

Garrett Lash

October 6, 2019

World Communion Sunday

First and foremost, I would like to thank Forest Lake Presbyterian Church for giving me the opportunity to partake in a once in a lifetime experience such as this one.

- I would also like to thank Frontera de Cristo and all of the people that accompanied us and housed us throughout our entire trip to Mexico.

Frontera de Cristo is doing amazing work in on the border, and our one-week itinerary there captured nearly the full extent of their work, and we were welcomed everywhere we went. From the moment we arrived we were introduced to the monstrosity that is the border wall, maybe a couple stories high and fully equipped with barbed wire. We were confronted with the uninviting message the wall was sending to our counterparts across the border. Not 15 minutes later we were being invited, welcomed, and very well-fed in a very modest household by a family on the Mexican side, to whom we were complete strangers and spoke a different language. Yet despite our language and cultural differences, we were treated almost as long-lost family members, sharing stories and jokes through all two of us that could translate back and forth, over delicious tacos and certainly salsa hilariously being spilled onto our shirts.

Being welcomed was a theme for the rest of the week. The next night we went to the refugee shelter - one that we later found out was constantly under surveillance of the cartel - without much to bring other than a football, a soccer ball, and chalk for the children to play with. And yet we were welcomed with open arms by the shelter and its volunteer staff, and later that night we had another delicious dinner with the refugees, as they shared their stories of their homeland, why they left, their struggles of the present and goals for the future. I felt heartbreak, guilt for having been born into a society where I endured no such hardship, wondering how it would feel to be on the other side, Yet almost everyone I met had a smile on their face as they told their stories, full of hope, perhaps of what was to come.

The week continued on, and we continued to learn and grow. We visited CRREDA, a drug and alcohol rehab center, Dougla Prieta Trabaja, a community garden for recovering addicts to get involved, Cafe Justo, a farming cooperative designed to encourage farmers in Southern Mexico, a school they had helped build, several families and friends of the Churches in both Agua Prieta and Douglas, Arizona, and we even met with the mayor of Douglas. We got to go to serve a meal to the migrants staying at the line applying for asylum. They slept in the dirt in the hot desert summer for a few days, waiting for their number to be called, only covered by a makeshift tarp. There was a small, but nice building a few hundred feet away called the migrant resource center - there they could use the restroom, shower, eat - while knowing that their number could be called in their absence and they would be skipped on that day, maybe forcing them to sleep another number of nights in the dirt and within reach of the cartels. I didn't know if they knew that even once they entered the US system, only 10% of people would be granted asylum, and the rest turned away.

Having spent so much time with the immigrants and refugees, by the time we entered our second to last day, I thought I had it all figured out, who was good and who was bad. I convinced myself that the border patrol were bad, inhumane and uninviting towards the "good" people, prospective immigrants coming from the other side, simply looking for a better life. On that day, we were scheduled to meet with the border patrol. Most of the week, I had largely ignored that piece of the itinerary, but when it finally rolled around, my preconceived labeling of the border patrol as "bad" drove me to want to do a lot of talking - interrogating even - and not a lot of listening. Only one gentleman ended up having the time to make it, a man named Rob, and just as I was about to launch a tirade of guilt-provoking questions, he began to tell his story. Rob more than understood the humanity on the other side, everything they were going through. He always treated anyone he encountered with respect, humility, and even fed them snacks when he could. But he also had a duty to protect the American people. He explained to us that while most attempting to evade patrol into the US were good people, simply looking for migrant work - some undocumented migrants had lengthy violent criminal records. Many migrants were smuggled in by the cartels, who operated on both sides of the border and forced migrants to pay hefty fees and perform illegal activities just to find work or see family in the US. Many were held against their will, and when some in our group decried the separation of children from their families, he explained that some children were simply being passed from cartel member to cartel member to give themselves or their traffickers the disguise of a family. Not only was he protecting Americans, but also the safety of many immigrants as well.

My mind was blown. Clearly I was wrong about the border patrol, and I couldn't decide who the bad guys were anymore. That evening, during our farewell dinner, I presented to Mark Adams my conflicted feelings of not knowing who "the bad guys" were. I told him that perhaps only the cartel members were worthy of "villainization", but he quickly pointed out that the cartel members were once impoverished or refugees themselves, forced into that life, to which we were partly responsible, as Americans, for having such a high demand for unsafe drugs. Then he pointed out a bible passage, Ephesians 6:12, which reads "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." We all like to blame people who we think are bad, point the finger at the border patrol, cartel members, immigrants, whomever we want. But it's important to remember that we are not fighting against people on any side. We are all people, and we all have the right to live, of course. We should be driving to create change instead of spreading blame.

It's now been three months and I still haven't fully wrapped my head around everything that I saw and heard. There were a lot of lessons to be learned from that trip - learning how to be truly hospitable, open minded, good servants, and much more. For me, the biggest thing was being reminded that instead of casting blame, we should be casting our efforts to creating change, against the principalities and powers, to create a better world for all of the flesh and blood out there. Thank you.

Michael Ryker
October 6, 2019
Forest Lake Presbyterian Church
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When I decided to go on the Mission Trip to the Mexican border with Frontera de Cristo, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. All I knew was that this was my first ever mission trip, I was going with a group of people I barely knew, and I was going to a place I had never been before. It was scary, but I knew God called me to go there to learn and to grow. So, for this World Communion Sunday, I want to share with you all one of the lessons that I learned on that trip, and that lesson revolves around the word "Global".

