

A Different Kind of Community Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35

GUATEMALA: A different Kind of Community

We finally arrived. Our group of about 18 students and 6 adults had travelled from Alexandria, Virginia down to Guatemala City by airplane, then we've been in a couple of vans to take us into the highlands into a rural area where we would be working all week. We had prepared ourselves for the realities that working on a trip in Guatemala wasn't going to have the comforts of home: there would not be a proper toilet, there would not be air conditioning. We were there to build stoves and plant trees. We knew what we were getting into...or at least we thought we did.

When we got there, a crowd of women and children and a few men greeted us. Then we moved from house to house, though they didn't look exactly like houses. They were more like huts with one open room, the space divided by function. One lone lightbulb if any. No television. The children's sleeping mats rolled in the corner, dirt floors, covered area outside. Chickens and dogs ran freely between homes. We were introduced to the families in each home, and then it seemed like the whole group moved to the next home to meet that family. Then the gathered group would go to the next home. This continued with not only our group, but now what seemed like the entire village walking from house to house. We didn't quite understand why we took so much time with introductions, after all, there was work to be done.

This was a different kind of community. Our first objective was to build relationship, build trust. Overcoming language barriers meant that we looked people in the eyes, we read one another's souls as we got to know their families. Boundaries between neighbors, families, and friends were not clear. In fact, the entire village was a family. If one group needed a shovel, it was simple borrowed from the next home, and then borrowed again, until no one knew where the shovel originated, and our Guatemalan friends didn't seem to care. They knew we had different ideas about using the bathroom, so they built a little curtain around the hole where we were directly to do our business...then they handed us a little toilet seat, much like we give to children learning to go potty.

That extra consideration didn't make sense, until we got to the hole and realized, it was not an outhouse, but just a hole. The kindness and care demonstrated for our group was humbling, especially given that we were here to help them. The food was shared. Our families, for whom we worked, regardless of age, worked just as hard as our team, helping to mix the concrete, bringing cinder blocks. Getting a snack to share around. The doors on the homes did not have locks. There was a different understanding of property. If they had something their neighbor needed, it was willingly given, from a blanket to cornmeal to a helping hand.

When our group was ready to pile back into our vans at the end of the week, we had built stoves. But, more importantly we understood a different kind of community, of

people who worried less about productivity and perfection and more about quality of relationship, even with a us. We realized, we got less concerned about the lack of cell phone signal or toilet in the ground, and learned more about communication. We realized we didn't want to go back home to pretenses, talking past friends and family when language wasn't an issue, where mine and yours is so clearly distinguished. We helped our village a bit, but they helped us way more. Through tearful goodbyes, they gifted each volunteer with a hand woven fabric filled with a bouquet of flowers as a sign of relationship, connection, and thanks-giving for God having brought us together. And you would have thought they'd given us the greatest gift of our lives. For, actually, they had.

A CHURCH IS BORN: A different Kind of Community

After Jesus resurrected, the disciples and followers of Jesus discarded some of their previously held fears and worries. They had 40 days with Jesus after that Easter morning. Those 40 days held more learning than the previous 3 years. Suddenly things made sense. Jesus ate breakfast with them on the beach. He walked with a couple on the road to Emmaus, that ended up stopping them in their tracks and doing a complete 180, back to the group. He spoke and opened their minds. They understood they would be a part of building God's kingdom, once they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

The 11 disciples: Matthew, James, Simon the zealot, the good Judas, Peter, James, John, Andrew, Phillip, Thomas, and Bartholomew cast lots to decide who the twelfth would be: it became Matthias. However, these twelve had actually become a group of 120, according to Acts 1:15. Then in Acts 2, verse 41, Peter preaches to the community, the Holy Spirit takes over and 3,000 are added. By Acts 4:4, the number had grown to 5,000. In fact, we know the *"The Lord added to their number daily. (Acts 2:47)."*

Like a snake's layer of dead skin, they became new people, and not just individually, but as a community. Those in the region started noticing. They experienced a different kind of community. It was as though they had been walking dead and were now resurrected. They began what must have felt like a new life. Before Resurrection and After Resurrection was their life experience. The room of strangers where they were each lost within their own hearts and minds so much that they didn't even notice when one of their own lost his mind and sold out their leader...this group of strangers became community. And the community grew. Boy, did it grow!

