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*Taste and See*

Yesterday afternoon our group of 19 youth and 6 adults returned after spending a week together. We were in the heart of Appalachia. Jonesville, Virginia. All to be a part of an Appalachia Service Project mission trip. The mission of ASP is to make homes warmer, safer, and dryer and they have been working in Jonesville itself for forty years. They are known deeply there. Our group was split into three crews. We put up J-Channel and siding and made improvements to a bathroom. Putting in a new door, fixing a piece of flooring, and helping to install a new drop ceiling. As we set out to give of our time and energy, we ended up receiving so many gifts in return.

When Jesus went to shore he *saw* a great crowd and had compassion on them. It takes a moment to really see. We are distracted by things seeking our attention at every moment. Our own inner voice lures us inward and we get lost in ourselves and a legion of devices and demands compete for our attention. But Jesus notices. Them and you. All we are and all we carry. That is one of the gifts of a trip like this. We leave what is familiar to be a part of a community different from our own. In new terrain those things that keep us from seeing ourselves and others clearly begin to fall away.

While Jesus sees them, the disciples hold on to what they've known. "Send the crowds away so that they may buy food for themselves." Self-reliance and sufficiency. Narrow vision. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Work harder. You were born a blank slate and get to live with the consequences of what you create. We are on our own. We get what we deserve. Feed yourself.

We push forward fueled by resentment. We bottle up pain and questions and fears. We don't ask for help. We start to believe that it's all up to us and that we are defined by our ability to produce, perform, or turn a profit. It lures people in and spits them out like an algorithm death spiral. We do that on our own. How has this "do it yourself" ideology kept you and others from abundant life? Exhausting. In the face of this Jesus says: STOP. Itself a kind of death. He invites us to give up the world's games. Drop our agendas and expectations. To sit down. Receive what we could never make happen. Food that satisfies- exactly what we need from someone else's hand. Grace. Pure gift that never has and never will depend on your ability to will it into existence. It comes down and is placed in your hands.

“Everyone who thirsts; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy without money, without price.” Here a new kind of life takes shape. A different way of seeing ourselves and others begins to come into focus. It starts and ends with your own belovedness. Forgiveness. And place in this new community that God is creating out of all kinds of people and places forgotten and cast aside, you and me included. What is built is mutual care, dignity, strength from vulnerability, power in weakness. Interdependence. As I heard recently--- the gifts of Jesus Christ are always a rebuke and answer to every system and structure and person that tells you that you are on your own and just have to survive by grit.

It turns out that when we are given all we need there are always leftovers to share. Grace multiplies. There were twelve baskets after everyone had their fill. Broken pieces for the journey like little eucharist tables set out in hollows and vans and picnic tables and walmarts. Baskets of abundance passed back and forth.

Our high schoolers are amazing. Faithful. Kind. Gentle. Strong. Always making room. I received baskets of abundance as I saw each of them be themselves. Listening and supporting each other. All with laughter. They found new connections as they each discovered more of who God is creating them through one another. I'm more faithful because of what they brought me without even trying. Wednesday morning our whole group led devotions for the entire center. All 19 together. It was a pastor's dream. I signed them up and they did everything themselves.

Friday night when we gathered to share and bless one another there were two kids from other churches that just happened to be in the same common room. Without even thinking about it they joined our circle. They were welcomed with cheers. Our circle grew wider as we exchanged baskets of abundance. Words and the sign of the cross. Welcome that we crave in a world of isolation. Seen. Included. Who has carried you a basket of abundance?

One of the relatives of the homeowner whose house we were working on had a truck that was filled with every tool imaginable. They worked beside us. We would come to a dead end in work we had never done and they'd say “I'll be right back” and come back with exactly the tool that we needed and didn't have. And the homeowner herself and her daughter and grandbaby who allowed us to work all week in her bathroom of all places. She invited us into her sanctuary and welcomed us again and again with warmth and love. Freely sharing what she had with us. Baskets of abundance.

For us the folks who opened their homes to us and allowed us to serve them became the embodiment of God. Our crucified Messiah disguised as a stranger. All while bearing gifts. We traveled all that way only to realize that in the reign of God distance disappears in an instant. More than could ever be hidden or kept to ourselves. We see it right here.

