

# David W. Lloyd: Holiness or Mercifulness

## Holiness or Mercifulness

As I share my experience of the [Faith at Work](#) pilgrimage to Guatemala last month, I am going to take the liberty of using part of last week's selection from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel, beginning at verse 49. In case you forgot it, let me read it to you:

*"I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until the ordeal is over! Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No indeed, I have come to bring division. For from now on, five members of a family will be divided, three against two and two against three; father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother against son's wife and son's wife against her mother in law."*

**That** is good news? Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, indeed! Didn't Jesus know about, or choose to use, nonviolent communication? Did Luke forget the opening of his gospel, where at Jesus' birth the angels promised peace on earth to those of good will?

In her article, "Disturbing the Peace," in *The Christian Century*, Teresa Berger points out that while our culture values a God who is "nice," this passage is about "God's redemption for a world that is anything but nice." She points out that

*experiencing a burning bush and a fire within does not make one 'nice.' On the contrary, an encounter with a burning bush invariably leads to confrontation and conflict ... [Moses] is led not to peace and a resolution of problems, but into conflict with Pharaoh himself. Moses' God-sustained confrontation with the Egyptians is part of a larger vision, one that is necessary for the sake of liberation and flourishing, and for the journey toward a promised if distant land.*

*If our world were nothing but a place of created goodness and profound beauty, a space of flourishing for all, just and life-giving for all in God's creation, then Jesus' challenge would be deeply troubling. If, on the other hand, our world is deeply marred and scarred, death-dealing for many life forms, with systems of meaning that are exploitative and nonsustainable, then redemption can come only when those systems are shattered and consumed by fire. Life cannot (re-) emerge without confrontation. This is the basis of the conflict that Jesus envisions. He comes not to disturb a nice world but to shatter the disturbing and death-dealing systems of meaning that stifle life.*

Marcus Borg notes in his book, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, that Jesus was engaged in the intense debate within Judaism about what God's call to the Jews meant in a time of political repression. The dominant view was that Jews were called by God to "be holy as I am holy." This meant practicing the teachings of Torah, performing the prescribed rituals of cleanliness and sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, and resisting any requirements of the pagan oppressor that conflicted with Torah. Holiness also meant separating oneself from those who did not practice the teachings of Torah, such as the pagan Greeks and Romans, and from apostates, the Samaritans. To the

strict, such as the Pharisees, it also meant separating oneself from fellow Jews whose practice of Torah didn't meet the Pharisees' strict standards, which meant separating oneself from Jews who were too poor to afford the costs of the rituals and sacrifices of Torah, and also too poor to avoid working on the Sabbath. Thus, this call to strict holiness led to the spiritual oppression of poor Jews by their fellow Jews who were economically better off, in addition to the political and economic oppression of the Romans that all Jews suffered.

Separation from others for religious reasons is problematic. While I may consciously separate myself from the unreligious for the worthy motive of spiritual devotion, I may also be unconsciously choosing to keep those who may want something from me, or who have some claim of social justice against me, at a distance. And that is a less worthy motive.

Instead of a call to holiness, Jesus saw God's call to the Jewish people to be a call to mercifulness, as God shows mercy to both Jews and Gentiles. This is exemplified by forgiveness, loving one's enemies, and seeking the ways of peace. This paradigm does not keep others who may have claims upon us at a distance, but encourages interaction with them and inclusion of them in our lives. Such a different paradigm was bound to cause conflict with those who believed in the call to holiness and separation, especially with the Temple authorities and with the Pharisees. This conflict led to Jesus' death, but did not end there. It continued into the early church. In the Book of Acts, Luke describes conflict of the Christian council in Jerusalem with Peter over the issue of whether the Church needed to follow the Torah's dietary laws, and with Paul over the issue of whether Gentiles had to become circumcised and otherwise to follow Torah. This conflict continues today

between conservative and liberal Christians.

I saw this conflict between holiness and mercifulness, separation and inclusion, in different issues during the Faith at Work pilgrimage to Guatemala last month. For a number of years Faith at Work has conducted pilgrimages to Guatemala, in which American Christians can seek to change the lives of indigenous peoples through antipoverty projects and can find our own lives changed in the process. You have heard some of these experiences in [others' sermons](#).

My older sister Janet registered for the Faith at Work pilgrimage to Guatemala and invited Sharon and me to go, too. Janet has visited Guatemala before to see her daughter Karla and her son-in-law, Luis Gomez, who live in Guatemala City. I went because as a former board member of Faith at Work I wanted to support this ministry, because I wanted to see Karla and Luis, and because I wanted to do some sightseeing. I also went because although my career is involved in the struggle for social justice, it is very separated from the lives of poor people.

I was surprised how much Guatemala is like the Ethiopia of my Peace Corps days 35 years ago. It has beautiful countryside and ugly cities, the same complex mixture of simple but hard peasant life and complex but hard urban life, the uneven quality of economic development as the nation moves from a subsistence economy to a market economy, the overwhelmed political democracy with an army ready to intervene to preserve order, and the emphasis on education. The factionalism and discrimination based on language, skin color, tribe and region was familiar. Most of all, both countries have a huge gulf between the rich and the poor, literally

reinforced by the presence of walls around the property of anyone whose living standard is above dire poverty.

