Sermon 2.9.20
Report from El Salvador
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A few weeks ago, I travelled to El Salvador on study leave. I was part of a group of UU clergy (and some other folks) being led by the UU College of Social Justice. The title of the week was Human Rights, Reconciliation, and Faith. And I was there for about a week.

I went to El Salvador with questions. I wanted to understand the roots of the migration crisis. I wanted to understand the role of the United States in El Salvador and the region. And I wanted to see how resilience shows up in a country that has experienced so much horror so recently.

One thing about the College of Social Justice is that they are great at identifying local partners to act as guides and educators. And I’ll reveal an agenda that I have: I’d love for this congregation to take one of their programs together. This is the second trip I’ve done with the College of Social Justice and each one has been a rocket ship of spiritual formation. We can read all we want about a situation but there’s no substitute for being placed in front of the people affected.

Our excellent partner in El Salvador was a group called Cristosal and they pack a big punch for a small nonprofit. They support and protect people displaced by violence, they initiate lawsuits against the government to repair the lingering effects of rights violations, and they conduct research and learning to support human rights leaders. That’s why we were there.

They have a thing they call the Global School of Human Rights. The rhythm of the week was that we would spend our mornings at their offices being trained on their model of human rights and reconciliation, and in the afternoons go out into the city of San Salvador (the capital) to see historically significant places. And historically significant usually meant some place where something really awful happened.

So, I just want to take a second here to offer a heads up. I can’t talk about El Salvador in a meaningful way without talking about the violence of their civil war, and the United States’ role in it. I know that many people here carry trauma from their own experiences. If what I talk about is too much for you, please take care of yourself, and do what you need to do. If that includes walking out, great. I want you to protect yourself. You can also listen to the sermon in the lobby and having the mediated experience might make it easier to encounter. And if folks want to talk about it one on one after today, give me a call or send me an email.

And yeah, I know that in my last sermon I promised that my next sermon would be happier. Sorry. Really, the next time I preach will be about taking a sabbath, and that really will be happier than this. Although I’ll probably find something dark about that too.

I want to explain the logistics of visiting the country that has the highest homicide rate on the planet. We stayed together in a guesthouse in a neighborhood that from my perspective seemed perfectly safe. But we were told to never leave the house alone, and not to walk around at all after dark. We always traveled by van or were shepherded by local guides when we were
walking around the city. They also told us not to eat the coleslaw that they serve with papusas. I’ll be honest: I ate the coleslaw. And I regretted it.

So anyway, the really cool thing about the program was that we folks from the states were side-by-side in the classroom with folks from El Salvador, as well as religious leaders from other parts of Latin America. We wore these little earpieces and had instantaneous translation, so we could be in real conversation with local folks who were also learning this model of human rights. What a powerful thing.

The Cristosal Human Rights theory of change is based on the work of a Norwegian sociologist named Johan Galtung. It starts with the triangle of violence. This is the idea that there are three kinds of violence: Direct violence, which are the actual behaviors that harm victims. The second is structural violence, which is when institutions like governments and businesses deny basic human needs. An example of this is when folks are denied health care because of their sexuality. The third leg of the triangle is cultural violence, which are the attitudes that inform a society. Institutions like religions, schools, and entertainment companies have a huge influence on these cultural norms. The interesting, and terrible, thing about cultural violence is that it gives permission for structural and direct violence.

In the class we talked about the definition of violence and people threw out the usual definitions that you’d expect. Violence is when someone experiences harm, when someone experiences pain, when they are dehumanized. Violence is when harm is intentional!

Then a wise person threw out an idea that opened up my heart. They said that violence is the absence of love. Violence is the absence of love. The more I thought about that, the more profound it became. What I realized is that the absence of my love for someone is a kind of violence. And that is a call to love radically. To not just love when it’s appealing, or comfortable, or easy, but to love everyone because the absence of that love is violence. This isn’t saying that we have to approve of everything a person does. It’s not saying that we can’t have healthy boundaries that protect us from the emotional or physical harm that someone might do to us. But it is a challenge us to love radically as an antidote to violence. I’ll be real, that’s a challenge that I will fail at as often as I succeed. But what a mandate. What a daring, big thing to do.

We learned about the civil war in El Salvador, and I’ll try to give a thumbnail version here. It’s generally agreed that the war started in late 1979, although there was violence in the 70’s and frankly the history of the country is full of unstable governments and conflicts. An interesting thing I saw when I was there was that the El Salvadorians describe the civil war of the 80’s as the “armed conflict,” conflicto armado rather than a war or “la Guerra”. This speaks to the pattern in El Salvador of minimizing and even denying the seriousness of the war.

There was a coup in October of 1979 that was led by the military and in response, a broad coalition of left-wing armed groups joined together. They were called the FMLN. Even then, El Salvador had serious income inequality and the lives of poor were desperate, both in the city and out in the rural areas. Almost 80% of the arable land was owned by .01% of the country. The war lasted 12 years until 1992. The United States backed the military government, training Salvadorian soldiers who were later involved in death squads that targeted civilians. The US also
provided a million dollars in aid a day to the government, mostly in the form of weapons. I went to the Museum of the Revolution and saw a room full of weapons that the FMLN had used to fight the government forces, including weapons that they had captured from the government. I served in the US Marine Corps in the 80’s as this war was going on, and there on the wall were the very same weapons that I was trained on. These were weapons provided by the US to the government forces. It was disturbing to me to see how short the distance is from my life to the suffering of people in El Salvador.

