

Proper 14 A – Returning from El Salvador
August 7, 2011
Family of Christ Lutheran Church
Chanhassen, Minnesota
Pastor Kristie Hennig

“Lives. Changed.”
Psalm 85; Romans 8:31b-39; Matthew 14:22-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

With this greeting,
I bring you a warm hug
from Bishop Medardo Gomez
and the brothers and sisters of the Lutheran Church in El Salvador.



...Where in July a Family of Christ delegation of 19 adults and young people spent 11 days that changed us forever.

As our readings for this morning say in a variety of ways,
in every circumstance in life **God is with us...**
when the sun is shining AND when the storm clouds roll in.

As people of faith,
we trust in the One who calls on us to make risky lake crossings,
and fishes us out of the deep when we lose our nerve and start sinking.
He doesn't promise that we'll never be blown about in a storm,
but he does promise that no matter what happens *he will be with us*.
And he will let nothing – nothing! – get in the way of his loving us.
As he called to Peter,
Jesus calls us to leave the comfort of our small boats
to join him out on the water.

We learned that again on our mission trip to El Salvador.

Lugging more than 30 suitcases filled with donations and letters for the students in our Seeds of Hope sponsorship program, we set out across the Caribbean Sea to follow Jesus. And we found him, over and over again, where he likes to hang out – among the poor.

People ask, what did you do in El Salvador?



Well, we listened and we learned... about the bitter 12-year civil war in which 75,000 men, women, and children lost their lives while foreign powers used that tiny country as a battlefield for Cold War games.

We learned about the martyrs of El Salvador, including Archbishop Oscar Romero and the Jesuit professors, assassinated by the government-sanctioned death squads.

Our friend, artist Christian Chavarria, told us what it was like to be a child surviving a massacre in his village.

We listened as Oscar told us that he works in his family's cornfield every morning from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m., *before* he goes to high school.

Bishop Gomez told us how the Lutheran Church in his country became an advocate and companion for the poor and oppressed.



We visited the schools where our sponsored students are learning to put their good minds to good use...

Where they are learning Spanish grammar and English, art and science, bread-baking and computing, moral values, confidence, and the advantages of gaining an education.



We saw old friends and made new ones.



Even when we didn't understand the words they said to us, and we struggled to express ourselves, we connected at the heart.



Reflected in the eager eyes of children and the care-worn faces of their parents and grandparents and pastors, we saw Jesus.



And, judging from the stares some of us got,
the Salvadorans saw something remarkable reflected in us, too.



We worked – painting at the guest house where we stayed...



and building a cement block wall to keep the earth from falling into the
Sunday School classroom beneath the roof that Maddy Harris' donation
built several years ago.





It was tough working in the hot sun,
but there were treasures to unearth –
mostly in the form of interesting species of spiders and amphibians.
It was fun to work with Atilio and Antonio,
and it felt good to be doing something for our friends, adding value.

We played hard and laughed a lot.
The soccer was intense,
the Salvadorans schooling our kids with their great moves.



There was music and dancing, tree-climbing and silliness.



Lots of silliness...



Along the way,
we left something of ourselves behind in El Salvador...
and that felt good.



You helped us to give...
but we received much more than we brought.
And that is what we long to tell you about.
We have *so many* stories. Here's *one*.



Mitchell graduated from Chanhassen H.S. in June,
and is getting ready to go to Purdue this fall.
Kevin is 7 years old and in the 2nd grade.
Mitchell's sponsorship gift of \$115 made it possible for Kevin to go to
school this year.
When Kevin learned that Mitchell was coming to El Salvador,
he prepared a gift for his sponsor and waited.
Mitchell had written that he hoped he could visit Kevin and his family.
So Kevin started to count the days till Mitchell's visit.
We went with Mitchell to Santo Domingo to meet Kevin's family –

who are so poor they don't even have a single chair to sit in.
But they do have hope.
And Mitchell has been part of that.