Why? Well, the preaching was good. ☺ The Old Testament figures like David and Moses were connected to God's working through Jesus, and it made sense to the disciples in a way that was compelling. Even the priests who were behind the movement to kill Jesus were dumbfounded by this fledgling church...They had paid off the guards of the tomb to help stifle the conversation about Jesus raising from the dead. But, then there were all these people who were banding together. They healed folks and preached, and the priests wanted to know by whose authority? Jesus.

This community was different in that they demonstrated caring and sharing beyond what was required or obligated.

This community was different in that they prayed, all new, inspired prayers, as if they thought God was actually listening to them. They broke bread together and every time recalled Jesus' instructions, not just on communion, but on becoming servants of one another, casting aside boundaries that separated insiders and outsiders. Caring for everyone; even those who society had dismissed or discarded.

This community was different in that they were unable to be intimidated. As we continue to study Acts, we will see how they are brought in by the authorities, arrested, threatened, and when released go right back to what they had been doing. This kind of unbridled faith was transformative. Everyone was talking about it. It's as if they got a whole jazz concert when going to church AND felt like God was present, nudging them into being a part of that different community. The people were awakened to new life.

WHAT COULD BE: A different kind of community

I am still learning so much about PRCC and who you are. I have a long way to go to understand everything about this church. But, I can tell you that this is a different kind of community too. This church is a place where people are invited to explore their faith, bringing their fully-engaged minds and hearts. This is a place where asking questions is encouraged and difference is not only tolerated, it's celebrated. A diversity of faith means that we teach one another about our perspectives and just because we land in different places on this or that, doesn't preclude us from sitting together or praying for one another. This is a different kind of community.

This is a place where so far, we have had funds to do ministry AND pay for the utilities to keep this building warm and lights on. How? Do we charge admission to come to worship? Do we charge other Bible study groups to meet here? Do our youth have to pay to get to attend youth group? Children have a ticket to go to Sunday School? No. Week after week, dedicated individuals and families make a sacrifice of hard-earned money, giving an offering. We are considering fund-raising strategies so that we can expand our ministries in the future, and the Finance team and staff diligently work to make sure we stretch every penny.

There was a miracle here last fall, when windows needed to be replaced in the Great Hall, and some funds were there, but as if guided by the Holy Spirit, over 80 thousand additional dollars were given so that even more of the windows could be replaced. We each give according to our ability, and that makes for a different kind of community. Together, we can do things that individually we just couldn't. I'm hoping and praying friends for air conditioning, which we've talked about as something in the future, but really finding a way to do the impossible and cool at least this sanctuary so that we can continue to find the Holy Spirit in this place while being cool...but we'll see.

Sometimes when I invite the children forward, I'm a little afraid because it seems to be an entire village. Our children's ministry team would tell you they are planning for the summer and fall so we can continue to grow. We are in fact, bursting at the seams. This is a different kind of community, where children are seen and heard, are taught and learned from, are cherished and accommodated. It's a different kind of community.

We are working on building on the tradition of having a vibrant youth program, and we pray for the next associate minister so that this would be a place where teens could find sanctuary and calm in the middle of the storm of life in middle and high school. We pray for the right person and that the funds will be made available because we don't give in to the excuses that say youth ministry is hard, kids have too much going on, and it's just not possible for students to be in face to face relationships now that everything's done electronically. We are going to help them find a different kind of community.

Friends, the stories of Guatemala, the early church, and even the story of this church inspire us...God is doing something new and different. It might feel a little strange and uncertain at times. As we receive new members, we acknowledge and celebrate that each one of us brings different gifts and perspectives, and the church is better for it. But, that can be a challenge too as we seek to work together. I celebrate that Jesus was raised for the dead, that the Holy Spirit is alive and moving, and that even now, we are becoming a different kind of community. Amen.