

“The Power of a Little Yeast” by Peter Bankson

July 31, 2014

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

SUMMARY

When I signed up to bring the Word on the first Sunday after the Guatemala pilgrimage, I knew that at least six of us would be together this year. I wanted to give us an opportunity to share some of our initial reflections. I'm glad to report that all 20 pilgrims are home safe and sound.

This year we worked with PAVA (Programa de Ayuda a los Vecinos del Altiplano) to help the people of Panimachavac, northeast of Tecpan with the early stages of preparing the site for constructing a new community library.

My sense is that we went to help... and we did just that: We may not have contributed much to the final building, but we helped them get something started, something that will change the way the people of Panimachavac live into the future.

INTRODUCTION

When I signed up to bring the Word on the first Sunday after the Guatemala pilgrimage, I knew that at least six of us would be together this year. I wanted to give us an opportunity to share some of our initial reflections. I'm glad to report that all 20 pilgrims are home safe and sound.

This year we worked with PAVA (Programa de Ayuda a los Vecinos del Altiplano) to help the people of Panimachavac, northeast of Tecpan with the early stages of preparing the site for constructing a new community library.

THE LIBRARY AS A PACKAGE OF YEAST

We thought we'd probably be digging foundation trenches, building rebar columns and maybe even pouring footings for the walls of a new building, tasks many of us had done in the past. But the work flowed in a different direction. It turned out that there was a dense tongue of solid lava running across the construction through the volcanic sand where the foundation was to be built. After two days of serious pounding with the best wedges and mallets available, the tough men of Panimachavac were not able to crack the lava. The architect needed to change his plans, and decided that it would be necessary to raise the building about six inches to make the lava part of the foundation and the floor.

That shifted our efforts from the building itself to the need for a retaining wall on the steep bank behind the future building to minimize the chances of a landslide. It wasn't the kind of work we had expected, but it was necessary. Once again we had to learn the lesson of what has become a theme song of the pilgrimage:

I step into the flow, and then I let it go.

I open my mind, my heart and my soul.

That kind of letting go seems to be a necessary, if uncomfortable part of recognizing that the Realm of God is already all around us.

As I began to look at the Scripture lessons for this week I was immediately aware of all the possibilities to relate our pilgrimage experience to the readings:

\$1. The Hebrew scripture tells of Jacob laboring for seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel and getting Leah instead, then laboring for another seven years to earn the hand of his true love;

\$1. The Psalm reminds us to "remember the wonderful works [God] has done;"

\$1. In the Epistle Paul reminds us that "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose;" and

\$1. The Gospel includes the parables of
o the mustard seed,

- o how a little yeast can leaven many loaves;
- o the merchant who sells all he has to buy the pearl he has found, and
- o the net that catches fish of all kinds so the fishers can sort them out, save the good ones and discard the bad.

As I read this rich collection of images of the Realm of God, I was immediately drawn to the parable of the yeast, so I'll focus there and leave other images for other Seekers.

Since I woke up on Wednesday morning I've been thinking of the Panimachavac Community Library as a container of the yeast the woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until it was all leavened, ready to be baked into bread and given as food for the community.

Yeast is pretty amazing stuff. It's persistent and prolific, waiting until the conditions are right, then acting swiftly to transform its environment in helpful ways. It helps the community by preserving its sustenance and improving the quality of life. It improves the flavor of life. Just like the contents of a library! Here's what I mean.

Yeast is persistent, waiting patiently in dry powdered form until it runs into the right mix of flour and water. The shelves of the temporary library at Panimachavac are already filled with books and games and CDs. There's an open invitation to stop in when the library is open on Monday or Friday. And as soon as the adults and kids show up, those books and games and CDs spring to life, nurturing the community.

Yeast is prolific. It only takes a little yeast to leaven a big batch of dough. We've all seen curiosity and excitement and knowledge spread like yeast. In Panimachavac there's a big sign on the side of the road right beside the school, inviting people to come to the library. It says:

COMMUNITY LIBRARY
"LA FUENTE – THE SOURCE"
WE OFFER SERVICES OF LOAN AND RETURN OF BOOKS,
STORY HOUR, RESEARCH, READING,

EDUCATIONAL GAMES,
KINDERGARTEN,
READING CLUB,
PRODUCTIVE PROJECTS AND MORE.
OPEN MONDAY AND FRIDAY FROM 8:00 TO 12:00
AND FROM 13:00 TO 16:00 PM.
WE'RE EXPECTING YOU!

All this from a small room in the school building. Wait 'till the new library is finished!

