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*Rich and Empty Handed*

“change of place plus change of pace equals change in perspective.” I’m sure you’ve experienced that. This was true for our group of seven high schoolers and two adults from Grace this past week as we took part in an Appalachian service project trip.

We traveled far from home. As far from Oak Park and River Forest you can get. Crossing boundaries of difference with each mile. As the topography changed so did everything else. Eventually we arrived at what would be our homebase for the week, a building aptly named “Christ’s hands.”

This was in Harlan, KY where the deep green mountains wrap their arms around you. A place once known for coal mining, now emblematic of so many places in Appalachia. As novelist Barbara Kingsolver says, people come in from outside and take what they can exploit and then leave a mess. Timber, coal, and now the very bodies of the people, by exploiting their pain through the opioid epidemic. The words from Ecclesiastes about pain and toil sound cruel.

We were there to serve. To be the hands and feet of Christ. Our task was to build a retaining wall, some siding, and finish work in the kitchen. We did. All while having fun. Taking our baptismal calls seriously, but never taking ourselves too seriously. A word of gospel for all of us. You would have been so proud. The wal-mart warriors as we named ourselves. Proud, but not surprised. We are blessed to have them as a part of our church. They each are places where Christ himself dwells. Treasures.

Don’t store up treasures for yourself, but be rich toward God. That is Jesus’ word for us. We who can be closed off by so many things. The temptation is to build bigger barns internally/externally. With ourselves and our stuff packed up. To hoard and hide. Keep our fists tight and our hearts tighter.

To that Paul tells us: in baptism we already died and our life is hid with Christ in God. Why would we hide any longer? From one another or from God. It’s okay. You are safe. Remember, the name of our home base: Christ’s hands.

What makes you rich toward God? Through the gospel it becomes clear. Not becoming more spiritual, theological, or memorizing Bible verses (not that we shouldn’t do those things), but a life spent where Christ is seated. At the right hand of God. Cross as compass we find that leads us directly to our neighbors. Other people made in God’s image and in whom Christ dwells. Living in places near and far. Those are the only treasures that will last. Nothing that can be stored in barns to rust-- only people shaped

by God's own hand. A life of rich love towards one another-- sharing what we have already been given. Need an example— get to know our youth or others like Pat Anderson in our community.

Slow down. Look around. Listen. Be the hands and feet of Christ- Even more, find him already there. Disguised in a million faces across a multicolored multiplicity of mosaics.

Angie. That's her name. The homeowner of the house we worked on. I think we all were moved by her generosity, joy, kindness, love, and hospitality. She made us feel at home. She gave us something we couldn't have received on our own. Like Christ. All and in all. Including her. Especially her. Of course in a place like Appalachia. Where else?

As someone said while sitting in our sharing circle Friday night, it's amazing how when you go somewhere to give, you actually end up receiving, in ways you could not have imagined. We journey with open hands, so that we can carry those drills, hammers, posthole diggers, tampers— but even more so we can receive Christ as a gift. In the faces of people like Angie, strangers, in the miracle of community that is worth the risk, in the middle of a Walmart, a Waffle House, through the work and wisdom of teenagers, and in bread and wine placed in your hands.

Like Christ, wrapping himself around you tight. Embrace. A place to stay through all our days. There-- in that shelter, capacious canopy, we would take our baptismal calling deadly seriously, but never take ourselves too seriously.

When you find Christ there again, you might cry, laugh so hard you could, travel to a new place in a van or in your heart, serve and be served. Marvel at all the gifts that God could ever give served up for you with no strings attached. His life was demanded of him by the powers of sin and death so that his risen life can flow through you. It is all grace from here. No earning or deserving in this geography. Grace is more than a stop along the way. It is the beginning, middle, and end. Rich. Overflowing. Bursting forth. Blow the doors off the barn. It's where we are.

Luther says, since we have been given an abundance of all good things in Christ (God has not held back anything from you) I will do nothing in this life except that which is beneficial for my neighbors. Because of the rich grace of God I will be rich.

“Change of place plus change of pace equals change in perspective.” Slow down and look through the cross to Christ alive. His icon is everywhere. Resurrection is God's constant work. Let go. Come out of hiding. Fall. Everywhere you go- Christ is all. And in all. We've already arrived home- in a place called Christ's Hands of all places.