



Sermons

from Northwood United Church

“A Place to Start”

Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 2:15-17, 21-22

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January 13, 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

So where do I start. Treena and I just got back from 12 days in Guatemala. This was not a holiday. There was not a single beach moment in the entire time. The purpose of the trip was to have an encounter with the people, the history, the faith and the struggle for life that is occurring as we speak in one of the economically poorest countries in the world. And the idea is not to do some kind of weird “gawk at poverty” rich western guilt tour, but to encounter the people and the struggle with an open heart and mind. How can we love our neighbor if we don’t know and understand their reality and the ways in which our reality and theirs are bound up together? So it was 10 days of encounters with people, history, and the day to day joy and struggle for life. We met many people trying to make a difference under very difficult circumstances and we had the opportunity to listen and talk and grapple with what they grapple with.

So once again, where do I start in sharing with you what your brothers and sisters in Christ are going through today? I am aware that having just returned and having had no time really to sort through the experiences, I am carrying around a mountain memories, experiences, encounters, stories, images of people and situations, many of them quite impactful, and I will need some time to put them in some kind of order so that I don’t just spew them all over. Treena and I intend to have a Guatemala night with food and stories and images and you are all invited to that, but for this morning I will let the experience of Jesus in the Jordon give me some order and sense. For that experience gave him a place to start. Here he is, filled with a call to bring a message of change, of transformation to his people. Here he is, brimming with energy and vision for a different way of being. He is wanting deeply for his people to be released from the oppression under which they live. And he goes to John at the Jordon and is baptized. And in that moment, God gives him his starting place. “You are my beloved. In you, I am well pleased.” The one who made you, the one who made the stars in the sky, and snowcapped mountains, the one who fashioned not just your life but life itself loves you, holds you dear, cherishes your life. Let that be your start, your foundation, your stronghold as you enter the fray.

I want to take you to Zaqualpa, a small town in the mountains about four hours west northwest of Guatemala City. You have to go way off the beaten path to get there, but Zaqualpa was one of the epicenters of the civil war which took place in Guatemala in the late 70 and early 80s, the worst of it in the early 80s. It is estimated that over 250,000 people were killed in what the UN has named genocide because 93% of those killed were Mayan. So hanging in the air, particularly in the highlands of Guatemala is this fairly recent experience of brutal violence and repression at the hands of their own government and military. In Zaqualpa, the church was working closely to peacefully resist the brutality of the government, and in response, the army overran the church and used it as a place of torture and execution. We toured the room where the torture took place and the site of the well where they dumped the bodies.

The armed conflict is over now. The peace agreement was signed in 1996, but the effects linger in every family and every community. The healing is far from over. How do you move forward from such atrocities? Well, I want you to meet Ana Maria, a Roman Catholic sister who runs a center of healing dedicated to the memory of the martyrs who died in Zaqualpa and

around Guatemala. She showed us the place. She told us the story. She led us through the ghastly reality with a steady hand and a hopeful heart. And today, among a whole lot of other things, she is leading her people through an honest remembering of this time, knowing that every life lost in the past was precious in God's sight and loved, and knowing that every person she encounters today who is burdened by that past needs healing and release in order to know and feel that blessing that is in the heart of God for each and every person. Precious in God's sight and beloved. A place to start.

I want you to meet John Bell and Alex, the founders of Transitions, an organization that builds wheelchairs and prostheses for disabled people out of their shops in Antigua. When Alex was 14 years old he was shot by someone robbing a grocery store and was left a paraplegic. He was rushed to hospital but there was little they could do there. He was sent home, but quickly returned because of infection and there he stayed for two years. When John Bell happened to discover him in the hospital he was dying of the effects of untreated bed sores. This was not ok. John took him to the states, got him treatment, and Alex survived. He returned to Guatemala and went back to the hospital to see his old friends, and there he found another person, in much the same conditions he had been in when John discovered him. He called up John in the states and said, we have another one. And with that, Transitions was born. With the help of many organizations including Rotary, and Poco A Poco, they have created a powerful place of recovery and new life for disabled people in Guatemala. And all this because both John and Alex refused to believe that Alex's life was expendable. They refuse to believe that a disability means a failed life. Precious in God's site and beloved- every one. A place to start.

I want you to meet Joli (Jolanda), from San Jose del Golfo, a small town maybe an hour north east of Guatemala City. Once again, off the beaten track, this small rural farming town was relatively peaceful and quiet until a Canadian Mining company decided that those fields of corn and beans had too much gold in them to leave them alone. To make a long story short, the villagers of San Jose and a neighboring town have decided that they will not let their farmland be turned into a mining site, the land that sustains their life be taken away, their water poisoned and depleted by mining like so many other sites in Guatemala. And for the last 10 months, they have blockaded the site of the proposed mine. Joli is one of the key leaders of the resistance. For this she has faced intimidation, death threat, and she has been shot once. The bullet is still lodged beside her spine. But she along with the seniors and youth and villagers of these two communities refuse to believe that their communities, their life, their land is expendable for the benefit of foreign mining interests, mostly Canadian. And here more than any place in our travels I sensed that their resistance, and their struggle is fueled by the deep conviction, rooted in a daily practice of faith, that their life is precious in God's site and beloved- that Jesus, or perhaps more like the virgin Mary is with them on site, in the struggle. And from that starting place, they move, powerfully and peacefully to stand up to the police, and the mining company that would take their land, and their water, and their livelihood. A place to start.

Friends, it matters. It matters where we start. It matters that we proclaim around this font and around fonts across this world, that every life is precious, not just to us but to God. It matters that you know in your heart and soul that your life is precious in God's site and beloved. Because from that starting place each of these people and each of us can go out into the struggle for life with the confidence that we are not alone, that no matter what happens, we are cherished at the heart of life. And that place of belovedness is the best and most powerful place I know from which to launch a life. We go out from that place and we return to that place to be nourished in this great and beautiful struggle for life.