

## The Good Samaritan

In 1962, a 28-year-old Catholic priest, Father Greg Shaffer, traveled from Minnesota to the remote village of San Lucas Toliman, on the shores of Lake Atitlan in the western highlands of Guatemala. He had taken some classes in Spanish for what, he thought, would be a 2-year assignment as a parish priest serving the community of San Lucas and neighboring towns. Truth be told, he was slightly tricked into taking the assignment by his Bishop. When he first received the invitation to volunteer he tossed it in the trash, he loved his position teaching high school and wasn't about to give it up. He was a gifted teacher and his students treated him with well-deserved respect. The Bishop asked Father Greg why he hadn't responded to the request for a placement in Guatemala, didn't Father Greg realize that it was an honor to be invited to apply, that newly ordained priests were not really in the position to reject invitations from the Bishop, and furthermore, even though he should apply, he might not get accepted anyway.

So Father Greg dutifully threw his hat into the ring, and lo and behold, some months later he received the news that he would be traveling to Guatemala. He later found out, he was the only one who responded to the Bishop's invitation.

In 1962, San Lucas Toliman was a simple village without phones, electricity, running water and most of the people lived in huts made of cane. And although he excelled in learning Spanish, at that time, most of the indigenous people did not speak Spanish at all, only their native Kakchiquel. So he learned that as well.

Father Greg quickly fell in love with the people, the culture, the land and the work. And his two-year commitment lasted until his death 50 years later.

As he would be the first to point out, when he began his ministry, he made every mistake that could be made, but soon learned that listening and patience were the key elements to learning to work **alongside** the people, not in front of them, pulling them along, not behind them, pushing them ahead, but at their side, in solidarity and partnership, knowing that each culture had something to offer the other, believing that lasting change only comes from working together as equals, and learning to be open to the possibilities that mutual transformation can bring.

Father Greg died 4 years ago and for his funeral the entire 22 miles from Cocales to San Lucas was lined with well-wishers - upwards of 30,000 people - who came to honor the man that had given his life to serving them. His legacy includes one of the best schools in the area, the only clinic that serves San Lucas and 22 surrounding communities, a coffee program that pays a livable wage to coffee growers regardless of the market price of coffee, a construction program, a land distribution program, a fuel-efficient stove program and a women's center which helps pass on the deeply embedded traditions of the indigenous highland Maya to the next generation. Over 1200 people visit and volunteer at the mission each year and all the locally-led programs support over 100 Guatemalan employees.

I am telling you his story because there is no one that I have known in my life who better illustrates today's Gospel story than Father Greg.

One of the themes in this passage today is that you cannot do the work of bringing the reign of God closer without getting intimately involved in the world around you. You must get dirty, be uncomfortable, make mistakes and keep coming back for more. As the lawyer says, "You must love the Lord, your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind," which, as far as I can tell, means you don't get to leave anything out, the work of loving God takes ALL of what we bring, we can leave nothing behind. Not our intellect, not our body, not our passions, not our deepest desires, ALL of it is needed in this work we are called to do: the work of picking up the shards of a shattered world, and piece by lonely piece, try to make it whole again.

And the story of the Good Samaritan reinforces this point that we must be completely involved, because notice what the Samaritan does to take care of the man who has been beaten. First of all, he bandages the stranger's wounds, having cleaned them with oil and wine; then, he places the man on his animal, slowly walks him to the nearest inn and gets a room. He then continues to minister to the man through the night, tending his wounds, feeding him, offering companionship and presence the very night the stranger feels most alone. And only the next day, after having spent the night taking care of him, does the Good Samaritan feel comfortable leaving the man in the innkeeper's care. Everything up to that point was done by the Samaritan as an intimate act of care and compassion for someone who was a complete stranger to him. A bloodied body by the side of the road, became, for the Samaritan, the opportunity to put his heart, soul, strength, and mind to work, intimately involving himself in the life of a stranger. And the only thing they had in common was that both the stranger and the Samaritan were children of God.

Which brings us to the other theme in this passage and helps focus the horrible news of this week and points the finger of responsibility squarely at us, as human beings, as we struggle to understand why WE keep committing acts of inexcusable violence.

As you know there were two other characters in this parable, a priest and a Levite, and they both saw the man, crossed to the other side of the road, and kept going. And they both had good reason to do so. To have come into contact with the man's bloodied body would have rendered them unclean and unable to perform their ritual duties. But there is something deeper at work here, something that made it really easy for them to walk away. And that is this: they never saw the stranger as another human being, they only saw him as a source of uncleanness. They had completely dehumanized and objectified him and were able to justify their lack of compassion and their denial of his humanity. And it is this dynamic, a dynamic that ALL of us engage in, that is at the heart of almost every act of violence, every act of warfare, every behavior that arises out of prejudice and bigotry, even every bully on

the playground, we do what we do to others because we have first have dehumanized them, turned them into objects and then casually dismissed them as not worthy of belonging to OUR culture, OUR community, OUR family.

And the only way out of this, the only way we learn not to do this, is to be intimately connected with the other, whomever that other is for us. The only way we learn to treat everyone as a child of God is to work and play alongside them, know them as humans first and not simply as members of a group and the basic common humanity that we all share.

And this is not work that we get to do at a distance, not work that we can compartmentalize into parts of our lives, rather, what we are called to do is be intimately involved in the lives of our neighbors, deeply connected to the work of transforming the structures around us that reinforce our prejudices, fears and alienation into bridges that bring all of us to the other side of the road to kneel in the dust alongside the bloodied and beaten stranger who is, in fact, our neighbor.

This is the work that Father Greg did his whole life. More passionately than anyone I have ever known.

But I am telling you Father Greg's story for another reason as well. We, at St. John's have been visiting the Mission in San Lucas since 2009, working on Mission projects as well as on projects with our friends in one of those 22 villages outside of San Lucas that the Mission partners with. We have come to know the Mission well and we have been blessed to have over 75 different folks from St. John's travel there to work and learn. The story of Father Greg and the Mission is part of our story now. But it is also part of my story. And while we are not yet ready to make a formal announcement of what my next call is, you should know that it will involve working on behalf of people I love in a place that is dear to me. I will still be living here, but the focus of my work will be there.

In my office hangs a picture of the Lady of Shalott. Based on a Tennyson poem that tells the story of a woman under an unnamed curse, which requires her to live in a tower and never directly experience the world outside. She lives beside a river that flows to Camelot and she listens each day as common people and knights travel past her window. She hears Lancelot ride by, singing, and she falls hopelessly in love, she decides to leave her tower, knowing that she will not survive, but also knowing that the call to be in the world, perhaps glimpse her love, is worth the cost. The painting captures her at the moment when she will begin to go downriver toward Camelot, her face full of loss and longing, sadness and expectation.

I feel a bit like her today. My situation is nowhere near as dramatic or fatal. But I am leaving a place that has been home to Em and I for over 16 years. It has nurtured, challenged and protected us; given us leadership opportunities and a thousand ways to serve. It has been a rock, a hub and a community of life for us. I am leaving for the only job I ever would have left for, from one dream job to another.

One of the things I know is that St. John's will continue to work in the world the way it always has: with all that we are and all that we have, with passion, and strength, and soulfulness and love and always, always, with the knowledge that being willing to risk deep, intimate relationships with the stranger among us is the only way to bring the reign of God closer, it is the only way to effect real change in the world and it is the only way to live into our calling to help every human being become the child of God they are intended to be.

Bill Peterson  
July 10, 2016  
Luke 10:24-37