

Witness to Reconciliation

January 26, 2014

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A week ago last Friday I concluded an educational trip to the Arizona-Mexico border region with several Western Theological Seminary students. This was my twelfth such trip to the border region. My first trip with seminary students to Latin American was in 1993, twenty-one years ago, when a group traveled to El Salvador. I have gone back to Central America or Mexico almost every year since, and I would like to share with you one reason why.

After our group landed in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, we were taken to our residence for our stay there, a guest house run by the Lutheran Church. We began a series of meetings with many different people that war-torn country, many religious, business, and government leaders. On one of our first days we had been out in the morning, driven to our destination by small fleet of taxis and minivans. That same afternoon we were to meet with someone who would come to the Lutheran guest house to speak with us.

As we were waiting for him I was talking with a few of the students, and my eye happened to catch one of our group leaders talking with an El Salvadoran man. My first thought was that our group leader was talking with one of our taxi drivers about where we were to go later in the day. When we assembled to hear our speaker to my surprise the man I had identified as the taxi driver was the speaker. He was an architect by profession and had studied theology at the University of Louvain in Belgium. I quickly realized he was one of the most brilliant theologians I had ever heard up to that point. I also realized that I had failed to do a basic lesson I had been taught since early childhood -- not to judge others solely by their appearance. What could this 'taxi driver',

this small, brown, simply dressed El Salvadoran man have to say to me? I had categorized him as a person of no consequence solely on the basis of his looks. Another realization then hit me, the realization that one of the most important decisions we make as human beings involves who we allow to be our teachers. We can look at others and say to ourselves, “this person doesn’t have anything of importance to add to my life,” or we can open ourselves to the possibility that the other person, regardless of what she or he may look like, might have something of great importance to teach us.

This experience, along with many others from that trip to El Salvador, impressed upon me how much I have to learn from my brothers and sisters in Latin America. After twenty years of trips there my teachers, my friends, include people from the Sagrada Familia Roman Catholic parish in Agua Prieta, Sonora, who are a marvelous witness to ministry led by the Spirit of God, a young woman in Nogales, Sonora, who directs a community center that gives hope and inspiration to people living in dire poverty, and young men from southern Mexico and Central America who are driven by desperation to leave their families behind in order to find some type of work in order to provide for them.

According to scripture the work of reconciliation involves our participating with God in tearing down the barriers that divide us from others. Twenty years ago I was shown how I had unknowingly created a barrier that kept me from appreciating how important the people of Latin America could be in my life; that barrier needed to come down in order for me to relate to them as my brothers and sisters.

This is my story. I hope you have a similar story to tell, or may have a similar experience in the future.