I saw some of that separation between rich and poor on our first day in Guatemala. Luis and Karla currently live in a rental townhouse in a clean, gated community surrounded by a concrete block wall topped with barbed wire. This is seen throughout Guatemala – every location of value is enclosed by a concrete wall topped by razor wire or embedded glass shards, with its gate guarded by private security guards with firearms. Karla and Luis are careful as they drive to avoid situations where they might be carjacked or robbed or kidnapped for ransom.

Their development's wall separates them from a workingman's quarter. This area was somewhat trashy, and the air had the typical third world smells of tortillas, diesel exhaust, urine and dust. Small tiendas sold sundries and snacks, and there were small restaurants, other storefronts and small businesses, some of them walled, too. There was poverty, but there were also jobs and hope.

We drove out of Guatemala City into a valley of farmland in large fields surrounded by high fences or walls. Then after a climb up a ridge, we entered a new, gated community, where Karla and Luis are building a modest house. They pay each worker about \$6.60 per day, which is above the average wages, with two workers living there in a one-room corrugated steel hut for two weeks at a time. Then we shopped at a store similar to a Wal-Mart, except that its parking lot was fenced, with armed guards who issued receipts that had to be shown when exiting. This helps prevent car theft. We dined at an upscale restaurant. As we headed back to Guatemala City, the day's sights of the gulf between the poor and the wealthy had

reminded me of the gulf between Anacostia and Potomac.

The Faith at Work pilgrimage began the next day, and we were bused to the colonial capital, Antigua. In the colonial Spanish style, Antigua has no front lawns, but rather has streets, sidewalks and then walls, behind which are courtyards of residences and hotels, or storefronts. The open areas are the sidewalks, the market, the parks and the plazas outside churches. We stayed at the Lutheran Center, whose quiet restorative setting was created by a wall and an expansive lawn and gardens. However, it also meant that the pilgrimage had a form of separation built into its structure to minimize the threat of crime against us. As a group we kept a low profile and carried little cash, but several groups of missionaries were ambushed and robbed before and during our pilgrimage.

Each day we rode the bus two hours to La Cumbre, the village where we were building the school. The construction work could be tiring, since we were working at an altitude of more than a mile above sea level, but it was always rewarding. Miguel, who had done construction work in New Jersey for several years, broke up the hard clay with a pick. I followed behind him, shoveling the clods out of the trench. We did not say much to each other, since he had forgotten whatever English he had learned and I do not speak Spanish (yet), but we did not need to say much. We smiled a lot, we each played a nose flute Peter had brought and we both knew we were working together. The door of the language barrier between us was cracked open a little.

It was wealthy Guatemalan women living in those homes behind walls in Antigua who were helping to tear down another wall, who responded to the need of the Maya people in the central

highlands. These wealthy women helped create and continue to raise funds for [PAVA](#), the organization that provides the materials, equipment and expertise to build the schools and bridges and water systems. These women know that teaching Spanish to Maya children opens a door in the language barrier that is part of the wall that keeps indigenous people in poverty, just as building a bridge across a ravine ends the separation of Maya farmers and artisans from a market. These women know that the struggle for social justice cannot be achieved by always staying behind one's walls.

On Tuesday and Wednesday our group of 20 divided so that half of us continued working at the village and the other half went into Guatemala City to the environs of the dump and the [Casa Alfreros](#), the Potter's House. The Potter's House is an evangelical organization that ministers with a comprehensive social action program to the 10,000 people who work in the dump, manually sorting recyclable materials to get enough money to buy their daily meal. The government has now built a wall around the dump, which has improved the quality of life somewhat for those who live in the nearby shantytowns. But the wall also reinforces the message that those who survive by working in the dump are scavengers, outcast, not worth seeing.

Our group laid a concrete floor in an old woman's corrugated steel shanty, an area maybe 10 feet by 12 feet that was divided into two rooms. Some of the community children helped us mix the concrete by hand in the street, and squeezing the wheelbarrows of concrete through the gateway into the shantytown, around the corner into a narrow alley, and up the narrow plank into the shanty to dump the load. In fact, some of them couldn't get enough of this hard work.

When we finished, the old woman who had sat passively by all day, blending into the background of the little shantytown, asked us to come forward. She told us that she had prayed to God for a long time for a concrete floor. Now God had given her the gift of the floor and God had given her the gift of us to make it, and she was so thankful to God. We all stood there teary-eyed as she thanked God for us and for her floor. Then we all cried as she told us she wanted to give us a gift for God's gift of the floor and God's gift of us. She gave us a box, gift-wrapped and with a bow, that had two beach towels with scenes of Guatemala. Then we cried in joy and she cried in joy. And I think that God cried with us in joy, for we had seen a wall of separation break down.

While we were in the neighborhood of the dump, we visited [Natalie](#). Last year Keith Seat and Doug Wysocky-Johnson, among others, laid a 4-inch drainage pipe under three shanties so that it would discharge rainwater into the dump. Now the muck did not collect in her shanty and Natalie had a concrete floor. Those who had helped lay the pipe last year rejoiced that her quality of life had improved so much from something we take for granted in our American homes. Watching Natalie hug friends from last year's pilgrimage was a reminder that humans are not meant to live separated by walls.

