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Date: June 23, 2013
Sermon Title: Work Camp Lessons
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 10:1-9; 17-20

Luke 10:1-9

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

Luke 10:17-20

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

When everyone asks why I don't go to the Appalachia work camps, I say, "I need to stay here and do the work of God!" But the truth is I've done work camps, lots of them, all over the world. Nicaragua, Mexico, Peru, India, Boston, New York City, San Diego. And I wasn't very good at it.

Most of you know about our work in India, FOCI. We have lots of projects over there, and a few weeks ago they requested an urgent \$40,000 to rebuild our Boys' Home that houses over 100 poor kids.

"What's wrong?" I demanded to know. "It's falling apart," he said, sadly, "it wasn't built very well." "Oh," I said ... because I had built it! Years ago I took a work camp to India, enthusiastic teenagers and adults, and we built that Boys' Home. We dug the foundation, mixed the cement, laid the brick, and poured the roof. And now, "It's falling apart. It wasn't built very well."

My work camp life is filled with mistakes. In Kansas City our Habitat work camp had a big ground-breaking celebration. We had the press and politicians. I was all dressed up in a suit and tie. We had brand-new shiny shovels to do the ceremonial digging. We were all quite impressed with ourselves. As we were about to start, a bunch of folks pushed their way into our circle, all angry and huffy, shouting, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" They were the neighbors! The folks we were trying to help. Nobody had talked to the neighbors. Nobody considered the neighbors. They weren't important.

Another time, I took a work camp to New Haven. We were helping to renovate an old-fashioned "triple-decker." Our job was to gut the interior. Our foreman explained the job very carefully and then said, "Any questions? Do you understand what to do and what NOT to do?" And he pointed to certain places we weren't to touch. I was rather insulted by the question! Of course I knew what to do! I was president of Habitat for Humanity International! I built houses all over the world! So, we got out our crowbars and sledgehammers. We started destructing that old house, working up a good sweat, tossing stuff out the window. It was great! A couple of hours later, the foreman comes back, looks around; he says, "Where's that wall that was over there? And the big beam that was right here?" I proudly pointed out the window to the dumpster down below. That was a supporting wall," he said, "and a supporting beam! They hold up the ceiling over your head." "Oh."

Those are just three of my work camp stories that explain why it's better for everyone that when 225 people get on the bus for Appalachia, I am left behind.

But you can learn from my mistakes. In one instance, we just did lousy work. That's all there was to it. Maybe we didn't mix the cement right, let the bricks dry long enough, or were too sloppy putting the mortar between the bricks. Oh, we were having fun!

But what we built is falling apart now. In Kansas City we were just disrespectful. We were so full of ourselves, so self-important, so vain, that we thought our work camp was about us! We didn't give any thought to the neighbors, to the families.

And in New Haven, I was arrogant. We didn't need to listen. We didn't need to think. Just give me that sledgehammer, get out of the way, and watch me knock down that ... supporting wall.

You're off to Appalachia. Have fun! Have a ball! But at the same time, be humble enough to learn, show respect to the people you meet, and do your best.

Our church has been doing ASP for so long with so many people, we may lose sight of how amazing it is. We've sent a couple of thousand people for 39 years, providing zillions of hours of hard labor. And after all these years, we're doing more and better, having a greater impact, leaving a bigger impression on people here and there. Pretty amazing.

I just spent four days up in the Berkshires, writing, working, studying. While I was up there, I saw six churches, dead, closed, "For Sale" signs on their front lawns. Once upon a time those churches were alive, thriving, jumping with activity and ministry and mission. Now, nothing. So without being obnoxious, or gloating, I think we've got a right to say that what we're doing is amazing. The people going off to do the work are amazing, and this church that sends them off is amazing.

Work camps are not easy. Sending 225 people 600 miles away, breaking up into three crews spread out over three counties of West Virginia, doing work most have not done before, for families they've never met, alongside people they're just getting to know. With power tools. It's not easy. But very, very, very important.

Important enough that Jesus had his own ASP. Our Scripture lesson tells of the time Jesus sent off his team, 72 people, two by two. That's 36 crews, going to different towns and counties, meeting new people, helping complete strangers, doing work they knew nothing about, staying in strange places, eating whatever got handed to them, and staying at one house till the work was done. In other words, ASP. He told his crews that there was plenty of

work to do, not enough workers, so the need was urgent. They were to go on faith, lean on one another, count on the kindness of others, and believe in God. In other words, ASP.

What were they doing, exactly? Jesus called it "harvesting." Basically, they were doing for people what I was supposed to be doing in New Haven and what many of you will be doing in West Virginia. Fixing the broken stuff. Cleaning out the bad stuff. Strengthening the weak stuff. Putting in new stuff. Preparing each family for a better life. And building up yourself at the same time.

I hope there's never a "For Sale" sign on the front lawn of Greenfield Hill Church. And in all seriousness, as long as we continue to believe that our ASP work camp is amazing, it will never happen.

How do I know this is so amazing? The Bible tells us when all the work crews were done, "Satan had fallen, demons were destroyed, snakes and scorpions were trampled," and they were "filled with joy." Satan, demons, snakes, and scorpions ... that's big stuff. But when you think about the families we're helping, the towns we serve, and the lives of our own people who do the work, we're all dealing with "big stuff."

That's why ASP is so amazing.