Today, the word Global is almost always followed by something we would not consider "good". Global Warming, global wars, global terrorism. etc. When my mind combined those with the bad news that flies around the globe in this digital age, the darkness of all that evil began to feel overwhelming and impenetrable. The darkness made me feel powerless and hopeless. Even when I look at one small area of the Globe, America's southern border, I hear of people being, extorted, murdered, trafficked, dying trying to cross or being separated from their families. It's enough to make me want to throw my hands up in defeat.

But when I got down to the border, I found that there was another, even more powerful, Global thing that I had completely forgotten about: The Global Church. We went down to an area that if you only listened to the media, might as well have been the Wild West, with all its lawlessness and violence. Yet, we found little of that. Instead what we found was Mark, Mariam and the Frontera de Cristo staff and volunteers being beacons of light in that seemingly impenetrable darkness. Their presence is a physical reminder of two important verses. The first is John chapter 1, verse 5 "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." And the second is Romans chapter 12 verse 21 "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good". The light that they represent not only continuously works to disperse the darkness on our border, but has also dispersed the darkness from my own eyes and heart. Suddenly, I remembered that God is everywhere, He too is Global and vaster still! I don't have to be everywhere; I don't have to fix all the problems; God and our Brothers and Sisters are everywhere, working to drive away the darkness with the light of Christ.

Their light is at the border bringing hope and healing to migrants through Frontera de Cristo and the Presbyterian Border Region Outreach. Their light is in "Les-sue-tu" Africa helping the poor, hungry, and orphaned through "Mom-on-yan-ee" and Ministry of Hope. It's in the Bahamas helping people recover from the hurricane, that same light is in India, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The light of the Church is everywhere, and it's driving away the darkness in every corner of the Globe.

So the lesson that I learned at the border, and the one I want to share with you today on this World, or Global, Communion Sunday is that no matter how much bad news you hear from around the world, don't feel like it's hopeless, don't believe that there is no one there helping, and don't think that you have to do it all yourself. The global church is there, the global church is helping, and the global church is shining the light of Christ into the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

What God showed me, and taught me down at the border renewed my spirit and filled me with hope. But as I walked out of that "classroom" on the border, God tapped me on the shoulder and told me that the lesson was not over yet. He pointed out that just as I look with hope to the Global Church who is working against evil, injustice, poverty, and destruction in other parts of the Globe, that same Church is looking back at **US** to help heal the same here in our part of the world. When they look at the news and see the darkness that is spread from divisive politics, discrimination, food deserts, and the injustices that are done to the poor and voiceless, the Global Church is looking with hope to us to help heal those divisions, to be the voice for the voiceless, and to bring justice to our community.

How can you do this? I'm glad I've inspired you to ask! For starters, More Justice house meetings are going on now; there you can learn how to help address the injustices going on here in our community. Details for how you can join are in your bulletin. You can contact Bill Wannamaker for opportunities to help mentor our youth or be a chaperon for events. You can help make bags for the upcoming potato drop, and then come fill those bags on November 9th to help feed members of our community. If those don't speak to you, then at the Connecting Point desk you can pick up this "Jesus said, "Follow Me"" pamphlet which offers over 30 opportunities where you can put your time and talents to work to become a beacon of light here in Columbia.

So as we take time to celebrate communion with our brothers and sisters around the world today, let us honor them and remember them, by doing our work here, to keep the church global and the light of Christ, shining bright.

Paul Van Wyke
October 6, 2019
World Communion Sunday

This morning I want to share some of the personal results of my Frontero de Cristo mission experience. The impact was very significant, and I strive to make my experience with the migrant population and many residents of Agua Prieta to be in the backdrop of my life here in Columbia. I want that very much. I often wonder how the travels and the travails of the migrants are going, although I will likely never know. They are persons who are in extremely vulnerable and even dangerous situations as they try to start a new life filled with hope.

It was during the trip that I developed a real sense of connection with the people who now had names and faces. The relationships felt real and powerful. It's much more difficult, maybe impossible, to connect with those who are not personally identified and seen. Sometimes we see pictures in media, and that helps somewhat, but it's not the same as being there. I have a much harder time connecting with persons in the Bahamas, Yemen, south Sudan, Syria, and many other places in this world. Perhaps that connection is what these mission experiences are about. It's not as much about giving as being one with them and being changed.

We've all struggled, and we know that struggles connect us in a different way than celebrations. Both are important. My prayer is to open my eyes to see and my ears to hear those in all parts of the world who struggle and lack opportunity; right now I think especially of my brothers and sisters in Mexico.

Significantly for me, my grasp of gratitude/thanksgiving has shifted since the mission trip. I'm so thankful for the bridge that exists between us and God and between us and people from all over the world. Because of God's love embodied in Jesus, and because of the personal experience I had in Mexico, I feel more free to love those from all cultures and places in this wide world. WE are children of God, who loves US.

I have thought more recently about the nature of gratitude expressed by the Pharisee when observing the low and even despised tax collector in Jesus' story. He was thankful that he was NOT like the person he saw groveling nearby. He saw the Publican as a low life, a loser, a chump. That thanks appears to separate rather than connect, and in that context it seems very hollow. It tends to maintain the status quo and likely a sense of superiority and privilege rather than moving him to change as a person. I'm very grateful for a greater awareness of God's love for all people, including those who struggle, are broken, and looked down on. We have the capacity to be drawn closer together through God's mercy.

I don't want to take my blessings for granted. Gifts are by definition undeserved, although at times I expect feel as though they are deserved. I don't want to consider my blessings to be at the expense of others.

Perhaps God chose us here in America, in Columbia, SC, to have the "good life" in order to help others have a better life. Luke 12:48 states that to whom much is given (not earned, not deserved) much is expected or required. And God spoke to Abraham with a promise and an instruction that His blessing to Abraham was expressly in order to BE a blessing.