

Sandra sandwiches

Miller:

1000

Seekers Church
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Most of you have now heard several sermons on the experiences of working in Guatemala over the last two years and I hope you are prepared for one more. Some of what I say will sound familiar so I beg your indulgence as I give my witness to my first pilgrimage.

Several weeks ago, we started the Gospel readings in John 6 with the very familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand. The first piece of that lesson is Jesus testing Philip, asking him how to feed the gathering crowd. Philip's response, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little," is left unanswered in the story and we are supposed to focus on the fact that Jesus already knew what he was going to do. Nevertheless, the truth is that Philip spoke the truth then, and it is all too often true even now when the poor gather in Jesus' name there is not enough to go around.

My ability to see this truth comes out of my experiences on the recent Faith at Work pilgrimage to Guatemala, and more specifically from the work that we did at Casa del Alfarero, [Potter's House](#), in Guatemala City.

What is this "other" Potter's House that is not **my** Potter's House? It is an evangelical ministry bringing hope to the people who live in and off the city dump. The some 10,000

scavengers are lovingly referred to as "treasures" by the amazing folk who are dedicated to the mission of ending scavenging as a necessary way of life.

This is twice the number that gathered at the foot of the mountain at the Sea of Galilee. We can only guess what the statistics were for the kinds of brokenness represented in the crowd Jesus encountered that day. I can tell you about some of the appalling statistics of this modern day 10,000. They comprise about 1500 family groups that include children. Of the adult population, 51% are women and 49% are men, and of the men, 57% have some level of alcohol problem. 59% are under the age of 30. 50% of the people between 13 and 30 are illiterate, only 36% have completed grade school, and 14% have varying levels of education. These statistics do not begin to scratch the surface of how these people came to be in their various relationships to the dump. Trying to discern that would require delving into the history of Guatemala from the time of the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century through the 35-year civil war that officially ended in 1996.

At Jesus' gathering, there were five loaves of barley bread and two fish to bless and start the ball rolling. As the baskets were passed from hand to hand, those who had carried some food with them took it out and shared. But what about when those gathered have nothing to share, where indeed if they did they wouldn't share what they had because tomorrow they probably won't have enough, and the concept of community building by sharing is not in the equation.

Groups from faith organizations coming to work as volunteers for a few days are a common occurrence at Potter's House. The way things are set up, the volunteer groups provide a donation to cover the cost of ingredients for 1000 sandwiches and beverages for two days of their stay, and the other days they provide varying kinds of labor to help the mission. Just 1000 sandwiches. There are real reasons for this, but it speaks to me of Philip's response to Jesus. The day I went to feed the

10,000, we started with enough bread to make close to 1000 sandwiches, and supposedly enough pieces of cheap sandwich ham and cheese to fill them. First, we ran out of cheese, then we ran out of ham, and the last sandwiches had just ketchup and mayonnaise in them. Think about how hungry you would have to be to eat a sandwich of cheap white bread with a slathering of mayo and ketchup. I would also ask you to think about how it felt to pass out those sandwiches when you knew you had a far more acceptable if humble lunch waiting for you when you were done.

We went down into the dump with our sandwiches, bags of sugar drinks, a small pick-up and two chaperones. Our instructions were to stay in pairs for our own safety, to try to make eye contact and to say "Jesús te ama," Jesus loves you, to each person we served. In the morning driving up to the Potter's House in the bus, you notice the odor many blocks away. Unbelievably while you are working in the ministry building just a stone's throw away you get used to the smell, but it is another thing to walk down into the dump itself. There isn't any way to prepare yourself for the immensity of it all – the ground bubbling up unspeakable rotting material, mountains of trash, and everywhere people of all ages bent to the task of sifting through the stuff coming in on the trucks looking for their particular specialty; reusable trash bags, glass, cardboard, fabric, metal, and even food. I felt as if every pore of my body was crying, and would continue to cry for the rest of my life, and yet I felt alive and open.

What can I tell you of the people I saw, the people to whom I was essentially offering communion? Surprising to me was the fact that most never came up to us for food, especially the women. Many of the men between the ages of around 16-30 whose primary job wasn't the scavenging itself, who may have worked for the middle men or some indiscernible task, had some attitude and tried to get food more than once, but at least the light wasn't gone from their eyes. Some said thank you.

