to recognize that the world doesn’t revolve around us or our plans, or our race, or our political party, or denomination, or religion for that matter.

John positions this almost impossible standard to live by between a lengthy discussion of being part of the light that God has brought into the world and a reminder that, as John puts it: “Love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God.”

We talked about both of those concepts this week in Knott County on long drives or evening gatherings, the idea that we are to be light or reflections of God’s light, and that all who love and live that love are in some way connected to God.

That resonated with me particularly this week as I got to know more and more of the people who were part of this amazing journey, for we are Presbyterians and Episcopalians, Jews and Roman Catholics, Buddhists, Agnostics and Atheists, members of over ten faith communities in all. Those labels seemed to melt away in the sweat of a hard day’s work or an evening of relaxation, ice cream runs, banana grams, coloring mandalas or playing Euchre.

More than once on this trip, Ned told the Knott County group that what really mattered was the light we were spreading, the light we were seeing and celebrating in these families touched by so many shadows and so much darkness. And he was right.

But not completely because the reality is that this trip was sponsored by a church, this church.

And we don't just sponsor this trip because it is a nice thing to do for people in need in Appalachia, we sponsor this trip as a celebration of the light and love that we have received from God in Christ. It's not exclusive; it's not something that makes us special, but it is our particular motivation to host.

It's what drives us to march in the pride parade, too. We aren't in it just for the fun of being in the parade but because the voice of the church is too often heard as one of rejection and injury and exclusion of the lgbtq community. And we want all who are a part of that parade today to hear a message of welcome, of love, of celebration, a message that we are all made in God's image.

You can call it gratitude; you can call it perspective; you can call it what you will. Our tradition calls it discipleship. We follow in the footsteps of the One who declared that love wins; who gave his life to prove it; who calls us to lives of grace and hope and love, not just one week a year, but all of the time.

And here's where it gets interesting. This week has been beyond amazing. The bonds that have developed within teams; the bonds that developed between us and the families who let us into their homes, who had the vulnerability and courage to receive help — we are forever changed by these bonds and this love. We have private jokes (some of which the members of VanGo, the team I served with, are sworn never to repeat) and we have shared stories of challenges, accomplishments, frustrations and victories large and small. And that is a gift without price. We will all, I hope, cherish what we have been given by this experience.

What I have learned and experienced with Patty, Amy, Jared, Jay, Sophie, and Jamie this week will be with me forever. What we learned together in getting to know and love Marci, Todd, Harley and Logan will be with us together.

(Here Pastor Michael shared three extemporaneous anecdotes about the family and the trip. See the audio for these sections.)

We did good work and we have been changed forever because of it. But it cannot stop there. If it does, then all of those naysayers are right — that trips like this one are about making us feel better about our privilege, not about actually changing lives of those who live in systemic, multi-generational poverty, underemployment, and disability.

But I think I can speak for all of us when I say something is different now after this week. And we now need to figure out how that thing that is different in us changes who we are and how we live in this world.

On Friday, during devotionals, we heard the song, “For Good” from the musical “Wicked.” One of the lines of that song goes like this: “We may never meet again in this lifetime, so let me say before we part, so much of me is made of what I learned from you...you’ll be with me, like a handprint on my heart.”

A hand print on our hearts — if that’s real, if we will let it — that handprint will do more than touch our hearts. It can — now that we are back, back into our “regular” lives — it can, even if you weren’t a part of this trip at all, be something that helps us see what the world needs us to be now, what our families in Kentucky need us to be now, what discipleship means for us now, when we aren’t lifting hammers, or offering words of comfort and support, or walking with them.

Still, our hands, our feet, our voices, our lives can be laid down for them and for millions like them. Our privilege can be leveraged not for our own gain, but for our sisters and brothers who have so little.

While we were gone, a proposal was floated that will gut the Medicaid expansion that has brought dental and vision coverage and insurance coverage for much needed drug rehabilitation services to Kentucky. Within a few years, those already struggling with many medical issues will face catastrophe, unless somebody speaks up, stands up, makes it personal. Could it be that continuing to care for the families we met might mean standing up for them, being willing to sacrifice for them?

I don’t have all of the answers, but I know deep in my heart that we have received a blessing this week. In the midst of sore muscles and stuck vans we got to be a part of making the world, the little world of our families and the greater world of humanity, a little bit better. The question is, will we let it end there?

It’s not about supporting a particular political party; it’s not about opposing a particular politician. Maybe it’s not even about the politics of any of this. Maybe it’s about sharing stories and busting stereotypes and humanizing statistics. Maybe it’s about letting it be about loving our neighbors as God has loved us.

But I know it’s something. I know we are called to do something, not just celebrate the week — this awesome amazing life-changing week — but to celebrate how we have been changed for good. And then to live as though it is true.