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The loves of our lives

On the simple joys of camp ministry

A decade ago, I answered a phone call from a total stranger, who was a camp director inviting me to speak for a week to high schoolers at a camp in Northern Michigan, on a piece of beautiful land that borders the edge of the Huron National Forest. I had never spoken at a camp before and, truth be told, hadn't spent much time with high schoolers other than coaching them in football and raising a couple of my own. I said "yes."

A decade later, the camp director I now count among my best friends, and by God's grace I've spoken there each of the last ten summers. I'm struck by how little camp has changed in that time period and probably in the preceding four decades. I suppose this could be read as an indictment, what with our culture's relentless focus on the future, but I see it as a strength.

The director still wakes up at 4:00 a.m. to drive a bus to Lansing to pick up campers. The kids still relinquish their phones and then experience about 12 hours of twitchy entertainment-withdrawal before completely embracing God's creation and fellowship with each other simply by noticing both, perhaps for the first time. We still sing theologically robust songs in a beautiful wooden chapel, accompanied by only a piano and a voice. Programmers still work tirelessly to provide elaborate morning and evening games (called "Ambush" at our camp) which exercise the campers physically and mentally and are also fun. Volunteers—usually awesome old couples whom I would like to emulate—make food in the camp kitchen and serve delicious meals (Camp Barakel has a Hall of Fame salad bar) and one snack every day. The college kids who work as counselors still flirt awkwardly with each other and some eventually date and then get married.

On the flirting: Part of my as-yet-unpublished robust academic research involves something I call the "Christian Erotic Pyramid," which places "camp work" (bleary eyes, sleep deprivation, and just the right amount of dirt) just below "short term missions trips" (bleary eyes, boarding passes, backpacks) and just above "leading worship at your Christian College," in terms of dating/marriage/attractiveness potential. Meaning that a person gets, like, 30 percent more attractive just by working on staff with you at a camp where you're "not allowed to date" but everybody does anyway. This, also, hasn't changed in five decades.

Somebody always opens the Word and preaches about 9 or 10 times over the course of the week. I send Paul a version of the same text every April, in which I snap a pic of whatever books and commentaries I'm reading, accompanied by the caption, "This is SO FUN for me man ... thank you for the opportunity!" And I mean it. There's nothing like preparing a bunch of sermons for tired high schoolers to

hone a man's own spiritual thinking and study. And then I text my small group something like, "I'm about to preach and I feel super nervous." I also mean that. And then they pray for me.

What's remarkable about all of this is that none of it is especially remarkable. These are simple joys and graces of God, enjoyed by many a churchman before me.

I still check out a paddleboat every day, board it awkwardly, and then paddle around with my wife remarking on how beautiful Shear Lake is, how for a decade the high school boys have tried to push each other off a raft thing that lives on the water, and how they'll probably continue to do this until the Lord returns. "Kluck, watch me do a flip!" yells one of the high school dudes, shortly before doing a flip off a high dive. People do pretty awesome things when they step away from their phones and televisions.

I've hung around camp long enough for my two sons to go from "speaker's kid," (also somewhere on the Pyramid) to Head Male Counselor and Young Adult Program staff. I know that camp isn't perfect, because no human is perfect. I know that there is controversy and bickering behind the scenes because good luck getting any collective of sinful adults together without there being that. But it's perfect for us, because people work hard to keep it that way.

We talk about how every year at the beginning of the week I am convinced I've lost my "relating to young people" fastball, how I'm too old to sleep in the musty cabins, and how "maybe this will be the last year." And by Thursday or Friday I will have fallen in love again because camp is a small foretaste of eternity.

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Ted is the award-winning internationally published author of 30 books, and his journalism has appeared in *ESPN the Magazine*, *USA Today*, and many other outlets. He is the screenwriter and co-producer of the upcoming feature film *Silverdome* and co-hosts *The Happy Rant Podcast* and *The Kluck*

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