The war was characterized by indiscriminate killing of anyone who was captured by the army. The army took a scorched earth approach where they would go into an area where they suspected the FMLN was operating and just kill everyone. There were numerous massacres and civilian activists and religious leaders were often killed. And to be fair, the FMLN did some bad things too, although I was told that of all the civilians killed, 85% were killed by the army and 15% by the FMLN. It was called a dirty war for good reason.

I’m glossing over a lot of details here for the sake of time, and frankly to spare you some of the horrendous details. The civil war ended in 1992 with a truce that brought some regulation to the army and created a civilian police force. The FMLN shifted from being a guerilla army to a political party.

Initially after the war, there was an amnesty but there were also some attempts at truth and reconciliation. A Truth Commission was established, and they took statements from over 22,000 witnesses. The report named names and urged the dismissal of all military and civil servants who were involved in the atrocities. The commission also recommended providing reparations to the victims and their survivors. The report was mostly applauded by human rights advocates but was criticized for failing to detail the US role in the war. However, and I bet you can see where this is going, the recommendations of the report were not implemented. Five days after the report was released, five days! The government passed a blanket amnesty law. Nobody gets held accountable, no victims are compensated, and let’s just pretend that this never happened. The really horrible thing is that the FMLN, who now were part of the government, they went along with this. They too had blood on their hands and didn’t want genuine accountability and as a consequence, there’s been no real reconciliation.

The resistance to any honest accounting has produced an interesting response. While most of the government has labored to sweep the war and its impacts under the rug, a few groups worked hard to be very direct and honest about the suffering the war. Churches in particular are doing this in profound ways. The Church of the Rosary in San Salvador was a refuge to protesters running from the army. The army fired into the church and a bullet struck the case behind the altar where the communion host are stored. To this day, that case is still in that church, shattered from a soldier’s bullet.

There’s a more graphic example at the Jesuit University of Central America. Six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter were executed by the army there. The Jesuits are interred in the church just 50 feet from where they died. And in that church, there are the stations of the cross. For folks who aren’t familiar with Catholicism, the stations of the cross are a series of stations, usually paintings or sculptures, that portray the last moments of Jesus as he is about to
be crucified. One station is him falling with the cross, another is Jesus seeing his mother, and so on. In this church, which has been witness to great suffering, the stations of the cross are charcoal drawings of photographs of victims of the death squads. They are graphic. And the message is clear: these were modern day crucifixions. And the church is asking us not to look away.

El Salvador does not have a civil war now. What it does have is income inequality, forced dislocation because of climate change, and an incredible gang problem. The gang problem was made much worse by the United States’ decision in the late 90’s to begin deporting gang members from prisons in the U.S. back to El Salvador, really destabilizing that little country.

One day during our course we were with two former members of the 18th street gang, which is one of the two major gangs that terrorize El Salvador, as well as a psychologist who works with former perpetrators of violence. The psychologist told us that the country still has not exited the psychology of war. The gang members who are extorting families and businesses are just a function of what their parents and grandparents experienced. She, the psychologist, believes that the victims need to be defended but that we also need to understand what’s behind the actions of the perpetrators. No one enters violence for the first time as a perpetrator.

The gang members themselves were more poetic. One said to us that violence is a kind of energy; it never goes away; it just gets transformed. Sometimes it goes underground but it always comes back. He said the past is the present is the future. This is a whole other sermon, but these are certainly lessons for the United States to learn.

What would real justice look like? We met with the families of the victims of the massacre at the village of El Mozote, where a thousand civilians were killed by the army. What they wanted didn’t really surprise me: They want their story to be told honestly, they want reparations for the lives they lost, and they want the government to put measures in place that will prevent these atrocities from happening again. But I was surprised by what they didn’t want. They didn’t want someone to sit in jail for the rest of their life for what happened. For them, having someone else suffer for their crimes is just more suffering in the world, and they had seen enough suffering already. They were very explicit that their faith called them to forgive. I was floored. But I understand this attitude as a part of the resilience of the people of El Salvador. The country as a whole is not showing a lot of resilience. It’s still suffering deeply. But I saw individual examples of resilience. In 2016 the El Salvador Supreme Court ruled that the 1993 amnesty was unconstitutional. This allowed the state to begin prosecuting those people responsible, and in one of those trials that’s happening now, an army general admitted that the army massacred the people of El Mozote. It took almost 40 years, but the truth is coming out. And I visited a recently opened park in San Salvador. In that park there’s a monument to Memory and Truth. It’s like the Viet Nam memorial in Washington, DC. It lists the names of every victim of the war, and also lists the site of each massacre. The victims are divided into homicides and disappearances.

I met a lot of really inspiring people there, and the work they are doing reminds me of the Oscar Romero Prayer. You may remember that Cardinal Romero was another martyr in the war. This prayer wasn’t written by Saint Oscar, but it does express a lot about his approach to making
justice. It’s not clear who the real author is. I’d like to read it to you now. And you’ll have to translate the language to fit your theology, but I know that you can do that.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church’s mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

That’s the end of the Romero prayer.

I want to talk about one final display of resilience. The guesthouse where we stayed was run by a lovely woman named Sonia. She was in her 60’s and was a true abuela to everyone under her roof. Every morning when the van would come to pick us up, she’d wait by the door of the van and hug and kiss each of us onto the bus. And every evening when we came home, weary and sad, she would wait by the door and hug and kiss each of us as we got off the bus. Everyone talked about how sweet she was, and she was, but I also wondered what losses she had endured that led her to find leave-taking and welcoming back so important. She lived through war. What she had seen? Who had she said goodbye to, never to see them again? Whatever it was, it was clear that her genuinely loving approach to everyone is a kind of resilience, a way to finding strength to carry on. I think she finds resilience in radical love. And that is a lesson for all of us.

Amen, and blessed be.