

"A Modern Day Pilgrimage" by Aeren Martinez

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Aeren Martinez

A Modern Day Pilgrimage

I could not have thought of a better way to begin this morning than a passage from this week's Psalm. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. This verse is a joyful blessing to those who are free to make a pilgrimage, which later he explains, is to Zion. The first part, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you" refers to those who come to know the God as their deliverer, sustainer, and provider of their lives. The second part of the verse talks of traveling, but not in a nomadic, wandering way, this is purposeful sacred traveling. By its very nature, a pilgrimage is movement. It is a journey stepping out of the normal routines towards the spiritual.

A couple of weeks ago Jeannine and I returned from such a journey to Guatemala. We participated in a pilgrimage with [Faith @ Work](#). 25 people from ages as young as 15 and as old as ... well let's just say very mature white haired folk, came together at the Lutheran Retreat Center in Antigua, Guatemala for the purpose of helping to build a five-room schoolhouse and finding out what it means to be a "peligrina" or pilgrim.

I have to take a moment to give a disclaimer here, as much as

I tried to tie this teaching into this week's lectionary I must confess for the most part I failed. I had a clear understanding of what I wanted to talk to you about and while the building of the temple for the arc of the covenant is fascinating, trying to create comparisons with building a schoolhouse sounded contrived. Having said that, besides the passage from the Psalm 84 I have already read another passage drew my attention: John 6:56 – *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.* While this statement is one of the bases for our present day communion service, I have come to see it as an open invitation to join the body of Christ and a remembrance that we are all connected.

Throughout a 10-day period, we explored what it was to be “parts of the body of Christ” – that is to say the individual pieces coming together and creating the whole. We came together pretty much as strangers from as far away as the State of Washington and Connecticut to as close as this community. Some I knew well, some not so well, some not at all and yet we immediately formed a bond. We wanted to help people that were in need. People who, for no other reason than having a different skin color, speaking a different language, having short stature and standing up for their rights; were brutally terrorized, abused, tortured, assassinated, and disappeared in a 36-year bloody civil war.

To understand how deeply this affected me I need to digress a little and go back six years to my first trip to Guatemala. My church in Pittsburgh had a long-term relationship with a village in Guatemala through a program called Sister Parish. Jeannine and I volunteered to do a mission trip there after we had met a delegation from the village in Pittsburgh. I fell in love with these gentle people and the dramatically beautiful

volcanic mountain ranges when I first visited a little Ladino village called San Francisco near the Honduran border. Fortunately for them, that village was untouched during the war. They knew very little of the civil war the rest of the country called "La Violencia" (the violence). During my second week of that first trip, our in-country guide, Walter, took us north of Chimaltenango and we visited some of the villages that had suffered terrible losses.

I recall exiting the Pan American highway and driving up a dirt road lined on both sides with tall corn stalks reaching up to the sky and partially blotting the sun to provide much needed shade. It was peaceful and a little eerie then Walter told us that in this village on one tragic day during la violencia, the military suspected the villagers of helping guerillas and they rounded up all the men tending their fields into the local Methodist church. There they padlocked the door and then set fire to the building. No one survived. As we drove into the village, the burned out structure was still present as a grim reminder of the violence suffered there. Leaving the car behind we set off on foot to visit widows who were part of a cooperative project known as Ruth and Naomi.

We approached a small farm and entered a back yard where I saw some of the most dramatically beautiful textiles I had ever seen. I observed a group of strong resilient Maya women donning back strap looms under the shade of a blue plastic tarp working steadily and effortlessly in a way that reminded me of a silent symphony of motion. They smiled as I asked if I could photograph them having to use sign language because they mostly only spoke Quiché. After awhile, we stopped to have lunch together and through an interpreter, we heard their stories and we cried with them. Most amazing to me was when they said that they were grateful that God had not abandoned them. I was wondering what kind of a God would let this happen

to these innocent people; but, as if sensing what the question brewing in my mind, one of the women said, "We can not blame God for what evil people do, we can only be grateful that God has left us with our ability to provide for ourselves and bringing people like you to buy our textiles." This sentiment was one that I heard continually from victims that had deep religious roots. I want to be clear they were not doing the "forgive and forget" rouse, no they were clear they wanted the Government and those guilty of the crimes to come to justice, but they were not blaming God. They blamed man.

In this village, I received the first of many lessons in letting go my own anger with God and beginning to refocus and understand the nature of evil...but that is another story.

Today I want to focus on the 25 strangers that came together to form a bond that I suspect will bind us for many years to come. We worked together, lived together, shared food, stories, dreams, hopes, fears, similarities and differences. Stepping out of our comfort zones is not a particularly happy prospect, but it serves a useful purpose – **to challenge us** – to stretch our minds and our bodies. When visiting a foreign country we are disarmed, disoriented and more than a little confused by the signs, the sights, the sounds and the smells.

I recall from high school religion classes that the body of Christ is made up of each one of us; but I have become aware that it is also made up of the societal structures we form to live in. The family, the church, the community, the nation, the world are all parts of the body of Christ – and each of those parts must be exercised to achieve balance function properly.

So how do we achieve balance in the body of Christ? One way is for us to become aware of our surroundings. When a family unit forms it is not the end of the story; it expands, it continues to explore each other. It grows in love, commitment, and perhaps size if children appear. Exercise or balance here means not letting things go or becoming complacent – it is communicating and staying in-tune with your partner. This process should be brought to our relationships to our church, our community, and on up to the greater world. Is it hard? Absolutely, at times it seems almost impossible. Consider this, we long for familiarity; yet we complain about routines. We like our favorite pair of shoes, our comfortable chair and those special pants that have a whole in the knees but we complain about how things never change; and yet when those things are moved or lost we lose focus. Making friends, keeping friends, asking questions and opening yourself up is hard. That is how we exercise our minds and reach out beyond ourselves to achieve balance.

