

**July 30, 2023 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**1 Kings 3:5-12, Romans 8:26-27, 31-39**  
**Matthew 13:31-33, 45-46, 51-52**

**Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.**

**Two weeks ago, during worship, many of you who were here in person**

wrote notes of blessings and prayers for our crew leaving early the next morning for Guatemala. Since our group was from First Congregational as well as Hope, that morning the First Congregational folks also added prayers. On small sheets, you penned a word or two, or full prayers, or perhaps drew a picture. You reflected on *your* own experience of cross-cultural immersion and travel, of hope and beauty, of stress and growth. Along with boarding passes and health forms, Dramamine and Jolly Ranchers, I left for the airport carrying in my backpack this packet of prayers, *your* prayers, *your* blessings.

**Each day of our trip, we'd gather before breakfast.**

Yesenia would divvy up the prayers, making sure that each of us had one. Then we'd read them aloud around the circle.

"I hope you build relationships with people in Guatemala and among those traveling."

"Keep your eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open on this journey. Soak it all in."

"We send you forth in peace and safety, knowing that you travel in God's grace."

"I pray that your hearts are ever more widened to give and receive God's peace with all you meet."

The blessings were sweet, moving, sometimes humorous,

like the one from a younger sibling with plans to explore the older sibs bedroom.

**Dear ones, the Kingdom of heaven is like . . .**

In this section of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is on a roll.

He's offering up image after image for God's reign, God's way, God's community.

The Kingdom of heaven is like...

...A tiny mustard seed that spreads, growing into an invasive shrub.

...Like a bit of yeast worked into the dough.

...Like a valuable pearl, or a precious treasurer.

Read carefully, these may be less about the whole kingdom of God, and more about how God's reign emerges in surprising places,

how it starts ordinary, small, and unseen,

how it's part of precious resistance, pushing back against all that seeks to limit or tame God's way.

**Take a moment: How would you finish that prompt? The Kingdom of heaven is like...**

**I found in that packet of prayers and blessings, seeds of heaven.**

They tethered us to you, reminding the teens and we adults in our group

that we were representatives of First Church and Hope,

and, by grace, representatives of God.

Now that could make for pressure, but at its best it makes for roots, roots that grounded us deeply.

As important: you reminded us that Jesus, God, the Spirit, went with us, cared for us, led us, carried us.

Nothing can separate us from the love and grace of God, nothing, Romans tells us,

and it's true. Nothing can separate us.

And, the blessing cards? They never ran out, we just kept pulling out prayers and kept reading them.

On the way home, in the Atlanta airport at 10pm on Tuesday night, blurry eyed, we read the last few cards.

**We ventured to the south of Guatemala, a few hours west of the capital, Guatemala city,**

to the mission at San Lucas Toliman, on the shores of Lake Atitlan.

This mission has roots 50 some years back in the New Ulm Diocese of the Catholic Church

and the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Now for many years it's been led by local Guatemalans and continues a wholistic approach including

a hospital and clinic, a school,

the construction of homes and ovens,

a women's empowerment center,

a coffee program, reforestation work, and during the war, an orphanage.

**This was service learning, theologically we call this type of mission: accompaniment.**

Like the Risen Jesus walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus,

we walk together, we accompany one another.

We did some labor with the construction group,

like hauling dirt and stones for a foundation, and making rebar frames for concrete,

but mostly we listened and learned and engaged, we accompanied...

Visiting an elder named Taribio at the reforestation program

that grows and distributes trees to lessen erosion on the hillsides,

Hearing from Patricia the director of the school about how they support the Mayan culture of the students,

Experiencing the robust children's mass at the church.

In all of this, it was accompaniment.

A predawn hike to see the sunrise, with the lake below, volcanos in the distance,  
and along the path farmers singing out Buenos Dias as we passed. Accompaniment.

At the Women's Center, learning alongside local kids and teens to cook a special dish,  
and then a rousing game of soccer.

This time with the children was a highlight for our group,  
and especially for our confirmation students who were wonderful with the younger kids.

Learning about the civil war, the devastation and grief,  
and ways our country has caused pain and been complicit for the sake of corporate power, money.

Now days, Guatemala struggles: teetering between democracy and a dictatorship,  
with something like 25 families owning nearly all of the land.

Facing—each in our own ways—this inequity, the poverty, the reasons for migration,  
the dreams and hopes, fears and traumas,  
the incredibly hard choices so many around the world face.

In all of this, accompaniment was our focus.

### **Our group of nine ranged from 14 years old to 70.**

For 6 of us, it was our first time to Guatemala and the mission.

3 had been there before, and in fact, for Jane and Cynthia, this was their 5<sup>th</sup> trip.

Yesenia was our primary interpreter

and such a strong, faithful leader as we thought about language, but also culture, faith, privilege.

I'm proud of our group and the ways we stayed open, engaged, even when tired or not feeling well.

We supported one another and walked through these days.

By an openness to the Spirit, we were changed, and for this, we're immensely grateful.

**Dear ones, there are more stories to share, more learnings to glean, that's for other days.**

### **What is the Kingdom of Heaven like?**

I might say, the Kingdom of Heaven is like an envelope of prayers, a bounty of blessings,

like a community at home that just keeps praying

or like a motley group of travelers,

or like a mission that grows and transforms as the Spirit leads.

Over and over, we'd thank the people of San Lucas Toliman Mission for this opportunity,  
and to a person, they'd respond with thanks to us.

Thanks for showing up, thanks for being open to learning, thanks for seeing them—truly seeing them. As much as we saw God in them, they saw God in us.

**This morning we celebrate the installation for Pastor Maria.**

It was just 15 months ago when she was installed as our Pastor for Care and Nurture.

This morning she is installed again as her position has widened to full time,  
the title to simply Pastor,  
and she has an expanded position description.

Yes, this installation is about Maria and her call, but, honestly, even more, it's about our congregation. It's about knowing our mission and needs, and seeing Maria's gifts. It's about stretching to structure our staffing in a new way that fits for this season, this time. It's about risking to follow the Spirit's call, to be shaped by God's reign.

**Here's one final prayer card.**

I recall someone around the circle reading it on our very first day, and it made me cry.

A blessing that fit our travels, that fits for our congregation today,  
and a blessing for Pr. Maria, and all of us.

**"In all your journeys,**

May your hearts be uniquely warmed and broken for the sake of the gospel.

May a new light be kindled in your spirits.

May your minds be enlivened with new hope.

May your bodies be blessed with good health and endurance.

And may you return home again with new perspective, new relationships,  
and steeped in the deep well of God's love."

**May it be so, beloved ones, may it be so. Amen.**