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Text: Mark 9:30-37

### *A Life for Others*

This was not the mission trip I expected. In March 2017, I wanted to get an early start on planning the 2018 mission trip. I heard about a fantastic organization in downeast Maine that subsidized home repairs for low-income residents and pounced. Reaching out to the site coordinator, I discovered that I was the first person to inquire about dates for the following year. The calendar was wide open, and I could have any week I pleased. After securing a date, it felt so good to have a trip on the books and a plan.

That plan—that I thought was so amazing—was turned upside down. This past January, five months before we were set to leave, I received a message from the coordinator confirming our trip not for the last week of June but for July. I stared at the screen, mouth gaping. Reviewing old messages, I discovered that I actually sent her the wrong dates. I called her only to find out the date I intended to sign up for was already taken. My hands began to shake and the color left my face as I realized how badly I had screwed up.

After many hours of deep breathing exercises and desperate phone calls, a new plan began to emerge. Instead of rebuilding homes in downeast Maine as originally planned, we would spend most of the week at Pilgrim Lodge, an aging Christian retreat center in central Maine. We would help in whatever way best to make the place beautiful and safe for people of all ages to enjoy. On the last day, we would join with folks from my childhood congregation in western Maine to serve a free community meal.

Some parts went as expected. The mosquitos were ferocious; we cleared overgrown hiking trails and hauled fresh woodchips to the group challenge course; and we served over 100 meals to the hungry and lonely of western Maine. We had experiences of showing up for others in need and offering our bodily strength. You commissioned us to go out and be the body of Christ, and we felt firsthand what it means to get our hands dirty for Jesus.

The trip also had its fair share of surprises. As we were wrapping up one particularly hot and buggy afternoon on the trails, we came across a section blocked with at least a half dozen downed trees from last fall's windstorms. I figured that project would have to wait for another day when we could saw a path through the logs. When I was nearly ready to crawl over them and keep going, Ethan Schuck starting lifting on one end of a trunk and signaled us over to help. To my delight, the group followed his lead rather than mine. Tired and sweaty, many hands still made for heavy work but we cleared those fallen birches and maples and finished the project. It was a turning point for the week. We were no longer seven individuals working side by side but a single group working together. The effort was emblematic of the effort and support they offered one another throughout the week. Considering the moment we loaded the van was our first time all together in one place at the same time, this was no small accomplishment.

If any of these reversals of expectations surprise you, they really should not. In a recent *This American Life* episode, a college admissions officer explained the narrative arc of the most common admission essay topic: the mission trip. He explained that they all eventually begin to sound like this: "We flew down to somewhere in Central America, and we got off the plane. It was really hot. And we got on the bus. And 20 miles outside of the village, our bus broke down, but we got picked

up by a chicken truck and taken into town. And then over the course of my time there, I went expecting to help others, but it was, in fact, me who was changed." He then continued, "And even just when you first start reading that essay, you're like, oh, here it comes again."

While originality in an admission's essay matters a great deal, it matters less so in the telling of our faith stories. At church, we read the same scriptures from the same book with only minor variation in wording year after year. The reason we tell these stories repeatedly is that they point to a larger truth.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus shares with them surprising news. He is not the messiah they expected. There will be no rebellion with swords and shields, and he will not overthrow Caesar. Instead, the powers of the earth and even his best friends will hand him over to die. For his friends and for the world, he submits himself to overcome the forces of Death itself through the power of love. Jesus responds to his God-given calling, gives of himself, and births something beautifully unexpected: the fullness of life for you and me.

When we go on a weeklong mission trip or simply serve for a few moments, we enter the story of Jesus and heed his calling, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." We intentionally practice placing the concerns of others above our own. We practice discerning how our God-given gifts best work with the gifts of others for the good of all.

By the word "all," I mean it as Jesus does in today's passage. To serve all is truly to serve everyone, and he does this by focusing on a particular person. To drive home his point, as he said it he took a little child in his arms. In the social hierarchy of Jesus' day, adults, particularly powerful men, understood children as less than fully human. Serious company preferred that children be out sight and most certainly not be heard. To make clear that offering oneself in service to the least took precedent over social climbing and self-service, he presented them with a child and proclaimed that her life had value. To serve all means radical care for the marginalized, because to welcome such a person is no different from welcoming Jesus himself.

What makes mission trips special is how they encourage us to prioritize service and expand our boundaries of concern. At their best, they create spaces where we can put the norms of the world—the ruthless striving, competition, and fear—on the back burner for the values of Jesus, especially service, acceptance, and generosity. We experience how the love of God through us can transform the lives of others we hardly knew before. Serving others in this way transforms us, too.

Although mission trip essays and often sermons lack originality, they serve a unique function in the life of the Church: they help weave together the narratives of our lives with those of scripture. Stories that help us give us a sense of purpose and hope to the episodes that feel burdensome and out of place. Living your life in this way is the farthest thing from clichéd. On the contrary, your eyes will discover surprises all around you. Rather than waiting for people to serve you, opportunities to give of yourself spring up all around you. The path in front of you may have downed trees in the way, but the fullness of the living Spirit of Jesus will abound as you help clear the path for those who follow.

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