

The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche
Mark 10.17
October 15th, 2006

This summer, I preached about one aspect of my experience of spending 10 days in Nicaragua in June: namely, the Nicaraguan sewage system, or more aptly, what passes or does not pass for a sewage system in Nicaragua. At that time, I also said that I wanted to preach about other, perhaps more relevant, aspects of my experiences there. And so the time has come to share some of my journey to another country to help change the lives of others that really helped change me.

I went to Nicaragua as part of a mission trip. I along with 20 other parishioners from my previous parish in Larchmont made the trek to Central America. For a year and a half, we had meticulously planned with the help of an organization named Bridges to Community in Ossining. The trip had become something of a pilgrimage. We had dealt with every possible objection, “But there’s work to be done HERE, in America,” or “Better to just send the money down there? Or probably the most prevalent, “I don’t want to send my child to a developing nation.” But we pressed forward. We trusted that to go on this trip would help better the lives of some very needy people, and we wanted our children to see a world that none of them and some of us had never experienced. We hoped that it would shape the trajectory of their lives and perhaps ours too. Our goals were too broad for one country’s borders.

When we arrived in Managua, none of us quite knew what to expect of this small nation that is one of the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. But once our bus left the airport, we soon shockingly understood why we were there and what to expect. We wove through unnamed, winding streets of shanty-towns, with homes no larger than 7 feet square “constructed” of leftover lumber, cardboard, and tin. The tin roofs of many homes were also often rusted through in certain places, letting rain or sun in. And through the doorways, we could see that the floors were only dirt. And yet, there was still a concerted effort on the part of the denizens through their faces, dress and demeanor to appear confident and proud. The Managuans did not look like the downtrodden of New York. Most Nicaraguans emerge from even the dirtiest den slums looking like radiant, well-dressed angels ready to go to Sunday school. How odd to compare our slovenly selves from the first world.

Our first night, we stayed in a local hotel where we unwittingly became part of a Sandanista rally. Our hotel was located across the street from the president’s home, and we could not help but watch the activity. Some of us even worried that our presence would be captured by local television reporters, who were present, and that all of our files with the CIA would grow by an inch if not two. The next day we arrived at our working destination. We were in Palestina, oddly enough Palestine, a farming cooperative in the midst of a beautiful jungle. The cooperative was originally organized by the Sandanistas, and the red and black tiles testified to their prior presence. Looking around, though, the poverty was like Managua. The contrast of the lushness of the countryside and the difficulties of the people was striking. We unpacked and were told that in the course of 6 days, even we weakling Westchester-its could build two earthquake proof, concrete and steel homes. And we eventually met the two families whom we would be helping. Hilario and Angela, one of the families, had a child in college, which was something like a 1

percent of the population possibility. As we were introduced, a very pregnant Angela took a drink out of a rusty old barrel used to collect rain water. And then there were Brenda and Miguel, a beautiful, young couple. In the midst of drastic poverty, they kept a youthful presence, blaring the ever popular reggae beat music over a battery operated boom box and demanding that we dance when we worked. It made sense that they were youthful. Brenda was not much older than the girls who came from Larchmont, but while the young women from Larchmont were preparing for college entrance exams, Brenda had two children, Edwin and Eyner, who both looked like Little Ricky from "I Love Lucy." And Brenda's husband Miguel. Miguel's story is amazing in itself. Miguel, we were told, was orphaned at the age of five. Because he had no parents, the members of the farming cooperative, who themselves were steeped in their own poverty, raised him communally. And when Miguel came of age, the cooperative gave him a small piece of land. The land was enough to build a shack home, but Miguel still has to work 14 hours a day as an armed guard on a bus, a bus bouncer, making sure that no one gets free rides. He is there now, keeping people off, and for each 14 hour day he is paid a whopping five dollars. The meal I had earlier that day in Managua would have cost Miguel several days' labor, and Miguel worked harder than I ever would or could.

Brenda and Miguel's home was small and leaky, with newspapers stuffed into the cracks to keep the elements at bay. But less than ten feet away, we saw a foundation had been dug. There was hope. This was one of the homes that we would build, the "casa nueva" of Brenda and Miguel. It would be 16 feet squared, weatherproof, and with a tile floor and real glass windows. It would be simple but luxurious for them. We worked extremely hard day after day, laying bricks, manually mixing concrete, bending steel, and hauling supplies. We dug foundations for other homes, and on the last day, we blessed the homes that we had helped to build. And we did go away changed. We felt what we already knew, that the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity that binds all of us together is much stronger and more rewarding than what we so often dedicate much of our lives to. And yet, we also acknowledged that it was a reality and call that is often hard to hear.

And that call, that reality is difficult to hear. As we traveled back through Managua, I realized that a plane ticket to America would take Miguel 100 days to earn. Walking through the duty free shops, we were all made omnipresently aware that we do live in a world controlled most often not by the shared brother and sisterhood of humanity, but by dinero. And indeed, money directs how Miguel and Brenda will live and eat. It controls where we will live and eat. The lack of money controls the future of young Edwin and Eyner. And on the opposite end, moolah dictates who is the most sought after celebrity, who will be on the cover of *People*. And yet, there is that call, that reality that we realized in Nicaragua inviting us to something more. From the Gospel of Mark this morning, we hear Jesus's familiar encounter with a wealthy man, a man at the top. And this man is upright, follows all the commandments of God. He still, though, cannot find salvation. Something is lacking, as in many of us. This man seeks out Jesus to find out how to fill the void.

And Jesus sees through this man. It is not that this man has not done well by following the commandments, or even that he has money. Wealth is not what is wrong with this man. What is lacking for him is that he cannot imagine a world in which wealth is NOT the primary indicator

of position, power, and authority. The man places his own ego with his money to the point that giving it up, even for God, is anathema. So, Jesus offers him a way out. Jesus says, "You lack one thing; Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." And the man goes away grieving. The wealthy man cannot believe that something other than what he owns can dictate who he is to himself, to others, perhaps even to God. The invitation of Jesus is hard to hear over the ka-ching and the bling. And Jesus grieves too. Jesus must have been shaking his head as he said those now trite words, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Luckily, if you do not know, the eye of a needle, is a small gate in Jerusalem, not an actual needle. Wealth is not an impossible impediment. It is simply that most of us, whether we are conscious of it or not, have trouble understanding that God does not see us as the world sees us, and that if we want to follow God, we get to let go of that way of ordering ourselves to embrace a new sense of call and invitation, that of the brotherhood of humanity.

One of my saddest memories of Nicaragua, a piercingly poignant moment was when one of the children from Larchmont innocently gave a village child the ticket stub for our airplane simply as a souvenir. The child, though, thought that this was actually a ticket out of Palestina Nicaragua. He thought he had been saved. He told his friends that he was going to live in New York, to have a different life. It made me strikingly aware that we could not save him as we wanted to. But in a sense, that boy understood something that perhaps we did not. In our hands, all of our hands, is his salvation, through our shared humanity, by us caring and reaching out. And amazingly enough, in his little hands was our salvation. We were made better people for going to Nicaragua. And indeed, all of us are made better people anytime we really imagine that, as Jesus says in today's Gospel that "with God all things are possible" and that this world that values some over others or things over God will be redeemed, refreshed and released. "With God, all things are possible," and some day, we, like I hope that wealthy man eventually did, will respond only to the that call, that reality, that redemption, and anything else in our lives will have no value. We will simply come and follow him.