

To Know One's Place
December 13, 2009
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 3:14-20

On behalf of all of the members of our Guatemala Vision Team, I want to thank you all for your prayers, your emails and your text messages to the team. Technology does have its advantages!

Most of all, thanks for the warm embrace back into this community that we have received since our arrival home (even if some of us are a bit more prickly than when we left).

We took hundreds of photographs and have dozens of stories to share. I'm sure the team has begun sharing already. We will find time to do that in an organized way after Christmas so you all can understand what we experienced on your behalf. For now, please know how much we were sustained by the knowledge that this congregation was with us in spirit if not in person.

Several members shared letters that we read each morning. Amy Leary offered a few passages from [A Latin American Journal](#) by the wonderful spiritual writer Henri Nouwen. His words express what many of us feel – about our work here in Charlotte and our opportunities in Guatemala. Nouwen writes:

“Our care for the poor thus becomes the way to meet the Lord. The more we give, help, support, guide, counsel, and visit, the more we receive, not just similar gifts, but the Lord's own self. To go to the poor is to go to the Lord”

“After all, we come to recognize our own gifts in the eyes of those who receive them gratefully. Gratitude thus becomes the central virtue of a missionary.”

In this season of giving and receiving, I hope that Nouwen's words will ground us all and remind us how much we have to give by serving others in God's name.

If Charles Dickens had lived in Guatemala instead of England, his wonderful seasonal story, *A Christmas Carol*, might have been about a family much like the one I met a few days ago.

Each member of the Vision team had the chance to accompany a social worker from Common Hope on a visit to an affiliated family. The purpose is for the social worker to get an update on the state of the family – their health, family relations, employment and general financial state – all as a way to ensure the family can continue to keep their children in school. When an older child can go to work at age 13 or 14, the pressure for that child to drop out of school and work to supplement the family income can be great.

The Lopez family, however, is staying focused on the kind of generational improvement that is the key to the future of Guatemala and so many other impoverished areas of our world. The father, Everildo, is lucky to have a job building and repairing the streets in the ancient city of Antigua. But as with so many of the families we met, his salary must feed three generations under one roof, a total of nine people.

Their home hangs precariously on the side of a mountain - a hodge-podge affair like so many we saw. Two small cinder block structures with dirt floors and no furniture to speak of, connected by loose sheets of corrugated steel roofing material that create open-air living space between the two rooms. Part of one of the cinder block houses serves as a closet-sized tienda, or store, as a way to supplement the families income.

Chickens and a duck peck and poke around their dirt lot for sustenance. During the visit, one son, named Enemias, proudly brought out two sets of mice and two big-footed bunnies for me to see. The youngest, a boy named Edgar, was the Tiny Tim character. He was getting over an allergic attack from eating pork that he was lucky to survive, given the state of healthcare there.

The hope of the Lopez family for now is pinned on the two oldest children, both of whom are on Common Hope scholarships. Gladys Eluvia is 15 and was happy to show us her school work, which is on the seventh grade level. She is excelling in all areas, especially math. Edwin Francisco is in 10th grade and has taken an interest in electronics as a potential career. He eagerly showed us an electronic gismo he had built resembling a spider with lights and moving parts, all drawing energy from a battery.

The members of the Caldwell Vision team processed many similar scenes when we gathered at night. As one member of the team said, the experience underscored the random good fortune we all have of being born in America. Such is our place in life, we acknowledged, leading us to reflect on why that is and what it might mean for us.

Had John the Baptist been a member of our Vision Team, surely he would have a pretty clear idea about that. As we heard in today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist didn't mince words.

“Bear fruits worthy of repentance,” he said.

When the crowds asked him what that meant, he responded in terms anyone could understand.

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Tax collectors should collect only what was due and soldiers should not extort. That’s what it means to ‘bear fruits worthy of repentance,’ he said.

We Presbyterians don’t speak the language of repentance too often, do we? When we do, we’re probably thinking about repentance of the heart and perhaps of the head, kind of internal change, a resolution to abandon our selfish ways and pursue God’s idea of being.

