

February 22, 2009

Last Sunday After the Epiphany (Mark 9:2-9)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector

Every winter since 2001 my home parish, St. Stephen's in Durham, NC, has led a diocesan health mission trip to an area called the United Communities in southern Honduras. From the very beginning of our involvement in Honduras, the focus has been on building relationship with the people in the United Communities and working **together** to obtain sustainability for these villages and towns. One of the initiatives that they focused on for sustainability was health, and at the invitation of the United Communities, the health mission was developed. The medical clinics are set up so that there is a doctor or nurse, a Honduran health care promoter, and an interpreter in each consult area. During the patient consults training frequently occurs back and forth: the medical professional trains the health care promoter about how to diagnose and treat various illnesses; and the health care promoter trains the physician about the cultural customs that affect the health of individuals and about the natural and herbal treatment methods for various injuries and illnesses.

The years that I participated on the health mission teams, I worked in a clinic in Los Toreros, which was a small village of about 40 households nestled in a small valley high up in the mountains. To get there we rode in the back of a pick-up truck down the Pan-American highway and an hour up a jarring dirt road. Most people came in or out of the village either on foot or horseback. In fact, the entire week that we stayed there the only motor vehicle we saw come into the village was the one that dropped us off and returned to pick us up. Los Toreros has a two-room schoolhouse, which is where we held the medical clinic. The school building is made of cement blocks which run half way up the wall, with screens on the upper half that run to the roof. The screens let in air and light, but they did not provide a lot of privacy for consultations, so we strung rope across the room and hung sheets to create private consultation areas. Of course, you could hear everything that was being said thru the thin sheet, but at least there was visual privacy. The village has no electricity and no running water. We closed the clinic at 5:00 every day because the sunlight would start to fade. People came to our clinic from the surrounding villages; some would walk for hours to be seen. In the course of our 4 ½ day clinic we saw well over 1,000 patients.

Lee was a nurse whom I worked with in the clinic for two years in a row. The second year, she and I both noticed some of the same patients returned to the clinic with the same problem. After dinner one evening about half way through the second trip, she told me how frustrated she was. She was frustrated because of the huge number of people we had seen in the clinic who were ill from unclean water. She was frustrated that the majority of the children who came to the clinic were infested with parasites

because they ran around without any shoes on their feet. She ranted to me: “there are simple solutions that would eradicate these problems: if they would simply add Clorox to their water or boil it, then the water would be clean enough to drink without getting sick. And if parents would make their children wear shoes then they wouldn’t have malnutrition issues because they wouldn’t be infected with parasites.” This was something that the Type-A personalities on the health team struggled with every year: here are the problems, here are the solutions – boom, problem solved.

The next day as we sat around together waiting for lunch to be served, Lee and I decided to talk with Gloria, the Honduran health promoter we had been working with all week. She explained that it’s not that the parents don’t want the kids to be healthy, but for many parents it comes down to the choice of putting food on the table for their household of 12 people or buying shoes for the kids to wear. And so the parents chose food, knowing that they will then need to take their child to the health care promoter to be treated for parasites. Gloria continued, “And with the water, many people can’t stand the taste of the Clorox in their water or if they boil it, they can’t tolerate the flavor of smoke –it is overpowering because the water is boiled over an open fire. When that is all that you have to drink day in and day out, many people simply can not tolerate those awful flavors in their water and so they chose to drink untreated water that tastes good and learn to live with the diarrhea.”

As Lee and I listened to the full reality of our patients’ lives, we began to see that the solutions that we offered weren’t realistic ones. In fact, we realized that the suggestions we had offered to our patients weren’t solutions that we could live with ourselves. The first year we had hosted a medical clinic in that village we had relied on boiled water to keep our team hydrated throughout the day as we worked. We tried to cover the taste of smoke by adding packets of Kool-Aid to our water bottles, but even the fruity flavor didn’t mask the strong taste of smoke. Many of the team members struggled to stay hydrated. And so the next year we stopped on our way to the village and bought several gallons of bottled water to bring with us to keep the medical team hydrated. How could we prescribe something we weren’t willing to do ourselves? We thought we had an answer to the health problems this community faced, but the more we developed our relationship with various community members, more and more of the complexities of the problem were shared with us and we realized that a real solution could only come about by working together to address all the complexities.