I've been thinking about the way yeast has been used for millennia to preserve food, and drink, changing it somewhat to preserve its essence for the future. Food can be preserved by fermentation in many different ways, as bread or beer, yoghurt or wine or nuoc mam, saved to be nourishing in the future. Books do that too. On the last day of our work week we went to La Loma, where last year we had helped begin construction on their community library. We were honored by the children, who offered us a traditional Mayan dance giving thanks for corn, the main staple food in their diet. Only this time, the children were raising up BOOKS – giving thanks to the Holy One for the sustenance they will get from books.

After the ceremony we asked Isais, the library promoter about the new dance. He was excited as he told us that substituting books for the corn was his own idea. I wasn't surprised by his creativity. He's the same young man we saw last year teaching preschool children colors and shapes in Spanish and Kaqchikel, the one who served as the ceremonial leader in the Mayan ritual of thanksgiving at the closing ceremony. In a remote, highland village with a traditionally macho veneer, Isais is like the woman in Jesus' parable, kneading the yeast of books into the life of La Loma, adding something new that will help preserve the culture in new and nourishing ways.

OTHER REFLECTIONS

There were six Seekers on the pilgrimage this year, each of us standing in a different place, seeing things from a different perspective. This morning several others would like to share something they noticed that seemed to be going "according to

God's purpose."

Sandra Miller

"Many groups are confronted by discrimination, like villages of indigenous people, people with disabilities, women, persons of advanced age, gays and lesbians, and immigrants. Those who have not suffered discrimination cannot understand the suffering that this represents to their fellow man, nor the destructive effect that discrimination has on society."

Navi Pillay

High Commissioner, UN Human Rights Commission

My memory isn't what it used to be so I checked my passports the other day and I've been to Guatemala 7 times over the last 25 years –6 times as a pilgrim working on the PAVA projects since 2003. From the first time to the last there has been one constant, change.

Others can talk about how we put a bit of yeast in the village of Panimachavac, or how we planted a mustard seed that will grow into a tree of knowledge, but for me the pivotal moment was the exhibit I saw at the cathedral, Inglesia Santo Tomas in Chichicastenango.

Jacob labored for 7 years for Rachel's hand, and then labored 7 more years to realize his dream. The correlation isn't exact, but the Mayan people of Guatemala labored over 36 years, some as guerillas, some as peacebuilders during La Violencia in an attempt to win the hand of justice. They won some important concessions, just as Jacob was given Leah's hand, but like the hand of Rachel, justice was not in their hands. Since the peace accord was signed on December 29th, 1996 they have labored nearly 20 more years and justice is still just out of reach. Perhaps in 16 more years.

I saw hope of that in the exhibit put together by the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The exhibit was first and foremost a call for the acceptance of diversity. There were big Avedon like portraits of Guatemalans of all kinds, rich

and poor, young and old, traditional and modern, and a series of 3 quotes by Guatemalan peacemakers calling for acceptance of ethnicity, skin color, disabilities, gender identification, and more. I never thought I would see such a public display in Guatemala but there it was. It's not yet true, but perhaps in less than 16 years it will be.

Marjory Bankson

After struggling all week with the absolute beginning stages of a library for Panimachavac, we took a short boat trip to San Juan de Laguna, on Lake Atitlan, to see the only public library on the lake. We hired a guide to take us to a coffee cooperative and several weaving cooperatives before we reached the library – and found him both knowledgeable and articulate. Finally, as we stood in the library, I asked him (with Aeren's help), "What does the library mean for you here?"

He paused, and then told the story of his own family. "My parents both came from large families, ten children and more. They spoke only Tzutuhil and never learned to read. I have only a 4th grade education, but I can speak and read Spanish, so I have been able to keep learning because of the library. When I married, my wife and I agreed that we would only have three children, so we could give them more opportunities. Today they are completely bilingual. One is a teacher, one is an accountant, and the third is in business. The library has expanded our world beyond this village."

I think the community library has also made staying in San Juan a creative possibility for our guide.

Deborah Sokolove

Many Guatemalans revere Hermano Pedro, a 17th century Third Order Franciscan who was known for his care for those who were poor, disabled, or ill. Even today, the hospital founded in his name, Las Obras Sociales, serves as a home and social service center for elderly people without means; orphans; and those with mentally disabilities and chronic illnesses who have no other access to care. Hermano Pedro was canonized in 2002, and his tomb in Iglesia San Francisco el Grande in Antigua is a popular pilgrimage site for people seeking

healing for themselves or loved ones.

During my two weeks of Spanish study, I had been to the shrine of Hermano Pedro in my walks around Antigua, and was deeply impressed with the faith of those who came there to pray. There was one family, in particular, that I remember – there must have been ten or twelve of them, from an ancient abuela to a baby in arms, all kneeling in a row on the stone floor, deep in prayer. When the baby began to fuss, a little girl of no more than three or four went over, holding her finger held up to her mouth to shush the infant. She already knew that this was a holy place, a place of seriousness and silence.

