

Beyond the Surface

Sermon, Part 1 – Youth Sunday, 19 July 2015 – by Bodie Knepp



As many of you know, I recently took a school service trip to South Africa.

While there, I had the most amazing opportunity to interact with orphaned South African children of all ages. It was a humbling experience to see how their lives were similar to ours in so many ways - but at the same time so remarkably different.

One of the biggest differences I saw - and the one that sticks with me the most - is their outlook on life. These children, who had lost their parents or been abandoned, who may have lived on the streets for many years of their lives, who had little to no money to spend on toys and

enjoyment, let alone food and other necessities, who literally had nothing were some of the happiest people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. Kicking around a ratty, deflated, dirty soccer ball - which many of us wouldn't consider good enough for our dogs - they were happier than we would be with every electronic available.

And it wasn't just the kids that had this outlook - it seemed to be everyone. There was a genuine friendliness to each person I saw. One thing I noticed was dramatically different from what you see in people here in the US. Everyone they see - whether it is a close friend, someone they've met a few times, or even just a stranger passing by on the street - is greeted warmly and equally no matter the circumstance: a trait our guide said that was commonplace throughout the country.

No matter who you were, what you looked like, where you were going, people you passed by were going to say hello. Around here, and throughout the US, everyone goes their separate ways, for the most part ignoring anyone else that they see. In places such as South Africa, there's a sort of community bond everyone has with each other, and if you visit there, you can feel that bond extended to you.

Another service trip I recently took brought me down to San Diego. At Sierra Service Project this year, we had an amazing opportunity not only to bond with our church family and do service for others, but to see the conditions of deportees sent to Mexico. I won't go into too much detail now, as we have a SSP potluck planned on August 16th where more stories and details will be shared by the SSP volunteers (everyone is invited and welcome to come). However, there is one

thing from that trip that I want to bring to everyone today - and that's something that Jordan said in a little meeting we had the last night - something that has changed my perspective on why community service actually matters. She said that it wasn't always the *actual* project that made a difference in people's lives. Of course the new roofing or wheelchair ramp will help them in their day to day life and is greatly appreciated, but there is more to it. She said that the actual service we're doing to other people is showing them that there are *still good people out there*. There are people willing to help, willing to volunteer time and money on complete strangers. There are still people that care. And that's the most important part of the service - showing those who may have forgotten that there are people that care about them and that are there for them.

After our meeting, I took a second look at all I had done in Africa. To what actually mattered from my trip. At first glance, I thought that the small donations would be what made the biggest difference in the lives of the kids - the pens, clothes, and toys that we brought with us. Digging deeper, I found that while this would help them, it wasn't what made the biggest difference. Sure they'll enjoy playing with their toy cars and their new fancy school supplies, but I believe that the biggest difference I made while I was there was showing the kids that they are cared about. That there are people willing to travel across the globe to come and play with them. These children - who have probably felt very little love in lives of turmoil and change - were suddenly surrounded by a group of teenagers trying to make a difference in their lives. And I think, that in our playing and dancing and carrying little kids on our shoulders, we accomplished so much more than we thought we could. We reminded them people care about them.

And I think that's something we all need sometimes. There are times in all our lives when it

feels "like the uphill are mountains and the downhill are cliffs". There are times when we all feel like no one truly cares for us. And sometimes just one person saying hello, or offering help, or even just silently being there, can make everything seem so much better. And I think that's something we can all do for other people. We can easily make a difference in someone else's life. Now I'm not saying that everyone has to go home and buy a ticket to Africa and go spend weeks working with orphaned children. I'm not saying we should all quit our jobs or school or whatever it is we do to go and volunteer for a few years in impoverished areas here in the US. Nothing big like that. I'm saying that we can make a difference here. Now. To those around us. In really simple ways. Sitting with that person that's alone at lunch. Saying hi the new guy at work and making them feel welcome. Taking a page out of the South African's book, we can smile at people we pass by on the street, greeting them as if we've known them all our lives. Sure we may get some weird looks at first, but you never know who is in need of help. Someone walking down the street may be having a really hard day, and your "hello" may have made them smile and feel a little better. I'm not saying we need to do anything big to make a difference - after all, the littlest actions have the biggest impacts.