

Barriers and Grace
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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John 4: 7-15, 21-30, 39-42

The worksite was supposed to be a “filler” job, one that the mission trip participants would get done in-between working in food pantries and serving meals to the homeless in North Carolina. The house was relatively small, a one story ranch. We had worked on roof repair and re-shingling before and there were many older PF’ers and college aged advisors who remembered how the work was done and what safety precautions we would take.

We were promised plenty of help: a contractor who would be on site from time to time and a foreman named Fabian, who was the custodian at church that hosted us for the week.

On a mission trip, you plan as best you can and manage as well as you are able. Most of the simple repair projects we work on are like those you might undertake in your own home. The big difference, of course, is that the worksite isn’t your home and you are a guest.

The pastor told us that the people we would serve had some challenges. I assured Pastor Randy that our group would do our best to be sensitive to the homeowners. The homeowner was a retired engineer with severe anxiety, and his wife was a freelance journalist who suffered from epileptic seizures. They were socially awkward, a little standoffish, probably on the autism spectrum.

Our work began on Monday, we arrived on site on time with our work boots laced and water bottles filled. Fabian met us there and walked with us around the property. In addition to being a full time custodian, he was also manager of a community co-op farm. Fabian had more than enough work to do that week, and confided to us that he was relieved to have our help, especially when he was able to ascertain that we indeed knew what we were doing.

We quickly found out that the job was bigger than we had expected. There were places so full of wood rot that we couldn’t easily patch them. Simply putting a new layer of shingles wouldn’t keep the roof watertight, much less

cool in the summer and warm in the winter. So, we decided rather than do it quick, we would do it right. We began to strip the roof of old shingles, we pulled the nails, repaired the rotted spots with new dry plywood. Later that week we would lay down new tar paper, install a drip edge and new shingles.

Not only was the job physically more than we expected, but it was emotionally more than we expected. As we were taking off the old roof, the man walked around his property and picked up every nail that fell from the tarp we had spread. He showed each individual nail to us, almost as proof that he held little hope in a bunch of teenagers roofing skills.

We felt that as the homeowner he had the right to call the shots, so we patiently listened to every one of his complaints. When we tried to make decisions about the kind of materials we needed, he would argue against it – it really didn't matter that he had never worked on a roof, what mattered is that he had a say in what kind of work we did on his house.

As we made good and steady progress, he would loudly say to me in front of the PF'ers that there was no way we would get the work done. You have to picture what it was like for them, sweating and straining on a hot roof for hours to feel such little appreciation or value for their work. It was not that this poor soul knew anything about replacing a roof; it was just that his anxiety disorder kept him from believing in us.

By Wednesday, most of us who spent time at the worksite were depressed and defeated. We began to believe what the homeowner was saying - we might not finish the job. It felt like the worst thing in the world would be to tell this homeowner and his wife that we couldn't finish what we started.

We wanted to love the people that we serve, but trying to love this man was a struggle. To be honest, some of us (me included) were even a little angry. We were there to help, why did he continue to be so difficult when we were trying so hard to do a nice thing?

The gospel tells a story about a woman and the barriers she built around herself to keep love at bay.

Jesus was alone, deep in hostile Samaritan territory. The disciples left him there so that they might go on ahead to the village and find food. Before him was an ancient well, rumored to be the site where Jacob first met Rachel.

They knew they were taking a big risk resting here. The rift between the Jews and Samaritans went back at least six centuries. When the woman arrived to draw water from the well, she was surprised by his request of her.

Her life hadn't been easy. She came to the well in the heat of the day instead of at daybreak like all the other women in the village. She did what she could to avoid their glances and questions.

And now, this Jewish man, a stranger, was trying to engage her in conversation. He began by asking her for a drink, then started talking to her about living water. His eyes were kind, and his laugh was gentle. Still, it would be best if she could figure out a way to distance herself from him.

Race, ethnicity, gender, religion... every roadblock she tried to place before him was gently removed. She just doesn't want him to get any closer. "When Messiah comes he will tell us everything," which is another way of tabling their discussion for a distant time. And that's when he finally reveals who he is.

Jesus has finally broken through all of her barriers. There was so much that she tried to hide behind, to protect and guard herself from being hurt more than she already had been.

But then she met Jesus. He knew everything about her and he accepted her; he loved her and offered her living water ... water that would last into eternal life. All she could do was run, and tell, and share that good news.

I think we can put up barriers to that kind of love, that kind of acceptance, because it can be a scary thing. That kind of love requires a spirit of generosity, one that we fear we may not possess. And while it is true that some of the obstacles we hide behind are imposed by our society and our culture... many of them are also imposed from within.

We're afraid that if God really knew us, God wouldn't like us very much, so we build our own walls. It seems that it is often easier to guard our own hearts than to be vulnerable.

But there is good news. I want you to know that by the end of our mission trip week, something magical happened. The grace and love of God showed up. We were inspired to get around the emotional barrier that had been placed before us with the homeowners, one act of love at a time.

We bought ice pops to eat on break with the homeowners. We asked to see the woman's magazine articles, and spent time reading and asking questions about each one. Susan Walker, one of our adult advisors, invited them off the worksite to have a hearty lunch at a local restaurant as a way to distract them on the final day. And we found a magnet on a stick and gave it to the homeowner and asked him to help us the nails so we would be certain to get them all.

The work was still hard, the sun still beat down on that roof, but we got the job done. We could have done it quicker, if we ignored the homeowners concerns and just did the job. But by engaging them, by meeting them where we were, we all learned a lesson about grace and forgiveness and what it really looks like to love and accept someone for who they truly are.

Grace happens when the barriers we place before one another are broken down. Jesus is always in the business of breaking through obstacles and tearing down barriers; between people and their fellow human beings; between human beings and their Creator; and between individuals and their own true selves.

The barrier is just where God meets us. God is waiting in the shade, ready to invite us to give of ourselves. There we are challenged to use what resources we have to come to the aid of others. The love of God has no boundaries. Disciples are not those people who do everything right, but those whose lives have been transformed by the living water of God. Nothing can prevent the flow of God's living water. Amen.

Due to an adverse shingles vaccine reaction and a need to rest, this is a recycled sermon from March 23, 2014.