

On Gates; Complex and Wild.

Three weeks ago I walked through a gate. Gate 34, concourse F on a flight to Guatemala City via Atlanta. I was part of a delegation from the St. Paul Area Synod that was meeting up with folks from the Southeastern Synod and a few from Global Mission in Chicago. We were going

- to share in the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Iglesia Luterana Agustina de Guatemala,
- to participate in the installation of their first Bishop, Bishop Castillo, and
- to grow in our relationships as companion synods and as friends.

When we arrived we met up with folks from the Southeast Synod. Their Bishop, Julian Gordy, asked one of our leaders, Paul, (who happens to be Jodi's supervisor) who all was in our group. Paul went through the list and everybody in the St. Paul group had some previous or intentional connection with Guatemala. Until he got to me, the loner from Humble Walk, and he said, "And Nate... I'm not sure what the hell he's doing here." Fair enough. To be honest, I wasn't 100% sure myself.

It was kind of a gut feeling I guess.

One of the pastors, Amanda Castillo, from the Lutheran Church in Guatemala was at last year's synod assembly and mentioned to Jodi that the churches in Guatemala had a lot in common with what she'd heard about Humble Walk.

I hadn't been out of the country for awhile.

The invite came out last October and I was already sick of winter.

My faith life was stagnant and I was slipping into my all too common cynicism towards the church and all things organized religion.

Sometimes you just know you're supposed to do something so you do it. With the financial help of a couple good writing gigs, selling my pedal steel, and by charging for donuts at operation caffeination, I was able to join the adventure. (Just joking about the donut sales.)

The story we hear from Jesus today is about a gate. Going through a gate.

I think what I fumble over in this story is the role of the gate. I often think of a gate as something that is closed. It separates point A from point B. When I read the story this way I come up with a simple and safe interpretation. We move from dangerous point A, through Jesus, to wonderful point B. From lost to found, from outsider to insider, failure to success.

That would be a simple and safe way to read it but since when is God simple and safe? Everything I know to be true about God tells me that God is complex and wild. And so is love.

Dare I say, God is love?

To understand Jesus' story I need to break my assumptions about the role of the gate. Let's break the assumption that the gate is to keep things out. Let's break the assumption that one side of the gate is more desirable than the other. Let's break the assumption that this gate is closed.

Because the gate in Jesus' story is open wide. In verse 9 Jesus says specifically that he is the gate and we are to come in *and* go out. There's life on both sides of the gate. Abundant life.

The gate is no longer a destination, but rather a perspective or filter through which we see the world. We're continually moving through it. The gate isn't a goal, but more of a lifestyle. And it complicates everything. And that's wild.

Our first three days in Guatemala were spent in the rural village of La Esmeralda with Padre Jose Antonio. We stayed with host families and heard the stories of the congregation.

In La Esmeralda we ate together. Some meals were tortillas and beans, others were beans and tortillas. Before our last meal there one pastor leaned over and said, "I don't want to spoil the surprise, but I peaked in the kitchen and I think we get to have tortillas with supper." He was right. And we were happy. Each meal was simple and delicious, and met our every need. Especially those with needs in the 'keeping it regular' department.

Two nights later in Guatemala City many of the Guatemalan pastors had arrived from the country side to the big city for the celebrations and we all went out for supper to a beautiful Italian restaurant that was on the second floor of a mall that felt like the Galleria in Edina minus the sea of blond hair and blue eyes. As a group we entered the mall through a gate and headed for the restaurant. We sat down, about 30 of us, and ordered from the extensive menu. Baskets of bread were brought out, glasses of wine passed around. It was a table full of professional church nerds, the significance of bread and wine passed around a table does not go unnoticed.

Again, verse 9, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

Once again we were eating together. This time on the other side of the gate. We were coming in and going out and finding pasture on both sides of the gate. I'm thankful for Pastors Amanda and Horacio Castillo for deliberately planning these sorts of tensions into our travel. From rustic to extravagant. They weren't playing it safe. And the wild thing is many of those at the table that evening wouldn't have been welcome if not for the accompaniment of the wealthy Americans. We walked through that gate together and that made all the difference.

