

“Use What You Have” by the 2015 Guatemala Pilgrims

July 26, 2015



The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Context (Marjory Bankson)

Feeding the five thousand is such a familiar story that we may miss the point: Jesus gave thanks for what they had (five loaves and two fish), and did not ask for more. When the disciples begin to worry about how to feed all those people, Jesus simply says “What do you have?” And when they come back with meager supplies – five loaves and two fish – he holds them up in front of everybody and gives thanks. Everybody knows it’s not enough, and yet Jesus gives thanks to God for what they have. The simple action of giving thanks for what they have invites everyone to be aware of their common resource, even if it seems small. It evokes cooperation, generosity, and probably self-restraint as well

In Guatemala, we heard the same invitation from Ceci Dougherty, chair of the PAVA board, when she said to us at a reception in her home: “Our government institutions don’t work here, and so we need to do it ourselves.” She was talking about providing schools and libraries for the indigenous people, who had been denied the right to a primary education for so long. Rather than spending her energy on trying to reform the government, she and the other women on the PAVA board join one village at a time to accomplish what a local community wants most. Ceci was our celebrant, inviting us and

thanking us for our help in making that happen.

Ceci's remark reminded me of what we heard many years ago, from Fr. Greg Schaffer in San Lucas Toliman. He had come there as a young priest, more than fifty years ago. When he decided to stay, rather than going home to Minnesota, he said: "I didn't know anything about development. I just knew we couldn't wait for somebody else to do it for us. We had to start with what we had here – the people."

As I begin to learn about Antigua, what is comforting to me? What is unsettling? (Teresa Ramsey)

Comforting: Antigua is an attractive, very old city of cobblestone roads and side-by-side structures. It is beautiful and interesting. After a brief tour I found that I could navigate the city and find the big grocery, internet places, colorful markets, restaurants, museums, etc. The city has much commerce. You see lots of young students going to and from school in their uniforms, well clothed. Mayan influence was apparent. There is a big square in the middle of town with a park and a fountain, statues. There are places to hike nearby. The people here definitely have free speech. There is an upcoming election and the newspapers are full of opinions about who is honest. There are speeches to the masses given near the town square.

The buildings are built right up to the sidewalk, with heavy doors and wrought iron window coverings. When the doors are open you can see inside to an inner courtyard or garden,

We are staying in a relatively safe area, albeit noisy as the main road passes outside.

We had a Seekers style Sunday service with communion which was comforting and familiar.

Comforted that I am not alone here and others in the group know "the ropes."

Disturbing: The big Catholic Church dominates one part of town, The continued influence of the catholic church on the youth troubles me as does the attitude toward birth control held by the catholic church. Young women here have children quite young and then many more. This is an agrarian society without much opportunity for the members of the large lower classes, particularly indigenous people. There is no work/life balance for the poor in an agrarian society, it is all work.

There are many boarded up churches and crumbling buildings. I notice armed security at Banks, ATM's, the grocery store, the jade store, the North Face boutique and even at McDonald's. It is unsettling. There are walls and a guard house for the upper middle class housing area.

I find it difficult to haggle over price, particularly when the seller seems poor and disadvantaged.

I am disturbed that I know so little Spanish and find communicating challenging. My limitations bother me. I wonder just what I have to share with the people here? Will I be a drain on their already limited resources?

How do I feel connected to God's story? (Will Ramsey)

My experience of connecting happened in two circles. One was with our group of 26 Americans 18 of whom I had never met before and the other was with the Guatemalan people. Marjory taught me how to bendrebar. Aeren, who worshiped at Seekers years ago and Ray, who is a few years older than me taught me how to cement cinder blocks together. More importantly, however, two boys and a girl all about five years old taught me how to communicate. I spent most of my time removing rocks and dirt from the location that is to be their septic field. On the second days the two boys showed up with a smile. They stood next to the wheelbarrow handles and we almost immediately developed a partnership. I climbed on top of the hill of dirt to loosen rock. One of my young partners joined

me with a small pick ax in hand. When I left the hill he left the hill.

On Wednesday I finally noticed the young girl who had been watching me across the street. Every time I emptied a load of dirt I would look across the street and see her staring at me. After the fourth load of dirt and many hand gestures she came across the street, hid behind some dirt and continued to stare. I motioned her over and walked her to Teresa who showed that we needed help throwing rocks on the rock pile. She became part of our team.

The hand gesture which brought a smile to her face involved me moving my fingers like a giant hook which moved back and forth. Later in the day when I was going for water I thought I would try the same gesture for the school boys. I had been passing them a number of times each day but could not communicate because I don't know Spanish. When I started gesturing with my fingers they responded with laughter. Others joined in and within a few minutes about ten students were playing around with each other and me making hand gestures, smiling and coming up with their own motions.

In the reading today, John 6:15

"When Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by himself alone."

