

A Servant's Heart: Choosing to Serve

His legs were stumps. They were the unrecognizable remains of once healthy limbs. He had left home in his youth to fight for his country. This man was never promoted to general or lieutenant; simply a private with the undistinguished heartbeat of hope. He returned to American soil, a broken man. No parades met him, just the startling poverty of Sneedville, Tennessee.

When our mission group came to rebuild the crumbling wood of his home, I faced a man whose soul had been burdened by decades of depression and despair. It had settled like rotten sediment in his heart, and he viewed us with an angry suspicion from the rust of his wheelchair.

Perhaps I didn't have the best reasons for joining the Jubilee Mission Team. Honestly, I wanted to build better relationships with church members and to get away from home for a while. But in no way was this trip meant to strengthen my relationship with God. In fact, when I arrived at "the most impoverished town in America", I was angry with Him. How could He leave His people like this, especially with all the faith they show in Him? It felt like He betrayed them all. He had broken the wings of this town and now they would be stuck here, never able to fly above their poverty-stricken situation.

While rebuilding a handicap ramp and repairing a disintegrating roof, I kept thinking of the broken man. Emotions overwhelmed me as I hammered in the blazing sun. This man was born with dreams. He had a voice and a story that may one day fade without so much as a word. Why was his dignity stripped away? What could I do to restore it? Certainly God wasn't doing anything to help him.

Our communication was strained as he barely provided grunts to my teenage prattle. Yet I knocked on his barriers daily, hoping to understand. Each day I persistently questioned him until gradually he told me of his vanquished dreams. His heart eventually thawed, allowing him to smile. He seemed to receive particular amusement from my naivety.

On our last evening, I retreated to a secluded hill. I admit I was still sulking and brooding about the harsh life dealt to these incredible folks. With a gentle breeze, I felt a moment of clarity and peace fell over me. I realized that the people of Sneedville didn't need a grand testament to their presence on this Earth. They have so much faith in God and what he promises. It was the quiet dignity that they displayed, even in poverty, that demonstrated real joy. Their faith went beyond anything I had ever witnessed...and I began to cry.

Before boarding the bus, I was blessed by the music of my new friend's laughter. Our eyes met with the deepest understanding humans can share. I had given him a restored home and hope; he had given me the faith I thought dead within my soul. My relationship with God had grown ten-fold and my servant's heart had begun to beat.

Even though I couldn't return to Sneedville every weekend, I could still help others in my own area. Over the past two years, I have shared my time with the Seniors at Heritage Hall Nursing Home. I organized a USO Dance to recognize the forgotten veterans and their families. Once I started talking to the residents, I was hooked. I began visiting them weekly and listening to their stories. Many of them mourned their loss of independence and dignity. They missed their freedom of choice. Everything was chosen for them in the nursing home: meals, activities, even what they wear. How could I help to instill the quiet dignity that I saw in the eyes of the people of Sneedville?

It seemed that I could restore a bit of dignity by opening a "Memory Mercantile" and offering them some "freedom of choice". I have spent the last eighteen months organizing the store, soliciting donations, implementing token system, and arranging volunteers. For the first time ever, the residents were able to shop for the items they wanted, and money was not an issue.

Every weekend I eagerly open the door to the mercantile and they walk right into my heart. We share our hopes and dreams as we examine the "merchandise". In our little store, we walk a little

closer with God. I have watched the “servant's spirit” grow over the last few months. We now have residents who will donate their own items back into the store for someone else to enjoy. They have so very little personal belongings in their 8' by 10' bedroom and yet they share of their “abundance”.

My I pray that my life and memoirs are littered with these moments. The moments when actions meet emotions and I find Heavenly grace on earth.