The Potters House is just one of the omnipresent indicators of Christianity in Guatemala. However, even the Church in Guatemala is divided, and it has led to and in some cases supported walls of separation between Guatemalans. Each day our bus had passed numerous evangelical churches, some of them storefronts and others in separate buildings, and many of the chicken buses are decorated with mottos common in Pentecostal and evangelical churches. Evangelical broadcasting, supported in part by companies established through Rev. Pat Robertson,

dominates the Guatemalan radio channels. In fact, about 40 per cent of Guatemalans are evangelicals and Pentecostals. They have the same emphasis on conversion, salvation and personal holiness as they do here. The former dictator General Ríos Montt is a devout evangelical who broadcast long sermons weekly during his rule. I am troubled that the evangelicals strongly supported the Army during some of its worst brutality during the Guatemalan civil war.

When I was tempted to be like a Pharisee and disassociate myself from those conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches, I thought of how it was primarily those denominations in America that had responded with massive aid after the 1976 earthquake that killed over 23,000 and left hundreds of thousands homeless. I thought of how the evangelicals have translated the Gospel into the local Mayan languages, and helped kindle in them a cultural pride that is producing social justice – however slowly – for Mayans. I thought, too, of how those churches have strongly opposed alcoholism, and how domestic violence and child abuse have been declining in those families as a result. Moreover, I thought of the fliers I saw for evangelical social action programs like those of the Potter's House.

The Catholic Church has centuries of complicity in the unequal division of land and the dispossession of the Mayas, and it had been reluctant for far too long to translate the Bible into the local Mayan languages. Nevertheless, when I was again tempted to be the Pharisee and disassociate myself from conservative Catholicism, we visited the village of Santiago Atitlán, and listened to Mass being celebrated in the church where in 1981 a right wing death squad murdered Father Charles Rother. Father Rother supported the rights of Mayans when, in his words, "shaking hands with an Indian is a political act,"

and, because of that, he was branded a communist by then-President García. His body was returned to Oklahoma for burial but his heart was removed and buried in the church. We visited the memorial where the murder of innocent peaceful protesters ultimately led to the removal of the Army from the village. I wondered whether I had the faith to risk my life for peace and justice in such a dangerous situation.

On Sunday in Chichicastenango, Janet, Sharon and I went to visit Magdalen, a 14-year-old girl that Janet's church sponsors for \$30 a month at the Internado de Niñas Indígenas, a home for 200 poor Maya girls. The nuns of the Dominican and Immaculate Heart of Mary orders are teaching them and preparing them for jobs. Sister Donna told us that the school across the street had originally been a school run by the Marist priests and brothers. During the civil war, the Army martyred some of them and destroyed the school. All the religious left; the Marists did not return but the nuns did. In an incredible act of faith, knowing the worst that could happen, they decided to rebuild and expand the school. It now educates 400 boys and girls as day students in addition to their 200 girls.

On Monday our group visited the village of San Lucas Tolimán, where Father Gregory Schaffer helped steer the village into neutrality between the guerillas and the Army, and where partners from the diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota and hundreds of Catholic volunteers are helping with reforestation and coffee cooperative projects.

It is the priests' and the sisters' practice of liberation theology that is making a difference with these Mayas. Therefore, I have tried not to disassociate myself from the Catholic Church, either. There is a need for forgiveness and

reconciliation – mercifulness – within all sectors of the Church there.

On our last day in Guatemala, we went to a beautiful home in a suburban, gated community for Karla's baby shower. Everyone except us, and perhaps the maid, was a wealthy Ladino, and their lavish hospitality was as gracious as the simple hospitality of the village of La Cumbré. I sat in the kitchen with Luis and his friends Mario and Juan Carlos. As we headed home that evening, I learned that a few years ago Juan Carlos' father had been kidnapped, and that they had had to sell property for the ransom. I learned that the daughters of Luis' Aunt Lucy were really her nieces. Lucy had been highly visible in the reform movement, and her sister had been a lawyer who had defended reformers and guerillas in court, and so had been assassinated. Lucy immediately gave up her political life to raise her nieces.

The challenges of bringing modernization and social justice in Guatemala are difficult and there are differing opinions of how they should be tackled. Seeking social justice in Guatemala can set three against two and two against three, father against son and daughter against mother.

Each day as we headed to the village to build the school and when we returned, our bus passed through a steep ravine with a small bridge over a river south of San Martín Jilotepeque. Each time, we passed men hanging by hundred feet ropes as they quarried rock by hand from a sheer cliff. Their faith in the strength of that rope was amazing. I think that is what the call to follow Jesus in Guatemala in the face of the huge challenges and the disagreements and the gulf between rich and poor and the gulf between Ladino and Maya is like – it's being

called to hard work while trusting in the strength of a long rope. Even if you hear that call, you can get vertigo or become paralyzed by fear that the rope will break. Nevertheless, God is merciful to all, and therein lies our hope.