

Peter Bankson and Jeffrey P. Silverstone: A Pilgrimage to Guatemala

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Scripture

After this, Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six month's wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled

twelve baskets.

John 6:1-21

Introduction [Peter]

The Gospel lesson for this week is the story of the feeding of a multitude on a hillside near the Sea of Galilee. The feeding of the five thousand may be an instance of Jesus expanding a bit of food so that it satisfied a huge crowd – or it may be the story of how a huge crowd opened their hearts and their bundles and fed each other. Either way, it is a miracle.

Last week ten Seekers were in Guatemala, as part of the [Faith@Work](#) pilgrimage, climbing some hills of our own, opening ourselves to others and receiving the gifts of the Maya people. It was a time of many surprises – dare I say miracles?

We spent some of our time on a steep hillside high in the mountains (above 7,000 feet), working with the people of the tiny village of Xacubel, building a school for the 60 children who now meet in two tiny, dark rooms underneath the village tienda, with a disabled truck parked in the only outdoor place with a roof overhead.

Other days we spent on the hill of garbage that is the Guatemala City dump, where 2,000 tons of garbage are dumped into a ravine and thousands of scavengers dig for what they might recover and sell to recyclers.

There was also the steep hillside heading to the shore of Lake Atitlan, and the morning trip across the lake to visit villages on the slopes of Toliman Volcano, villages that were caught up in the terrible violence that marked the life of Guatemala for a generation.

The theme of the pilgrimage was from another familiar Gospel image: “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, so that we

will know that this extraordinary power comes from God, and not from us." Here is one of those vessels, one of the small symbols that Keith found the day we left Xacubel. This one is for Seekers.

We went, not really knowing what we would find. We were fed in some wonderful ways, and we found the courage to open ourselves and share who we are others.

This morning we want to give those who went an opportunity to share some of our different insights. Here are two questions to get us started. Since there are eight of us here this morning, we will not all have time to respond to each question, but there will be time later for more conversation.

Questions [Peter]

On the pilgrimage where were you fed – or who helped you find the nourishment you needed?

Peter: I was fed at our final gathering with the people of Xacubel, when the Maya kids discovered that they could play birdcalls on the nose flute! We spent a miraculous moment, making birdcalls and pointing up into the empty sky, following the imaginary birds through the air. It was a moment of delight for all of us.

When did you open yourself at a deeper level, and offer what you had to sustain someone else?

Peter: Keith and I spent a hot afternoon digging part of the trench for a sewer drain the fetid soil of a dirt-floored shack at the dump, to drain away the flood. The smell was almost overpowering. Nevertheless, Natalie, the mother of two young children who lived in the house, was delighted to have some help keeping future floods from her home. She worked as hard as we did, finishing the trench across the dirt street outside her home so storm water could flow into the city dump

on the other side of the street. When I left that afternoon, I carried the image of her thankful, hopeful smile and the laughter of her two children close to my heart.

[Jeffrey P. Silverstone]

I was fed more deeply working with the village than I was working at the Potters House. Our Potters House experience was closer to today's scripture lesson. At the Potters House we made and handed out over 800 sandwiches, most with Bread, Ham, Cheese and a Ketchup/Mayo mixture. After about 600 we ran out meat. Later, we ran out of cheese. The last fifty was just bread and Ketchup. We were told to pass them out to the people picking through the Guatemala City dump saying "Jesús Le ama".

What does it mean to feed 5000 when all are followers of Jesus? One answer is the Stone Soup model, in which everyone contributes one thing, and combined, it is enough to provide a rich broth that can feed everyone. Each person goes home with more than they individually brought.

The Xacubel project was like that:

- The nearby town provided the heavy equipment to flatten a terrace in the side of a mountain and their Mayor laid the first stone.
- PAVA contributed the materials and brought them to the site.
- The Village Council assessed the need, made the request and probably contributed a little money.
- The men of the village, along with some boys, helped to dig the foundation.
- Masons and their apprentices laid the blocks.
- The US Government provided us with Rory, our translator.
- The women of the village prepared the lunches for the men, and a feast for the opening and farewell

ceremonies.

- The local radio station broadcast the opening ceremony.
 - The kids entertained and gave everyone the inspiration for our work.
 - And, we bent some Rebar and provided a little international importance and cross-cultural levity to the project. We were the stone in the stone soup.
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Closing [Peter]

We were all changed by this pilgrimage – nourished in unexpected ways; challenged by the work and the contrasts; and brought to a new understanding of what it means to be part of this fragile, but enduring, Body of the Living Christ.

There much still to be done, and there are faithful people there who are dedicated to the peaceful future of Guatemala. Now we are part of their story, bound to the future by the labor we shared and the love of Christ.

Amen.