On another trip, I spent some time in a different region of Honduras, in Copan Ruinas. This town, like many towns, had a huge unemployment problem. Many of the men were unemployed – they spent their days in the town square hanging around talking with one another, waiting for the occasional offer of day labor. As I talked with some women that I had formed friendships with, they said that the men were demoralized. They saw the work that needed to be done in the town and their response was: “Why should we do it, why should we build the community center or the school when a church group will come in and build it for us?” The women explained it was not laziness that the men were expressing, it was a sense of defeat; they felt helpless. Through these conversations I began to realize how you go about doing your work in the world is as important if not more important than what you do. The schools and the community centers that these

mission teams built were definitely needed, but an unintended side-effect of all this mission work was a sense of learned helplessness in the community. The people had been disenfranchised; the men no longer had a sense of investment in their community. The work of building real relationships between the mission teams and the Honduran community had not been done. The community had not been involved in working to promote the health and development of their own town and that had a drastic impact on the men of that town, leaving them with a sense of helplessness and low self-worth which was exacerbated by the difficulties of obtaining employment.

Mission work, the work of God, is about relationship, working for right relationship with God and with our neighbor. It is not about simply doing good acts, but about building the kingdom of God. This happens when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to be known and when we put in the work to know others. Jesus takes Peter, James and John away with him up onto the mountain. He doesn't need these three disciples there for the transfiguration to occur. He doesn't need them there while he speaks with Elijah and Moses. But he **invites** them come with him, he invites them to build relationship, to share with them who he really is. Peter initially makes the mistake of seeing without fully understanding: he sees Elijah and Moses and says, "ah, you must be a prophet too, so let's build a dwelling to honor each of you." He jumps ahead to trying to be useful - "We must be here to pay homage to these three great prophets." Then God speaks and proclaims Jesus as the son of God. Now Peter truly sees, he knows that Jesus is not merely a prophet and a teacher, he knows who Jesus really is, the Beloved, the son of God. This intimate knowledge of Jesus by these disciples, the vulnerability that Jesus shows in allowing himself to be truly seen and known is what builds the kingdom of God. This intimate knowing, this knowledge that Jesus is the son of God, empowers Peter, James and John to reassure the disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection to continue his good work.

If like Peter, we take what we see at first glance, if we rely on our perfunctory attempts at building relationship and don't truly commit to knowing a person and allow ourselves to be known, then like Peter we might find we have hugely misinterpreted our work in the world and find ourselves building dwellings to honor prophets, instead of listening to God who is standing right in front of us; we might find we are building school buildings while tearing down the morale of town. God calls us to the hard work of building real relationships, right relationships. We do this when we take the time to know and be known. Building relationships requires listening and openness, and real presence. It requires that we allow our true selves to be seen - not merely some shadow of ourselves that we project into the world, but our whole selves. In a couple of weeks, we will have the opportunity to build a new relationship as a church as we begin our companion relationship with the Cathedral of Saint Paul in Rio de Janeiro. We will have several opportunities to get to know the Reverend Inamar de Souza, their dean, and she is taking the time to come here and get to know us.

Mission work, whether it happens in foreign lands or right here on the streets of Atlanta, is the work God has set before us out in the world. It is one of the promises we make in our baptismal covenant: "will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as

yourself?" We witness to God through our actions, through the sharing of love for one another. Perhaps it can begin today by our listening to our homeless neighbors and realizing that simply building another shelter will not alleviate the problem of homelessness in our city; and instead we work with them, listening to the entirety of their stories and then design a system that offers access to mental health care and job skills training programs and offers incentives to employers who hire people with a criminal record. Or maybe we start right here. As we continue to build real relationships with one another in this community by allowing ourselves to be known as we serve on committees, or in the communities we form through the choir, our foyer dinner groups, our EFM and GIFT groups. And then as we move out from this place out into our communities, we can begin to allow ourselves to be known as Christians, as members of All Saints'. We can share with our family, friends, and neighbors the freedom that we experience in knowing that we are beloved by God, the healing that we experience in worshipping here. It is risky allowing ourselves to be known, and it takes hard work to truly know others, to devote time and patience to growing real relationships.

My friends, the work that God has given us to do is outside of those doors out in the world. It is work that can only happen through the intentional building of right relationships. Let's go out and build the kingdom of God!