This is the Guevara Pineda home.
And here is Kevin's family: his father, mother, little sister, and grandmother...



with their new friend from Minnesota, "Michel."

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We gave, but received much more in return.

Diego and Douglas were pleased with the new backpacks we brought to them and to each of the 287 sponsored students in our program.

We blessed them with smiles and hugs,
listening ears and words of encouragement.

Over and over we were asked to extend thanks to Ron and Elaine Larson, who run the program from Minnesota, and to all of the people of Family of Christ who stand in solidarity with the Lutheran Church in El Salvador and the people in seven congregations.

They thank God for us, and they pray for us, they said.

That we come each year – some of us returning summer after summer – is huge.

That is one of the ways we follow Jesus...

Stepping out of our little boats and onto the water,
walking alongside these brothers and sisters,
who have so much to teach us.



We brought Bibles, too,
and food packets from Feed My Starving Children
to help feed the homeless people who depend on the Hope House
for basic medical care, laundry, showers, and four meals a week.



Aside from what was in our luggage,
we brought good humor and flexibility,
all that we are and want to be.

We gave and we received...



El Salvador, we found, is filled to overflowing with many beautiful things –
courageous and resourceful people,
above-average children,
abundant hospitality,
delicious fruits and mysterious vegetables,
showy flowers and singing birds,
faith and hope and love.
Lots of that.



And it is a place crammed with suffering, too – poverty and violence, the toll of a tortured past and ongoing injustice.

Adults still haunted by war-time memories struggle to provide for their families as prices and unemployment soar.

Kids in our sponsorship program, finally able to go to school instead of dodging bombs and bullets, are intercepted by gang members demanding “protection” payments.

In a tropical country where rain is abundant, large numbers of people still do not have access to clean drinking water.

It was a lot to take in in 11 days.

So we headed for the hills and coffee plantations of Ahuachapán for a time of retreat and reflection.



We spent time journaling and praying, processing our experiences and crafting testimonies – what we wanted to remember, what we might say to our families and friends when they asked, “How was your trip?”

Then, at our final worship -- outdoors under a log roof – each shared in turn.

And that was our sermon.

Our amazing two-hour sermon that was all about...

Lives. Changed.

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One student said: “This trip helped me with my faith. I was what you might call a skeptical Christian. The people here have cemented my faith. Now I know what I believe. People said I’d be changed. They were right.”

“The bumper sticker you see around that says *God Bless America* bothers me now. Do we need to be blessed or does El Salvador? We are sent to serve.”

“A 13-year-old was convicted and sent to prison for murdering our driver and friend, Jorge. They call that justice. But I wonder. The real perp in El Salvador is poverty. On this trip I learned that poverty isn’t just uncomfortable; it’s a social sin.”

“In El Salvador, the “least of these” have taught me about faith. I realize that they are rich, and I am poor.”

“You see more here. I hope our eyes will stay open when we get home.”

“I expected to find darkness in El Salvador, but it is filled with light. I have never felt so close to God as I have here.”

“I put walls around my heart. But the Salvadorans have gotten in. Now I know I am worth my own love.”

Lives. Changed.

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At 3 a.m. on the morning we left for Central America, Pr Jerry met us at church to send us off with a prayer. He encouraged us to watch for surprises. He was right – there were a bunch.



We didn't guess that when we fed others, we too would be filled.



We didn't know that buying cheeseburgers for others could taste so good in our own mouths.



At first, we didn't recognize the angels God sent to keep us safe...



...and fed.



But later, with new eyes, with open hearts and open minds, we saw that in El Salvador and within each of us – each of you, too --

God *is* doing a new thing.

There was a billboard we kept seeing along the highways. It read, “Estoy aqui. Diós. I am here. God.” In one corner it said, “God is everywhere, talk with him. He is searching for you. Leave yourself to find him.”

Jesus calls to each of us from across the water, “Do not be afraid. Come to me.”

What about you?

Where is Jesus calling to you?

Will you leave yourself to find him?

Will you get out of your boat?

Will you let him take your hand?



Amen.