On this trip I realized that stereotypes get in the way of communicating and connecting. I didn't need construction workers with hard hats to teach me construction and I found a way to communicate many more than three children even though we did not know the same language.

What do (did) I need to learn (again) from this experience?
(Kevin Barwick)

This was my first pilgrimage to Guatemala. Although I've seen

several other cultures, I've never experienced one like this one. What I mean is that I have been in other cultures before but never allowed myself to fully *experience* or immerse myself in the culture and people. In other words, to just listen and learn.

The prompt that I chose for today from our daily reflection journal was "*What do (did) I need to learn (again) from this experience?*" I chose this because as I journaled last week I remember writing that there were so many things that I needed to learn. I wrote, "Learn to be an open humble sponge." Here are a few other things that I was beginning to learn or re-learned.

1. I need to learn what service to others has very little to do with what I accomplish, compared to how I hold my *attitude* toward others. If I come with a "move-over-I'm-here-to-help-you" attitude, that will reflect in arrogant authoritarian behaviors. One day we tried to break up this massive hunk of bedrock. The teens tried to pick ax it, then use chisels, to no avail. Later that day I had a space of time that I wasn't laying cinder block. So I had a bright idea that I would give the pick ax a try. With all my might I swung down several times, resulting in a few small dents in the rock, and sore wrists and blistered fingers. Hugo, the foreman came up to me to see how I was doing. He looked a little bewildered that I was so tired and frustrated. I motioned that we needed a jack hammer. He smiled, rolled his eyes and said mucho quetzals (a lot of money). My first thought was to say, "Listen, I'll pay for it. Let's get it going. Don't say you can't do it." But I said nothing, except, "What's next hefe?" He later came up with an ingenious way of using the rock as support for the footings of the library. My attitude in service was more important than what got accomplished.

2. I need to learn again that my belovedness, my sense of God's loving presence for me, has nothing to do with who I am, what I do or accomplish, or how I love others. It's

totally (and I'd add, completely incomprehensibly) based on the nature of God, as our Ephesians scripture reading reminded us. Sometimes I measure my worth on what I accomplish in life. Consequently, living in my "belovedness" often seems based on what I accomplish or do. This is an ongoing challenge for me.

3. I need to learn that people are far more important than progress. That is, staying open, watching and waiting for "sacred moments" to occur far outweighs the benefits of the outcome. One day my cinder block partner of a three days were joined by a 16 and 18 year old girls who just started laying block. As they watched me mud the blocks they began to cringe. When I asked them they said in a distaining tone that how I was doing it was not how Aaron told them to do it! I had to pause, check in with myself, and try to remember in a split second that my method of laying block was far less important than how I interacted with those girls. The moment was a sacred moment to which my ego was not invited.

4. One more, I need to learn to lighten up. That is, learning to laugh at myself, allowing room for lots of mistakes, learning from others, laying down having to prove anything, and allowing myself to be in the moment. Or, as we sang many times, "I step into the flow, and then I let it go." I often found myself draw to the children. I wondered, "Where will these children be in ten years, twenty years?" So, I allowed myself to play, to be in their moments of joy. Throwing rocks with some boys temporarily superseded moving dirt and rocks, laying block, moving block or whatever else. I felt a little guilty while others were working when I asked a boy if he had a ball. He scrambled home and brought a plastic ball. All of a sudden we has a roaring soccer game going of twenty of thirty adults and children. Staying light hearted, open and in the moment is important for me.

These few days in Guatemala almost seem like a blur, had it not for my cuts and blisters still healing, and the pictures I took. They are reminders that my world is often too small, or

that I am really just one little part of the body of Christ.

I very grateful for the opportunity to have gone.

What values are most alive in the village ... among our group of pilgrims? (Glen Yakushiji)

Daily Schedule

1. up at 6:00, out the door around 6:30
2. breakfast begins at 7:00
3. get on the road a little after 8:00, ride for an hour and a half, or two hours
4. at the village, start to work on the library
5. we were given several tasks:
 - move dirt (my main job)
 - mix concrete: carry buckets of water, wheelbarrows of sand or rock
 - set concrete blocks into the foundation
 - make parts: cut steel rods to the proper length, bend them to the proper shape
 - cut wire into pieces for tying
6. have lunch
7. go back to work for a few hours
8. ride back to Antigua
9. shower, go out to dinner
10. meet and reflect on the day

Stories

– The hill of dirt and rock was ten feet high. Some rocks were the size of a strawberry and others as big as a beach ball. We used pickaxes to loosen the dirt then square-nosed shovels to fill wheelbarrows. We wheeled them across a dirt road to a dumping ground, and put the rocks on a pile of other rocks that had grown over our heads.

– Most of the time my shovel would hit a rock and I'd back up and try to work the corner of the shovel around it. Then pry it up and lift it with the shovel or pick it up with my glove. I'd put the rock in a wheelbarrow that was set aside for rock or throw it onto the rock pile—depending on its size.