Most could not have cared less that Jesus loved them. The younger boys and older men mostly said thank you, and a few even told me that Jesus loved me, and I felt much loved in those moments. Towards the end, I felt the need to be more proactive in the situation; I took a partner and I walked towards the trucks being emptied. The scavengers were too busy to come to us, there were so many children and we still had food. This was the best of this experience, open gratitude from the women especially, for reaching out. One little boy was so shy he was not going to take a sandwich. I squatted down to his level and kept holding it out to him, telling him that it was for him. When he finally took it and smiled, I gave him two. There was, after all, enough, though not enough to fill twelve baskets for the next day.

The crowd follows Jesus to Capernaum where he exhorts them to "work not for the food that perishes." A message more easily delivered to those of us that have enough and then some, but for scavengers who work for the food that perishes, and largely, nothing else, this is a message that falls most often on deaf ears. They live in the dump, in shacks made up of scavenged materials, mostly cardboard if they are industrious enough. Alternatively, they live totally out in the open in circumstances that would frighten the homeless in urban America. What Gladys and Edgar Guitz, the embodiment of Jesus behind this ministry see in these treasures are eight types of poverty:

1. Spiritual Poverty – the lack of a relationship with God
2. Intellectual Poverty – a lack of access to knowledge, or obtaining distorted knowledge
3. Poverty of Affection – a lack of love and a presence of distorted feelings
4. Poverty of Will – a lack of self-control
5. Physical Poverty – a lack of health
6. Poverty of Solidarity – the lack of a support network
7. Poverty of Civic Involvement – a lack of community

concern and a sense of distrust

8. Economic Poverty – the obvious lack of resources

The picture is grim indeed, but I do not want to lead you into thinking that there are no exceptions to the most impoverished of conditions even here. Gladys and Edgar with a staff of which 40% are success stories out of the dump and a group of dedicated volunteers, work tirelessly for the food that does not perish, and they offer that food back to the treasures of the dump in tangible programs that bring the seeds of hope that sometimes fall on fertile ground.

The dump is a natural ravine running through the middle of the city and is being filled at the rate of 2000 tons a day. That is four million pounds! Where the trash has reached the top of the ravine it has been tamped down, covered with top soil and reintegrated into the city. Potter's House is on a street on this landfill. As is the small community of shacks that a number of our group found ourselves working in after lunch on the day I've described and the whole of the next day.

I found myself painting cardboard and scrap metal with a dull gray paint intended to extend the life of the materials but certainly not intended to beautify the place. This could have felt like a pointless exercise but for the three women who called these shacks home. These women represent the fertile ground planted by Potter's House; women who with God's help, will power, and industriousness found themselves able to buy their own homes, and want to see their children have a different and better life than they themselves. Natalie, Susan and Elsa allowed me not just into their private space but also into their lives. We managed to learn enough about each other to make a real connection even though my Spanish was less than perfect.

Elsa was the shiest, and lived in the smallest place with her husband who scavenges full time, and her infant daughter Cindy. She shares a small outdoor space with her neighbor

Rosario, whose house you have to walk through to get to Elsa's house. Here I was painting with a partner, Kay, and we were instructed to paint Elsa's door and as much of the courtyards walls as we had time and materials for. Elsa's spirit was evident when she insisted that Kay also paint the inside of her door, and a small portion of wall. Her smiles of gratitude were enormous.

Susan's was actually the first place we worked in, Kay, Margreta, and I. A little larger than Elsa's place, but with no outdoor space, it did have gas and electricity, a two burner gas hot plate, a television, and a little stereo. Kay and Margreta started painting the narrow entryway and I started on the one room. Susan was amazed by our willingness to do this for her, and that we were doing what she considered man's work. We had to rearrange the beds in the cramped space so that I could paint. There was one area that I thought I could not reach. It nagged at the back of my mind as I worked. Then I felt Susan tugging at my sleeve. There she was with a scavenged plastic bowl and the paintbrush we were not using asking for paint. With a baby in one arm, she scrambled over the beds and started painting that one nagging piece of wall.

