

May 12th, 2017, I was in the town of San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala. San Lucas is a town of about 20,000 people on the shores of a beautiful lake, 900 feet deep, surrounded by volcanoes. Sitting at 5,000 feet, it is always between 50 and 80 degrees. May is the beginning of the rainy season, a time for planting corn and squash and beans. A time to tend to your coffee plants, add mulch and prune back dead branches. It is a time of hope, all is potential, anything seems possible. Maybe this year the crop will be successful and prices will be high, maybe this year there will be work, maybe this year there will be a new child, or grandchild. Maybe this year things will be just a little better.

The month of May in San Lucas is a lot like April and May in Vasa. All is promise, all is infused with hope. All is expectation.

I was in San Lucas, not to plant or plan, not to dream or imagine, I was there for the 5th anniversary of a death.

Six months before arriving in San Lucas I had taken a new job. I was hired as the Executive Director of a non-profit that did development work in San Lucas. The non-profit is called Friends of San Lucas and our job was to raise money to support an organization simply called "The Mission". The Mission had grown out of the work of a Catholic priest who had come to San Lucas in 1963 from the diocese of New Ulm, MN. Fr. Greg Schaffer served the people of San Lucas for almost 50 years and when he died in May of 2012, 30,000 people lined the roads for his funeral procession. He was a giant of a man, literally and figuratively, and had made a huge impact on the lives of thousands of people over decades of work.

In my new position I was replacing one aspect of Fr. Greg's work, the fundraising part. I had a counterpart in San Lucas, Leonel Tun, formerly an elementary teacher there, his job was to oversee all the programs of the Mission from the school to the clinic to the construction program.

Even though I was not “replacing” Fr. Greg and I refused to accept any language about “following in his footsteps”, I still felt an enormous amount of pressure to get the work right, build on his legacy, and continue the work that impacted 20,000 people every year. And my pride led me to imagine I could do even more. So, the pressure, largely self-imposed, was immense.

The day of the anniversary of Fr. Greg’s death had begun with a mass in his honor. The church was packed with the congregation spilling out the open doors onto the plaza. After mass there were some “words” (palabras) offered in tribute to Fr. Greg. (Truth be told I was generally terrified of being told that there would be “words” because it meant I was expected to address the throngs of people in my not terribly good Spanish.)

After the “words” we gathered outside the church carrying banners and wreaths of flowers, lining up behind a red pickup, the back of which was loaded with a generator and massive speakers. We would walk the ½ mile to the cemetery, speakers cranked to 11, everyone within the entire town able to hear, on repeat, a recording of the “Fr. Greg hymn” that had been written in his honor soon after his death. In the moments between the hymn starting over, there were a few audio recordings of Fr. Greg addressing his congregation, most famously shouting his benediction, “Vayamos... en paz!” “We go... in peace.”

There were hundreds of us at the cemetery. We were packed in. Cemeteries in Guatemala are above-ground affairs with brightly painted tombs and crypts built in every available space. And when you run out of space, you just build on top of the previous person. Fr. Greg was buried on top of another priest. And, since his death, has had two more tombs built on top of his. They needed scaffolding to get the most recent casket up to the fourth level.

There is a small aisle in front of his tomb where a few dignitaries could gather, but the majority of the crowd was wedged in the small spaces between tombs while all the younger and more nimble folks climbed up on adjacent tombs to catch a glimpse of the ceremony. Another, even larger, sound system had been set up and there were more “words” and prayers and songs. Flowers were ceremoniously placed around his tomb, tears were shed and, eventually, the crowd began to disperse.

It is hard to overstate the impact that Fr. Greg had on the town. He is revered and honored. He changed the trajectory of the community and left behind a legacy of social programs that has bettered the lives of tens of thousands of people.

As the crowd turned to leave through the gates of the cemetery, Mission employees packed up the equipment and began walking back to their offices.

At the end, it was just me and Leonel, standing in front of the tomb.

We stood facing the tomb. I was, quite frankly, hoping for a few minutes alone with Fr. Greg. Just a few months into my job I was looking for a little inspiration, perhaps a little jolt of energy, some silent words of encouragement quietly whispered directly to my heart. But standing next to Leonel, I was distracted by his presence. And also thinking of the pressure he must feel. This former 4th grade teacher, now the head of a 7-program organization with more than 100 employees. With no guarantee of its success.

Finally, he broke the silence, my moment of expectation shattered as he said, “Well, we’re not dead... let’s get back to work.”

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As a message from God, or Fr. Greg, it left a little to be desired. I was hoping for an “Atta boy!” or “You got this”, maybe a feeling of “You are the right person for this”, any encouraging word would be welcome.

Instead I get, “We’re not dead... let’s get back to work.”

I think of the disciples... their lives upended and confused. They have done their level best to follow Jesus, believing he was going to restore the kingdom of David, only to see him crucified and then discover an empty tomb. He eventually appears to them and spends days teaching them how to understand the events that have occurred, trying to get them to see the bigger picture. And then he just leaves, taken up into the sky, and they are left standing, looking up, mouths open, I suspect, as two, thinly disguised angels say to them, “Why do you stand looking into heaven?”

“Why do you stand looking into heaven?” “You’re not dead... get back to work.”

Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. We are asked... even commanded, to be in the fray, to get our hands dirty, and do the work of making the world a better place. It reminds me of that old adage, “If you were arrested and accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

As Christians, we live in the space between. The space between presence and absence, between what is and what is not yet, between darkness and light.

If we are lucky, we get fleeting glimpses of clarity, those moments when we are absolutely sure, where everything seems clear, when doubt has been overwhelmed by purity of purpose. When we know exactly who we are and why we are.

But most of the time, life is not like that.

Most of the time we live, like the disciples, our eyes turned toward the sky, and wish that maybe if we just had five more minutes and asked just the right questions, it all would be clear.

We live, most of the time, in the promise of what might be.

And while we are not promised absolute clarity, we are promised endless hope, eternal possibility. We are promised the presence of the Spirit and the gift of community.

We live, as Christians, in an eternal spring, seeds pinched between our fingers, poised above the soil, hovering in the promise of new life. All promise and possibility, expectation and wonder. Eyes turned toward the heavens and feet taking us back to work.

Bill Peterson

4/7/24

Vasa

Acts 1:1-14