Early in one of our reflective sessions, Marjory told us that as pilgrims we should be aware of three important aspects in our pilgrimage: encounter, reflect and expect to change. The act of encountering includes seeing, feeling, being in the moment.

Encountering is observation and a little more. It is awareness-of not only our surroundings, but also everyone around us. It is being in the moment. “To be in the moment” is difficult coming from a society where “tuning-out” is a national pastime. Yet somehow, I find it much easier to be in the moment in Guatemala. Perhaps because it is a foreign country and we are aware that we are strangers in a strange land.

On the surface, our purpose in coming together in Guatemala seemed to be two-fold: becoming aware of our parts in the body of Christ and reaching out to the greater world community through building a school in a Maya village. Nevertheless, I think **the school is only a means** to a deeper purpose—that of which is “**being with**” the Maya people of the village. Being with my fellow pilgrims and being with the Mayas made me keenly aware that this was not an ordinary trip. For some time I have been consciously trying to live in the moment by eliminating distractions and focusing on the present. It is not a simple task. Cutting away distractions are like peeling back an onion, the more you peel the more layers there are. If you have ever tried to meditate you know this is true, everything from did I turn of the coffeepot to where did I put my keys comes into your mind. The children perhaps were better followers of the practice of living in the moment than we were. **Nothing deterred them from being with us**, even when we told them they had to go to school. They watched us carefully, they engaged us whenever they could and they contributed their efforts to help build the new school to the best of their ability. They carried buckets or pushed wheel barrels half-full of sand. They dumped the dirt we dug up from the foundation footings and bailed water from the footing after it rained. While their efforts were appreciated, their purpose was not the work it was **being with us**, it was living in the moment because soon we would be gone.

The second aspect – “reflect,” involves actively thinking about our observations. It required us to journal and not let the experience drift past us. Reflecting made it possible for me to be here today. Journaling will keep the experience alive for years to come. I found myself writing my observations whenever I had a chance, although I must confess, I was too tuckered out a few nights to write. Every day the question changed, but the focus remained on the body of Christ;

additionally, what it was like to be a pilgrim versus to be a tourist. As I reviewed my journal, I found an entry that answered the question about what was my most memorable moment was that day. I wrote about seeing a crippled man cleaning the sidewalk in front of an ice cream shop in Antigua. He did not walk; rather he scooted along the ground pulling himself with one hand and using the other to sweep the ground with a little hand broom.

At that moment I was not a pilgrim – I was a tourist in search of a working ATM. I was withdrawn from my surroundings, distracted by my singular focus. I passed him once and then as I passed him a second time, I felt something that made me look back. Everyone moved around him as if he was invisible as he managed to move quickly avoiding people's feet. As I walked away, the image haunted me and it left me wishing I had stopped to talk to him. I sensed Christ in this man and I felt guilt at turning away from him to continue my touristy afternoon. It was an opportunity lost, except for the fact that I pray for him still. I think a journal needs to be **like this**, a critical self-analysis answering questions like: What is spiritually out of balance in my relations with my family, my partner, my children, my church, my community? Did I take enough time to feed my soul this week? It should be honest, filled with the not so pretty and the pretty memories to become representative of our conscious as well as our reflections.

The pilgrimage's third aspect is "expect to change." I was not sure how much I could expect to change since this was my third trip to Guatemala, but I realize that just being with people changes them and me. As pilgrims, we must be aware that **as we are observing, so are we being observed**. As such, much of what we did in the village was "modeling behavior" to imprint a positive image of us in the minds of our hosts. Females outnumbered the men in our group and not one woman shied away

from the physically demanding work. We were a curiosity to the little girls in the village who only had their mothers and teachers as models. One of our greatest joys was our youngest pilgrim, 15-year old Rachael, who made fast friends with all the children and was greeted with lots of hugs and kisses every morning. She modeled a behavior they had not seen before a girl working side by side with adults doing "man's work" hauling sand, bending wire, and taking time to play with the children.

On the first day of work, we saw boys grabbing wheel barrels to help us move sand and while encouraged the girls to help us many giggled and just observed. By the second day, many of the girls and boys dashed out of school to ferry wheel barrels and for the littlest girls it meant filling a small plastic container with sand and placing it on their heads then walking up and down two hills from where the sand truck left its load because it could traverse no farther. It was not only that they wanted to help us; they felt empowered in helping themselves. In years past, I was told that the villagers did little to work with us. This was certainly not the case in El Sauce as we returned each morning and would happily see more digging was done after we left the worksite. I think we encouraged each other to work harder.

At the end of five days, we were attached to the children and few dried eyes were left after Rachel tried to give good-bye comments to the children. She could not stop crying and then neither could we. The children and families of this little village had stolen our hearts; they are without a doubt part of our body of Christ. I knew that I experienced a change in them and in me.

Being aware of the body of Christ is not a like college course to study and move on, it is us – you and me. In the body of Christ we have to recognize the Christ in each other and from that we come to mutual understanding of each other. My fellow pilgrims were all part of the body of Christ before we got there. The difference is that we now have a name to go with each part. Along with that name is intimate knowledge of struggles and hopes, pains and joys, past successes and future dreams. I see the body of Christ as an endless puzzle. The more I learn about people the more they become a part of me. I look forward to many more pilgrimages.