For the past six summers, my faith community has partnered with North Housing Parish Ministry (MATE). There are clear reasons as the community’s pastor I have chosen to work with MATE. They are practical:

1. Maine is close to where we live outside of Boston.
2. I am ordained Presbyterian minister.
3. I grew up in Rural America and am attuned to the plight of the rural poor.
4. Kids can fully participate.

These are not reasons to return. I do not return because everything is smoothly managed and each project is completed to perfection. That is for people who desire to help from a distance, who want mission work that translates into nice brochures.

Every year our community returns to MATE for two very clear reasons.

First, we are committed fully to the complications of following Jesus which on some days means figuring out how to replace a broken windowpane with Plexiglas since there isn’t enough money this year in the budget for a new window. It also means encountering the nitty and gritty of poverty which this year meant dry heaving after seeing hundreds of cockroaches behind a refrigerator (Apparently, I have a weak stomach when it comes to roaches.)

Why is MATE so much better at plunging into the complications of the gospel then other organizations? I can only explain with this brief comparison:

I once volunteered with a group that recreated an inner city park. Teams of people showed up. Lunch was served. We raked in new dirt, assembled new picnic tables, planted trees and shrubs. Everything was slick, “corporate.” At the end of the afternoon, the project was complete. Everyone felt good and satisfied. I don’t know if any of the volunteers ever returned to that park. Most of us were college students. I’m certain the park hasn’t weathered well. I wonder if there is a family who lives near who now won’t send their children into the park because it is unsafe, overgrown, riddled with trash. Who knows? It was a one and done, feel good project.

NHPM is entirely different. Rarely are projects completed because there is so much to be done it’s not possible. Yet bravely, *and with faith,* NHPM takes these projects on, knowing doing something is better than doing nothing. For two years in a row, our community has helped families whose poverty is so great, whose challenges are so overwhelming, that their stories haunt us. Ironically, we are grateful their stories haunt us. They spur us to action, remind us of our blessings, make real for us Jesus’ promise the last shall be first, and expand our compassion. *This is the transformative work our community craves.* We are not into one and done feel good work. We like to immerse ourselves in the very difficult work of the gospel. That means, when we return from Maine ever aware our work has not been completed, we carry the families and individuals we have served *with us*.

Secondly, we return year after year, because of the deep relationships we have formed in Maine. If I am to be honest, I return every year because of Marie.

Our community met Marie in the summer of 2012 when our team insulated and replaced a ceiling in her home. We all feel instantly in love.  It was easy to do.  We were quickly encircled in her gratitude and hospitality.   
  
There are objects all over Marie’s home that reveal her nature: bird feeders, pictures of children, grandchildren, great nieces, handmade objects, baby dolls, and the most telling—a toy once enjoyed by a grandson who died.  Marie has lived a life full of great sadness and great love.  She has raised a gaggle of children, not all biologically hers, and with such love has come sorrow. She is honest about her heart break and free with her love. Her husbands have disappointed her, but she continues to live in the world as one who trusts that love is the only answer.   
  
One summer, I talked to Marie about one of the families we were serving, confessing I was afraid that what we were doing wouldn’t even make a dent in their lives. After I was finished, Marie sighed deeply—a sigh that revealed she had never gotten used to heartache in her 70+ years. Then she said without a second thought, “Tell them I have an extra room here and they are welcome to it.” Marie lives in a trailer that is standing out of habit. She subsists each month by carefully budgeting her small check from Social Security. Yet she offered her home to a family of seven she had never met. That afternoon she sent me with 18 eggs from her chickens for the family.

Jesus tells the powerful story of The Widow’s Mite (Luke 21), in which a penniless widow gives all she has faithfully and humbly. Marie offered her mite to a family she didn’t even know: her home and all the eggs in her fridge. During his Sermon on the Mount Jesus proclaims, “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God (Luke 6).” Jesus did not think poverty was a blessing. He spent his ministry offering material and physical comfort to the poor. Yet he did believe that *the poor were blessed*. He understood poverty’s stark reality: poverty strips you down to the very studs, leaves you without, so that in return you must open your heart completely and vulnerably to the world. This wide open heart, I believe, opens the poor to heartache in a way I cannot fathom, yet I believe it also opens their hearts to all that is good in the world as well—generosity, gratitude, compassion, and love.

In Maine, everyone in my community has these Gospel truths tenfold. Our understanding of the Good News has deepened, our commitment intensified, and our gratitude multiplied. This is why we return to MATE summer after summer.

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