We talk about having an open table when we come to communion, because we believe that God's welcome is for everyone. But what if this isn't just a reminder of how God does things but also a lesson in how we can be doing things. What if we started treating our dinner tables a bit more as a sacrament? A means of grace to which everyone is invited.

One afternoon in Guatemala City we visited the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection. There are large ravines in Guatemala City and as you can imagine these steep descents are not favored by the rich. The steps built into the hillside are uneven and unpredictable. At 6'2" I had to continually duck to avoid catching my forehead on the tin roof overhang of the homes built alongside the walkway. If Guatemala has building codes it's safe to say these codes have yet to be cracked. It was down these winding walkways and rough cement steps that we came upon la Resurreccion.

With every church we visited we heard the stories of the congregation. Pastor Marsalina began telling the story. When she finished she apologized for going back and forth between her own story and the story of the church but qualified it by saying, “It is because the church's story and my story are one in the same.” What if we could no longer differentiate between the life of our church and our own life? What if that line between faith and life was erased? Perhaps then life would be more abundant.

We had arrived the week following Easter. In the Roman Catholic traditions of Guatemala Good Friday is marked by making huge floats that bear the suffering Christ and are lifted and carried by up to 110 men. And a couple of women to make sure the doors are held open. Not really, the women carry their own float of the virgin Mary. This is where the focus of Holy Week lies – Good Friday.

But not at La Reserrecion. Here, in the ravine, down the narrow walkways and steep steps another float was made. A float for Easter morning bearing the risen Christ. And built in such a way that Jesus could be lifted, turned, contorted, and twisted to travel among the neighborhood surrounding the congregation. To make it's way through the forgotten alleys and peoples of Guatemala City. It was Christ present in the midst of suffering and celebration. It was the incarnation. In that respect La Reserrecion was an incarnational congregation. A congregation that forms not where it sees potential growth but where it sees immediate need. To figure out where Christ is present and to show up. I'd like to think that I'm part of a congregation that desires to be present in this same way. To join in incarnational living. What does that look like at Humble Walk?

I've got 50 more stories. I wish I could tell them all. But here's a few themes I noticed:

No where along the way did we hear stories of numbers or growth. We heard about relationships. People were a part of the congregations because they had a role. They knew they were needed and they were given opportunity to respond to the embrace of God's love. Like Jimmy showing up each week to set up chairs or Lydia and Anna counting the offering. It's not about numbers, it's about relationships. When people ask me about Humble Walk they often ask, How many members are there? My response is generally along the lines of, Well, last Sunday everybody was there. It's kind of a smart alec response but it's true. When we can't break church down into numbers it gets complex.

No where did we hear about struggling with capital campaigns. We heard about sharing real physical struggle. Nine different people groups were represented in the congregation at La Esmeralda. One of our pastors asked how this was possible – and how we could achieve this sort of diversity in our own congregations. I jotted down from Padre's response, “We helped each other build our homes.” And here we thought Summer Homework at Humble Walk was such an original idea. La Resurreccion was built in a ravine. How did the building supplies get there? The congregation carried them down the hill. One cement block at a time. What if the next time a church added a 3 million dollar education wing all the members lined up at Menards in their cars and pickups to deliver the supplies? How would that change the community? Wouldn't that be wild?

No where along the way did we hear about getting people to come to church. We heard about the church being present in the midst of the people. After 20 years La Resurreccion is still in the ravine. The members are still financially poor. And Christ is still present. That's more complexity than Rick Warren and Joel Osteen will ever comprehend.

You see, from most view points these don't sound like success stories. But we don't share most view points. We share the view through the gate. We share in the understanding that Love is far more complicated and wild than simple, safe, success stories. The success we live is one of God coming to us in sacramental and incarnational ways. Ways that destroy our notions of in and out, lost and found, wealthy and poor, inferior and elite, failure and success. A way that goes back and forth through a gate. A gate we traverse so often that we can't remember which side we're from or to which side we are headed. We become rooted firmly in the love of this gate. And it is here, in all of it's complexity and wildness we have life. Abundant life. Amen.