As I was packing the night before the Seekers pilgrims arrived, my suitcase started to tip over, and as I reached to catch it, I felt a tearing in my right shoulder. By morning, just getting dressed or picking up a cup of coffee was so painful that I knew I could not get my suitcase to Los Bucaros without help. Fortunately, I was able to find Aeren, who not only helped me move my things, but also went with me to borrow a sling from Vey before the Atitrans bus arrived to take her to meet the pilgrims at the airport. I am very grateful to Aeren for giving up so much of what was to be her last free morning in Antigua.

When Sandra and Glen arrived, although I was still in a lot of pain, I wanted to show them some of the places I had been before they got there. One of the places, of course, was the shrine of Hermano Pedro and the medicinal tree that grew in the courtyard just outside it. As we were ready to leave, Glen bought a small, wax, votive figure and tied it to the saint's tomb, as is the local custom. I guess it never hurts to pray for a miracle, because after needing to keep my arm in the sling in order to function at all for three days, I woke up on Tuesday morning able to use my arm almost freely, at least enough to be of some use at the library construction site.

So I give thanks for the prayers of everyone who was on the pilgrimage with me; for our own Brother Peter, who many times put his hand on the injured site to send healing energy; and to El Santo Hermano Pedro, through whom somehow, mysteriously,

God gave me a miracle. I still have some pain, and I will see a doctor tomorrow, but without this miracle of healing, I would not have been able to participate at all in the work that we had come to do.

Glen Yakushiji

So there are many stories because we were there for a couple of weeks and hundreds of things happened to us.

Marjory told us at the start about the difference between a pilgrim and a tourist. A pilgrim goes on a trip with open hands looking for ways to be changed; while a tourist goes to collect things. I thought about Peter's question about how ideas about the pilgrimage fit God's purpose and thought about the library that we worked on last year.

We went to see that library on the day that it was going to be dedicated. We went to the town we where spent so much time and were welcomed by the villagers who thanked us for being there. I looked at the beautiful building and I could remember the last time I saw it as a construction site.

I remembered the little pieces of wire that I twisted on the rebar. Sitting in the trench. Deborah and I were there doing this thing. It was this end of the building; I remember where that beam was. I remember the way we twisted that wire, broke it off, and now it was buried underground under hundreds of pounds of concrete and all kinds of other stuff. I could just see the place where we were working on that building.

I remember the pile of dirt that Ivan and I, and some others, smoothed out to make a patio that is now beautifully covered with concrete paver blocks. It looks fantastic—really good.

I thought about the work we are doing at the new site, this year. We didn't get a chance to work on that building at all. There is not going to be anything of us in that building because what we were doing was working on the hill behind the library site. What we were doing was making a space safe for a building to be built.

I figure that was God's purpose, for us to go and do whatever is needed. Sometimes it's twisting a piece of wire that's going to be buried in concrete—nobody will remember that but

me and Deborah, we know where those pieces of wire are. Nobody is going to remember how we dug out those rocks, how we carved out that hill, chopped off that tree, and the rest of the stuff we did to make a retaining wall behind the library, but that was God's purpose for us this year.

Dixcy Bosley-Smith

I joined the pilgrimage at the last minute. God is alive and well in your passion to this mission, and I joined the pilgrimage to glean from your faithfulness and witness how you love. I also want to learn how to grow older EXACTLY as you [Marjory and Peter] do. I delight in your love of God and all God's people.

(Dixcy and her family are part of the 8th Day Faith Community, and worshipped with us at Seekers today.)

CONCLUSION

Thanks to each of you for sharing your different perspectives on our time in Guatemala.

Our theme for worship this season is "According to God's Will." The reflection paragraph invites us to "Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder, to help someone's soul heal. We are invited to "Walk out of your house like a shepherd." This sounds to me like a clear invitation to each of us to listen for, discern, and accept God's call on our lives as individual parts of this Body of Christ.

What might it mean for those of us who spent a week in Panimachavac to "... be a lamp or a ladder" for the people of that community as we worked with them to build a library, a place that could hold and nurture the yeast of learning that is embodied in their emerging community library?

As we got ready to leave on Friday I looked again at the big sign announcing the library. I thought about what it might have meant for the women and men of the village for us to have spent a week working there and donating some of the funds needed to help the construction of the library.

My sense is that we went to help... and we did just that: We may not have contributed much to the final building, but we helped

them get something started, something that will change the way
the people of Panimachavac live into the future.
Thank God we're in this together.
Amen.