Then there is Natalie. It is hard not to shine the spotlight on Natalie. Eighteen years old with two children, and recently married to a man I would guess is in his early thirties. What little I saw of them together seemed good. There were actually two projects going on in her house, and everyone of our group, men and women alike, who encountered her fell in love. Two nights before I got there, she had had two feet of water and sewage in her house, but she never stopped smiling. Moreover, she never stopped working. The day before I was there, while her eldest was in the children's program at Potter's House, and her daughter napped she helped dig a new drainage ditch and haul out dirt. When I was there, she painted, sometimes with her daughter in tow. When we came back from our lunch break, we noticed she had painted her little table and she was

hauling out more wheelbarrows of dirt. She was indefatigable, and high spirited, very loving, and grateful.

What I/we did was both so little, and so much. Gladys and Edgar are very aware of how overwhelming it can all seem, and aware of the ambiguity of such an experience. As we prepared to leave they gathered the children in the after school program and had them thank us and sing us some wonderful songs. Best of all was our final send off, hugs from the children. They literally swam all over us, and hugged you in ones, twos and threes or more. They gave as well as they got, and when you rubbed their backs it felt as if they were purring.

Work for the food that does not perish. Oscar Romero, a priest assassinated in El Salvador for doing just that put it this way:

Luchando por la justicia...es vivir en la paz que Jesús vino a entregarnos.

Struggling for justice... is to live in the peace that Jesus lived to bring us.

This is a tall order in Guatemala, where Rios Montt, the military dictator responsible for the worst of the Maya genocide during the civil war is running for President and is likely to win. How does one work for justice in the face of such reality?

One answer to that is a non-profit called PAVA. PAVA is a Spanish acronym for Programa de Ayuda para los Vecinos del Altiplano – Aid Program for Highland Communities. PAVA is a private organization whose staff are Guatemalan. They work closely with villages to achieve long-term sustainable development through community projects and community education. They have an outreach program that informs villages of what is possible, but it is the village that comes to them when they have committed to a project. For the Faith at Work

pilgrimage group that meant helping to set the foundation for a school in the Cakchiquel village of Xecubal.

I could tell you about pick axing dirt as hard as rocks, or bending rebar, but that is not where the scriptural story lies. That story is in the people of the village who sacrificed together and worked together to make this project happen, and who welcomed our presence and small contribution with grace.

As our bus drove down the dirt road to the job site the first thing we saw were the villagers all standing on the man made plateau that was where the school would be built. As soon as the bus stopped the first wave to run down the side of this steep hill were the children screaming "Hola." A number of girls had little baskets filled with flower petals. We all felt truly welcomed. After all the ceremonial speeches, we were fed. A delicious squash soup, a plate with rice, beans, pickled salad, and a piece of pork, and piles of white corn tortillas, which the women had prepared in the wee hours of the morning and was served to us by the twenty-something men. Then the men sat down apart from us with bowls of soup and piles of blue tortillas. They got no plates of rice, beans, meat and salad. I had the real sense that the village had gotten together to plan this and first one said "I've got five barley loaves, and another said I've got two fish," and so on until there was enough.

Village life is not so impoverished at life at the city dump, but it does require hours of work each day to put food on the table. Each family has some measure of land on which they grow corn, squash and a variety of regional vegetables. This land is worked every day, and it may take them an hour or more just to get there. Some plots are on such steep hillsides that they have to tie themselves to a tree for security while they work. There is also wood to gather for cooking, and chickens to feed, and in some cases pigs. There are often repairs to be made to their adobe dwellings. There is the daily maize to

grind into flour, childcare and all the tasks we cannot imagine such a lifestyle requires.

Yet they readily made the sacrifices necessary to work for the food that does not perish – for their children’s future. The agreement with PAVA is that the village provides some of the material cost and virtually all of the labor, while PAVA provides most of the material, gets the materials to the site, and provides most of the expertise. This means that each family is sacrificing many hours away from their usual work to make this happen. They exhibited a wonderful work ethic, taking shifts so that some could work their land while others were at the site. They worked through thunder, lightening and rain, and they worked long after we left, and started long before we got there each day.

And on the last day they took us the village’s special place, a park like setting where there were more speeches and more food; cups of hot tropical fruit soup, and crisp fried tortillas with guacamole, communion. As I think back to that last day, this week’s Gospel was given us by the Body of Christ that is the village of Xecupal:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

We live in the treasures of the Guatemala City dump and the Cakchichel of Xecubal, and they in us. Forever.

(Visitors to the site might wonder at the references to "other" and MY Potter’s House. I am the kitchen and catering manager at The Potter’s House in Washington, DC – the first outreach mission of Church of the Saviour. Visit our website at www.pottershousebooks.org)