

Second Sunday of Easter (c)
Acts 5:27-32 Revelation 1:4-8 John 20:19-31
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
April 24, 2022 [Traditional]

In all my former congregations, I took high school students on Workcamp mission trips. Been to 22 of them. But who's counting? I know that St. John's has been involved in Workcamps. It's where the kids do repairs on people's homes. It's a Christ-centered, wonderful faith experience for young people. And I still remember a workcamp story I heard, one of the first years I went. I remember it so well, because over the years, I had several workcamp experiences myself that were very much like it.

An elderly man lived alone in the Kentucky woods. He never came out of his house, and didn't like visitors. One day his daughter found out that a Christian workcamp was coming to their county. Her dad's house was falling apart: needed a new roof, a new porch, and a paint job, just for starters. But he never let anyone help him out. All he let this daughter do was bring him groceries once a week. She had her own health problems and financial issues. So she felt helpless and scared for her dad's wellbeing. He was so stubborn. She knew she might be pushing things, but she signed up her dad's house to be one of the workcamp sites.

The next summer, one day, a group of five high school youth and their adult chaperone arrived at this man's house. They had to park their van a quarter-mile away on a dirt road, and hike through the woods, carrying their supplies, on a footpath overgrown with brambles and thorn-bushes. They couldn't believe anyone lived out there; it was like a jungle. When they got to it, they could see that the whole house was tilted to one side. The wood was bare and sections were rotting. What once had been a porch was now a pile of boards lying on the ground, full of rusty nails; it looked more like a barricade. The windows were so dirty, and the house was so black inside, you couldn't see in.

But there were the new cans of paint and nice lumber in the front yard, ready for the group to use...all the supplies were there, the workcamp sign was on the window. They knew they'd come to the right place. First they knocked on the front door. Tried a few times. No answer. So they formed their game plan and got to work. It's when they started scraping...that's when the man inside started howling at them at the top of his lungs. He did not use church-appropriate language. He yelled at them to get away from his house.

The group stood there, shocked, looking at each other. They had paid to come on this trip to do nice things for other people, and this was not the response they were expecting. The adult chaperone knocked on the door and tried to explain why they were there, thinking maybe the guy hadn't been told what was going on. At this, a whole new stream of vitriol came pouring out of the house. "I know why you're here. My daughter told me. And I don't want you here. So get out and don't come back." The kids were crushed. Some of them wanted to leave, and the adult chaperone wasn't sure what to do. But the youngest kid in the group—a 9th grader—finally spoke up and said, "The paint's here, the wood's here, the instructions are here. This is where we're supposed to be this week. I say we do it." The adult chaperone didn't want them subjected to all that. But the kids were swayed. They went back and started working on the house.

And so the long week began. When someone was up on the roof, the man yelled "get off my roof" over and over till he was hoarse. "Get off my porch." "Get away from my window." Sadly, after a while he got personal, making fun of each of the kids. He gave each one of them a belittling nickname. It was not funny—it was cruel.

It's part of workcamp to have a short bible study and prayers during lunchtime. He couldn't pass that opportunity up...he yelled insults and made fun of them from his window. Some of the kids were angry, all of them were sad. But they kept on hammering and sawing and painting away in silence; it was a huge job so they were going 8 hours each day. At night they'd go back to the school and hear stories from other groups, whose residents did devotions with them, and who served them lemonade at lunchtime and who invited them inside their houses for apple pie.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, they put up with the abuse. The outside of the house meanwhile was starting to improve. The roof was finished, the new porch was sturdy and actually looked really good. But on Thursday there was another change. They started painting in the morning, prepared for more verbal punishment. But the house was quiet. They actually became worried. Had he yelled himself to death? After an hour or so the 9th grade boy got up his courage and knocked on the door. No answer. The door was bolted when he tried it. This was before cell phones. So the group drove all the way into town and called the workcamp office, and relayed their concern. The office told them to wait by the phone. A few minutes later, the office called back and said their resident was fine. They'd called his daughter at work, the daughter had called her father. Everything was all right. Weird. They went back to work.

On Friday, the last day on the site, it was the same. Total silence. They finished the house early, at 2:00, and took pictures because they'd done a beautiful job. They packed everything up and were about to get in the van, when the youngest said he had to try one more time. They all followed him to the door. There was no answer when he knocked. But then he tried the doorknob, and the door swung open into the darkness. They all got the creeps. The boy paused, and then without a word, he disappeared into the house. The rest of the group stood outside for a long time, looking in. Minutes passed. The boy came out, and they were astonished, because he was crying. He told them all to wait there another minute, and he went back inside.

Finally he came back out pushing the old man in front of him in an ancient wooden wheelchair. And when the group saw him appear at the door, they understood everything. This man was so misshapen, he was hard to look at. They could tell that he had once been a big man. But disease had ravaged his body, crumpling it into a painful, tight ball. Even his face was completely deformed. He was hard to look at, but they looked at him anyway, because he was weeping. He told the boy to wheel him out into the yard so he could see his house. He looked so out of place in that sunlight. They knew he hadn't crossed that threshold in years. He sat there in his yard, but he wasn't looking at his newly painted house, or his new roof, or his new porch. He was looking at the kids, and he was sobbing, over and over, "I don't have nothin' I can give you. I don't have nothin' to give you." And after a while the kids were crying and laughing, and hugging him.

What a surprise it was for those disciples, when the risen Jesus walked into their locked room and said "peace be with you." They had deserted him, abandoned him and denied him. And now they're sitting there in darkness with their shame and fear. They've locked their door because it was a dangerous, hostile, thankless world out there. What a surprise to see this Lord again, who had taken all the abuse the world had to give him in order to come into that darkness to give them all his forgiveness, all his life, and all his peace.

The Lord we follow does not just spruce us up on the outside and make us look good. He persistently knocks at our door until he gets inside and sees the face we don't want to show to the world, and he shares our darkest fears and griefs and shame. And now he uses you and me to do that. He goes out into the world with the people of his church; he goes out with his disciples. We teach each other, we give each other courage to knock on those scary doors and open them and go in where people are isolated and dying.

Jesus is still bringing people out into the light. When we're feeling timid about opening those doors for other people, well, we can take heart. It just means there's a dark place in us that needs some sunlight. Here it is. It's the crucified Savior with wounds in his hands and side saying, "Peace be with you." Here's the light you need. Here he gives you his body and blood—his own place with God. Everything you need to follow him.