But what John the Baptist has in mind is something different than just an internal reorientation. It’s a much more visible and concretely productive way of living out our faith. It is exactly that – a way of living – a missional pattern of life rather than an occasional good deed. Such is our place in God’s sovereignty, to open ourselves to God’s use, completely and unflinchingly.

I’m sure the Vision Team members would agree we saw that kind of life up close in the members of the staff of Common Hope. Young people who had studied international development and who worked 10-hour days to advance progress inch by inch and foot by foot for their Guatemalan brothers and sisters. Guatemalans who worked to learn new skills and take on more and more of the professional roles of the organization. And still other Guatemalans who dedicated their skills to the mission of the organization, such as Pablo the five-foot-two middle aged grandfather who could drive a nail in four swings, lift half his weight over his head and move around the construction shop with the agility of a cat.

There were times when we all thought about doing what Sally and Zack Thomas did a few years back – just staying, committing ourselves to the cause. We didn’t have the luxury of doing so, at least that’s what we told ourselves. Perhaps it was because we didn’t quite have the courage.

But that is not to say that we cannot bear the fruit of our repentance here – and we are. If John the Baptist dropped in on us today, he might say:

“If you have more land and space on your church campus than you can use, lend it to those whose lives aren’t as privileged. If you have skills and abilities to serve others,

use them to ease the burdens of those less advantaged. If you have influence in the community, use it to bring about justice. And never forget that the decisions you make affect others, around the corner and around the world.

“This,” John the Baptist might say, “is your place in life.”

But as clear and even uncompromising as John the Baptist is in our scripture – and would be today – his sense of place in God’s work has an equally, perhaps more important dimension.

When the crowd began to wonder whether he was the long-expected messiah, John the Baptist points to another.

“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

John the Baptist tells his first audience – and us – that we should remember our place in yet another way. As important and needed as our fruits of repentance are, our efforts to alleviate poverty and improve the lives of others in so many other ways, this work only points to the one for whom we hope and whose birth we await.

In this, we are reminded of another kind of repentance that may be due, that of forgetfulness or perhaps even confusion about who and what Christ really was and is. As one commentator writes of this passage, we must avoid thinking of Jesus “as mostly or even only as an ethical teacher.”¹

In other words, our place in the world – what we do with our lives, how we live in relation to others around the world – is all defined by God’s coming into the world in the flesh and blood of Christ. And, as much good as we may be able to achieve, we must also model a patience that even more - even a new heaven and a new earth - awaits the world one day.

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One of the realizations of any mission trip – or even a local mission effort – is that those who serve are changed more than those we seek to serve. Some call this reverse evangelism – that in giving we receive the good news of the gospel even more

¹ Commentary in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 72. Essay by Veli-Matti Kakkainen, Fuller Theological Seminary

intensely. I think that is what Henri Nouwen meant when he wrote the words I read earlier, that “our care for the poor thus becomes the way to meet the Lord.”

In the case of the Vision Team, we learned from the Guatemalans what it means to wait patiently, peacefully, even joyfully for the Lord.

The afternoon of my visit to the Lopez home I saw it in the face of Julia, the mother of the children who today live in poverty but who strive to climb out on the ladder of education. She sat quietly at the table as her daughter showed us her ability to add and subtract fractions and as her oldest son listened earnestly as the social worker explained the possibilities of a career in electronics. She hardly spoke a word but her pride was almost palpable and her countenance was one of hope, a hope that transcends her family’s present circumstances.

As I looked over to the small space from which she sells food and small items to help feed her family, I saw the sign bearing the name of her tiny store. It read “Tienda Benedecion”, meaning blessing. Before leaving the country, I noticed one or two more tiendas with the same name, revealing what sustains so many families in the face of such poverty ... God’s blessing of hope.

May God grant us all the same kind of patient waiting in this season of Advent, that we might know our place in God’s work and be reminded that our waiting has nothing to do with the material distractions of Christmas ... and everything to do with the one for whom we wait, whether we live in a modest rented home in Charlotte or in the comforts of the suburbs or a make-shift cinder-block-and-corn-stalk hodge-podge on the side of a mountain in Guatemala.

Amen.