– On the bus rides and over dinner pilgrims would talk about where they lived and the work they did in their communities, for the town or in their churches. I told several people about Seekers and how we support each other, and how we try to make the world a better place.

– While we worked we would shift from task to task. We tried different jobs to see if we might have a talent for it. Almost everyone drifted by the dirt hill to move some rocks or shovel some dirt at one time or another, others focused on cutting wire or bending squares.

– A flatbed truck arrived with a huge pile of concrete blocks and we left what we were working on to form bucket-brigade lines to move them into stacks.

Values

The question I am working with is about the values I saw in the villagers, and amongst the pilgrims. I found that both the villagers and the pilgrims shared similar values.

Patience to remove that hill of dirt a small shovelful at a time, or a rock at a time

Pride in our communities

Education, valued enough to spend time and energy to give this village a chance to provide it to their children.

Tolerance, Humor, Compassion, Curiosity, Enthusiasm, Perseverance, Trust, Hope

Making things level, Making things flush, Piling things up higher

Where do I see God at work in Guatemala? (Peter Bankson)

The short answer to this question is "All over the place." For me, Guatemala is a place where it is easy for me to see God's loving Spirit at work in the lives of so many people. Sometimes, though, when my expectations of efficiency and effectiveness get in the way it's a bit harder to see. Those are times when I fall into the role of the worried disciples: "Where will we ever get enough ...?"

When we visited the Catholic Church at San Lucas Toliman this year, I had a sense that the focus had shifted from a congregation with strong support from the United States (through Father Greg Schaffer who died about three years ago) to a local congregation that is thankful for "gringo" support, but is working to live into God's call on their own. I wondered if they will be able to keep going on their own.

The Parish hall was empty, and although there were the names of some volunteers on a whiteboard by the door there the place seemed deserted. (Actually it felt like a lot of church buildings on a Saturday afternoon, but I was used to something different.)

We learned that Father Greg's housekeeper had moved the store selling weaving by members of the parish to a store down the street from the church. Unfortunately for us, it was closed.

Then, when we got to the coffee and honey cooperatives, they were closed as well. There were no "gringo" volunteers working

there to sort the coffee beans or process the honey brought to the cooperative by parishioners who had coffee trees or beehives on their land. It WAS Saturday and I heard something about being closed for the weekend. The church is living through a change. I took me by surprise. I felt sad.

When we arrived at the reforestation project, the forester, our long-time friend Toribio Chajil, greeted us warmly. He told us how his work goes on, with students from the school next door rather than volunteers from overseas. He is still passionately following his call, reminding all of us of the importance of honoring the earth – as our Mother.

As we visited with Toribio we learned that the local congregation has had to cut off their support from the reforestation project. The future of Toribio's project seems vulnerable. I want to help him continue his ministry!

But the deeper questions seem to be “What does God want in this rich, complex and troubled land?” and “What is my part?”

When we first arrived at the parish hall and were waiting to use the bathroom in Father Greg's living quarters, someone pointed out a small sign over the door. It reads:

Go to the people, live with them. Learn from them.

Start with what they know; build with what they have.

But with the best of leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, “We have done this ourselves.”

Lao Tzu (700 BC)

That was the guiding light for Father Greg. And it is also the Gospel message for this week. As Kayla McKlurg observed in [today's posting on “Inward/Outward:”](#)

We can devote ourselves to striving after success and

popularity, or we can notice the least likely to succeed parts of ourselves—*What? All you have is one little boy with a few loaves and fish?*—and imagine them new. Our child heart is open; it offers what it has, saying not a word about what it has not. What good will come from such a small offering? Yet ages since, we still ponder the outcome: “Gather up the fragments left over,” Jesus says, “so that nothing may be lost.” If we fall under the trance of success and popularity, we risk overlooking the power of crumbs. What is left over when we have nothing more to give is enough. Immense potential lives among the fragments.

I’d like to see the San Lucas Reforestation Project continue, with or without the support of the San Lucas church. Toribio’s challenge reminds me of a lot of the challenges faced by ministries of Church of the Saviour. At some point, all of these ministries need support beyond the Church.

Where do I see God at work in Guatemala? I see that divine intervention in the way people come together to meet community needs whether they get credit or not. There ... Here ... and Everywhere...

As I ponder the living story of the San Lucas reforestation project and the story of the feeding of the five thousand, the sign over Greg Schaffer’s bathroom door

Go to the people, live with them. Learn from them.

Start with what they know; build with what they have.

But with the best of leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, “We have done this ourselves.”

Thank you, Jesus.

Closing (Marjory Bankson)

Feeding the five thousand is a story about the kingdom of God, here and now. The love, generosity and cooperation symbolized by sharing food in a large crowd lies dormant in all of us. Sometimes, in a time of need, a celebrant steps forward, holds up what we have and gives thanks for that in such a way that we are moved to share, to be a body of Christ together. It's what we hoped for the pilgrims, and what we hope for Seekers too.

May it be so.