

WHAT I LEARNED LEADING YOUTH GROUPS
Father's Day –June 18, 2017 –I Timothy 4: 11-16
The Church of the Covenant

One of my mentors in ministry, Morgan Roberts, advised me in my very first church where I was the Minister of Youth, that I should take every opportunity to prepare stimulating remarks and programs for young people. That if I couldn't grab their attention in about ten seconds then their interest was lost. Then he added, and while adults may feign politeness, on the subject of interesting speaking, they are just the same as kids. Ten seconds to grab your attention and if not, then you all are going over your shopping list in your mind for the next 20 minutes! "Pot Roast, check, and Doritos, check, and ice cream and cookies, check, and MORE Doritos, check." That's one of the things I learned leading youth groups.

There are always rules in youth groups. If you do this or don't do that, then we'll call your parents and send you home. Wrath of parents far worse than the wrath of God. One of them is you must participate and you cannot go off by yourself, and if you are missing from the group, we will call your parents and send you home. So I'm on a mission trip to Kenya with a bunch of kids from my church and am asked by a youth group in a neighboring town, Elbugon, to come and participate. So I take a little Matatu, a micro-mini bus we would say whose capacity holds a maximum of 4, that had at least 12 Kenyans in it. So my head was jammed up against the glass by a very nice Kenyan, whose head held mine in place for the entire 30 minute trip. The youth group was happy to see me and it went on and on and on. The students themselves preached and taught and prayed; there were no other adults present. And finally it was nearing 9pm having gone on since 5pm and I said I really needed to leave to get back. They all laughed because the last Matatu left during daylight and I was stuck in Elbugon until tomorrow morning. So I wound up sleeping in a bed with four other Kenyans. What a memorable time that was! Took the Matatu back to N'Joro next morning, where our youth group kids were, and they were all standing out in front of the Presbyterian Church pointing to their wrist watches and saying, "Stu, I guess we have to call your parents and have them come to Kenya and send you home!!!!!" I guess what I learned is to be careful what rules you put together because someday they just might be applied to you! That's also what I learned leading youth groups...

The Apostle Paul is speaking to his young "son in the Lord" Timothy in our scripture lesson for today. He writes to Timothy: *"Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."* (I Timothy 4: 12) Set the bar high for yourself, Timothy, is the Apostle's wise counsel to his son. You be the church NOW. You live the life God is calling you to lead NOW. Don't wait to become an adult first. Do it NOW. Be a disciple following the Lord Jesus NOW, not someday. Do wild things for the Lord NOW. Dedicate your life to following Jesus NOW. That's what those young Kenyans did; that's what that long ago youth group I served did; that's what our kids serving the people of Washington through Mission: Washington will do this week. Set an example for the adults, not the other way around. That youth group all sat in the balcony every Sunday. And when I would preach they would have letters on cardboard they would hold up saying things like: "Hi, Stu" Or when the sermon was finished they would hold up cards giving me a score, "3.2 out of a possible 10" Come on, admit it, you've always wanted to do that in church, also! Church is to be REAL and ALIVE and FUN and a place where young people want to be. Where the Spirit of Christ is there is freedom. Kids know where Jesus is and where Jesus isn't. Kids know where they're wanted and where they're not. That's what I learned from leading youth groups...

I remember the very first Ski Retreat up in Northern Michigan with that youth group long ago. Again, there were many rules. You know, the evil trinity was out –No sex, no drugs, no alcohol. If you did we'd call your parents and send you home. Had to stay with the group; no Lone Ranger Christians. A lot of people think they can be a Christian apart from the church and other Christians. WRONG! Wander away and we might have to call your parents and send you home. One of my favorites was: "If you mess up, you clean up". Don't care how messy the church van becomes, but do remember when we get back home at ten o'clock at night you will stay and clean it up before you leave. That's a pretty good lesson in life. Not somehow magically we will never mess up; (O we will, we're human and humans always mess up) but when we do mess up we have the responsibility of cleaning it up before we do something else. A lot of adults haven't learned the wisdom of that rule yet. But that's what I

learned leading youth groups...But even more, one young guy thought it was a smart idea to highjack a bottle of his Father's vodka and bring it on the Ski Retreat. People always find out, no matter how clever you are. And so I sat down with the young man and had a little "fireside chat" with him. His Father was a VERY stern Father with VERY high standards for his son. And I knew that if I did call Sam on the phone and Sam did have to travel six hours to Northern Michigan to retrieve his son that Sam would likely kill his son on the way home in the car. What to do? What to do? I knew what the rules were. But what did God want me to do? Rules were clear. But it is rarely clear when you have to apply the rules. So I prayed about it and what I said was this. We would get everyone together and we would decide together what to do, what we felt God was calling us to do. We would trust God and we would trust our collective wisdom. What a great learning opportunity that was. What an awesome debate. And man, did I have everyone's attention. I was the new, then YOUNG, Minister of Youth, and this was my first test. What to do? What to do? We decided unanimously that we would not call the young man's Father but that we would all agree together that we would never, ever again do something that jeopardized the youth group ever again. We chose GRACE not JUDGMENT. We chose MERCY not calling the parents. We chose RELATIONSHIP over RULES. And that was the best retreat content of any youth retreat I ever led. It was from the Lord; we learned a great deal about God that trip. And nothing bad ever happened ever again in that youth group, for the four years I led it. And it exploded in size and depth of commitment to Jesus. They knew I loved them and I knew they loved me. That young man went on to become a leader in that youth group; he and his wife today are strong Christians in a church where he serves as elder. How different the outcome might have been. The rules said one thing and mercy said another. That's what I learned leading a youth group a long time ago...

We have a GOOD GOOD Father in God. We have a loving Savior in Jesus. We mess up and grace is there to help us clean up. We fail and fall short and then rarely is it about the rules, it is about the relationships, and it is about MERCY. Father, remember LOVE. Father, remember, mercy. Remember the GRACE poured out by Your Son Jesus who loves us at Calvary, not because we deserve it, we don't, because we have messed up royally in our life. When I was praying about what to do with that kid who had brought vodka on the Ski Retreat, I believe I received my answer when I looked down at my seminary ring. My parents got it for me 34 years ago when I graduated from Princeton. And on the inside of it is inscribed my life ministry verse from 2 Corinthians 3: 5 and 6. Paul begins by saying that we are written letters that others read and through us they find out about who Jesus really is. It is no longer written on tablets of stone, the ten commandments, it is now written on "tablets of human hearts" and it is written not with ink but with the "Spirit of the Living God." Then there's my life verse: Its "not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3: 5-6) The rules KILL but the Holy Spirit of the One True and Living God, released for us by what Jesus has done for us in mercy, the Spirit gives life. The law kills, but the Spirit gives life. And that was the answer to my prayer that day on that Ski Retreat. The rules would kill that young man and that youth group, but the Holy Spirit would give life.

We can spend all our time making rules and regulations and procedures and then enforcing them and placing everything and everyone in a nice neat box of sameness and control. And when that happens in a church young people know it and are among the first to pick up on it. They understand real, authentic, and transparent. They understand in a way who Jesus is. They know who He is, and they know who He isn't. O Fathers, O church leaders, O Church World, its not about the rules. It is about LIFE. It is about spiritual FREEDOM. It is about the SPIRIT. And we will have more young people when we have more mercy and more grace. Because young people figure it out in the first ten seconds.

When you really consider who Jesus really is, we understand that He really is about GRACE. And that HE reveals His heart and the heart of a GOOD GOOD Father through the Spirit of the Living God. Grace when we mess up. That's what I learned leading youth groups long ago...Amen and Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*