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Lessons from a free dental clinic

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How did I come to be in a free dental clinic? For the Petty Party of Five (what I affectionately call our family) at least three months of normal family chaos was crammed into one week. On Monday the air conditioning went out in my husband's car. On Tuesday our youngest daughter visited the emergency room for a cut on her knee and received 10 stitches. On Wednesday the power steering went in my minivan. On Friday our son Ryan broke his arm riding a scooter too fast down a hill while I was a thousand miles away pulling off a huge surprise party for my father's 60th birthday. After a moment of panic about the week's events, all I could really think to do was phone my best friend and actually laugh about the absurdity.

Once the adrenalin rush of crisis management had left, the reality of facing mounting medical and car maintenance bills set in. While it was only slightly emotionally draining, it wasn't financially timely to experience all these things at once. Reading in my local paper that there was a free dental clinic coming soon was an unexpected blessing. Two Boy Scouts were arranging this clinic to receive their Eagle Scout award, and I had a chipped molar that really needed to be fixed and kids who needed check ups. It was beautiful timing, but at the same time it felt strange to actually consider going. I had not been a "receiver" like this in a very long time.

I am usually the person volunteering at these sorts of community activities. I even teach church leaders and develop resources for how people can get involved in transforming their communities.

It felt quite ironic and I'll admit – embarrassing. Usually talkative and outgoing as I volunteer, I sat

quietly with a book as I waited to receive dental services. This experience took me back to another time and place that I would like to forget, but that God needed me to remember. He had some lessons to teach me about serving others that could only be seen through the eyes of a receiver once again.

SPEED AND EFFICIENCY ARE LUXURIES

My husband and I had our first child while we were very young and in our second year of college. Friends and professors helped us connect to all the social services and grants available to help us stay in school, raise our daughter and be able to eat at the same time! It had been about 15 years since I had waited in line for free well-child check ups or visited with the county nutritionist to receive what was known as “WIC” vouchers for groceries. All I ever wanted to do was get in and get out, but there were always long waits and crowded lobbies. I could never plan to really do anything else on that day because I never knew how long it was going to take, and I wasn't usually able to “make” an appointment, but rather “take” the only available time.

While I have many good memories of our early married life and raising our oldest daughter, the time spent in the “system” waiting wasn't one of them. Waiting two and a half hours in the free dental clinic for a procedure that took 20 minutes reminded me that having control of my own schedule and time are luxuries not afforded to people in need. The ability to control my daily routine is a blessing in and of itself, and I've taken that for granted.

RECEIVING HELP WITH DIGNITY

As a young mother, I was constantly embarrassed to receive help. I'm now ashamed at my lack of gratitude for all the free groceries and medical care our little family was given. I was too full of pride to

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This day in the dental clinic reminded me that as hard as it is to make time to volunteer, it can be so very hard for people to receive help with dignity and grace. The next time I serve, I will pray for the people who seem ungrateful and not let cynicism toward them build in my heart. Shame and embarrassment are self-inflicted wounds that are even harder to mend than a broken tooth.

HAPPY TO GIVE, NOT RECEIVE

Probably the most touching experience that day in the free dental clinic was seeing the overwhelming gratitude one young pizza delivery man did have for the Eagle Scouts and their volunteer team of dentists, assistants and hygienists. This man waited even longer than I did, had several teeth pulled in front of a small audience of other patients and was obviously going to be in pain when the day was done. At the conclusion of his dental work, he had pizza delivered for everyone working in the clinic.

The volunteers at the clinic tried to talk him out of spending his own money this way, but the young man insisted. As much as his teeth needed work, his soul obviously needed an opportunity to give back. After seeing the smile on his toothless face when the pizza came, I'll never decline someone the opportunity to give back or express their gratitude. Every receiver should have the chance to experience giving.

That free dental clinic became a classroom, teaching me to treat those I serve with dignity because most of us are only one or two life situations away from needing help. And all of us, no matter what our financial situations may be, are only a cross away from being in need of God's grace.