

Sermon preached by Ruth Noel, June 30, 2019 at Takoma Park Presbyterian Church

Scripture Readings: Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 and Luke 9:51-62

As many of you know, I was in Agua Prieta, Mexico, for 2 weeks this May as an accompanier through the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF) and previously had served twice as an accompanier in Colombia. PPF is its own non-profit, not an agency of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA). This allows PPF to respond more quickly to immediate needs.

This time the call to accompany felt right for me from the moment I first learned of the possibility and continues to this day to feel so. I don't ever recall being as sure that what I was doing was exactly what I was called to do.

In reflecting on that one of the reasons of the surety of this call may be that it combines areas where I have previously felt called including most recently racial justice work. Much of the knowledge and awareness I gained in this area comes from the trainings and my participation in the Committed Racial Mindfulness of this congregation, my involvement with the interfaith community and my involvement with the Activist Council of PPF. Add that to my longstanding interest in and involvement with Latin America. I spent a year in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, as a high school exchange student. Five years later I returned to Latin America as a college student studying in Medellin, Colombia. After graduating I relocated to Washington, DC, and worked for a few years at the Spanish Education Development Center. After moving to Takoma Park I, along with my family, was actively involved with the sister city relationship with Santa Marta, EL Salvador—which led to our adopting from El Salvador. Later I was actively involved with our congregation's sister parish in Jiñocua, Nicaragua.

I learned of the accompaniment work that PPF does when they held trainings at our congregation in the early 2000's. The Presbyterian Church of Colombia had requested accompaniment of the PCUSA while Rick Ufford-Chase was moderator. Realizing the need to respond quickly, he took the request to PPF as well. They initiated the program with later ongoing support from PCUSA.

For the trainings our congregation provided housing and meals. We were invited to attend one of the dinners. It was at one of these dinners that I first felt called to do accompaniment. However, it required a month's commitment and it wasn't until 2009 and then 2015 that I served as an accompanier in Colombia.

Just what does being an accompanier mean? Accompaniment is counter culture here in the US. It is being with another/others—walking with them, being fully present to them—NOT doing for them. It means letting go of one's own agenda, allowing those with whom you walk to shape what happens. It means doing what one is asked even if that is nothing more than sitting nearby without participating. It can be done anywhere-anytime. When Jesus was with others he accompanied them and the disciples accompanied Jesus.

Accompaniment especially internationally is usually thought of as protective—to deter violence. That is the case in Colombia-- the staff of presbyteries were and still do receive threats against their lives. It can also be moral accompaniment as what we are doing in Agua Prieta. The folks working at and collaborating at the shelter Center for Attention to Migrants Exodus, or as it is called CAME are regularly under surveillance and being intimidated by the local cartel but have not received direct threats. Our being there gives them space to continue to provide hospitality for migrants trying to come to the US legally seeking asylum.

How does our accompaniment do that? Because we hold US passports and are mostly white they feel they are less likely to be approached or attacked when we are with them. They also know that should anything happen we will serve as eyes and ears to bear witness. In this case we are using the unearned privileges that come with being white and having US passports to serve the better good.

In Agua Prieta we are seeing just a very small part of the long journey people are making, but allow me to set the scene for you. The border crossing from Agua Prieta to Douglas, Arizona is a small one where 0-3 families seeking asylum cross a day; whereas at larger ports of entry to the US, such as from Juarez to El Paso there may be 80 or more families interviewed daily.

People have journeyed from near and far to reach the border. They are families, large and small with children ranging in age from a few weeks to teenagers. They may be mother and father or they may be just moms. They may be men traveling by themselves or they be transgender. At Agua Prieta most come from the southern Mexican state of Guerrero, just north of Chiapas, where they are targeted by a variety of local cartels and gangs. The rest come from African and Asian nations including Russia with only a very few at this crossing coming from Central America or Cuba.

They travel as little as a day or several months through many countries. They likely passed through areas controlled by cartels where they might be or had actually had to pay extortion money to continue their journey. Additionally for non-Mexicans there is the potential of being stopped and deported by Mexican immigration officials. They arrive at the pedestrian gate hoping to cross into to the US to request asylum. What they find is a makeshift shelter of the people on the top of the list to cross. They learn that it will likely be 4-6 weeks before it is their turn. In the interim there is likely is not space for them at the shelter for at least a little while, so they must find and pay for their housing until there is space for them at CAME.

The shelter is an enclosed property with a central patio. One side is a Catholic church, two sides are dorm rooms, each sleeping 40—one with pads on the floor and the other a room full of bunk beds. There are also bathrooms. The fourth side has offices and a laundry area. The only machine is for doing the linens and blankets. Clothes are hand washed at the laundry sink. Within the patio is a kitchen and dining hall and a few computers. The dining hall is also used as a classroom when there are volunteers to teach English. The sunny patio is the only place for the children to run around and play. The small covered area has a few benches and tables are sometimes set up to play games. Despite the tight living space, people are anxious to be here because it is a safe haven and they make it home, becoming a community in continual flux.

When it is close to their turn to cross the border, we drive them to the Migrant Resource Center on the border near the crossing and walk them to the make shift shelter. They will live there for 3-7 days. Three times a day we or other volunteers walk them to the Resource Center to use the bathrooms and the one shower. Breakfast is taken to the line by CAME and lunch is provided by various churches and organizations.

How do they manage? We look at today's scripture. Paul in Galatians reminds us that it is the Spirit that provides us freedom—freedom to stand firm and not submit to the yoke of slavery. The fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control--if we follow them, release us from law. In much the same way Jesus in the passage from Luke this morning reprimands the disciples when they lose self-control and

patient endurance and instead choose hostility and anger. In addressing a potential follower He advises that following Him may mean having nowhere to rest one's head one.

I see parallels between Jesus life and the lives of the migrants. They give up the life they know, leave behind family, community, culture and livelihood to seek freedom. They travel light often with no more than a change of clothes, not knowing where they will sleep and having no certainty of the outcome of their journey. In order to do this they are filled with the fruits of the spirit—love for themselves and their families. They patiently endure all types of hardship and largely maintain self-control. They show kindness to those on the journey with them and gentleness with the children. At the shelter and at the line they form community, caring for each other and each others' children. Through all they endure overall they are good natured and seem to maintain an inner peace.

The coordinator of the shelter is another example of being tough yet tender. He is firm in maintaining rule that creates a safe environment for all. He is tough when he has to expel someone from the shelter and its support systems for breaking those rules, yet he remains kind, providing assurances that when it is their turn to be on the line they can rejoin the community. Although the local drug cartel is constantly surveilling what he does he consciously does not let his own fear get in the way of serving the migrants nor going about his daily life. He leads by example. He freely chose to give up his own security in order to work with the migrants who had given up even more.

Just last Sunday he had to be even tougher. You may have heard this past week about the Mexican National Guard. It was recently expanded in response to our President's pressure. It is new recruits with little training or discipline and it is military taking on the role meant for civil society. Last Sunday, trucks of National Guard with rifles showed up at the CAME reportedly because someone with a weapon was outside—which turned out to be local police. Instead of leaving the Guard remained for almost an hour and a half, questioning the coordinator, accusing CAME of not following the law and trying to gain access to the shelter supposedly to release the migrants from being held against their will in this locked facility. A collaborator was able to reach the Human Rights Commission of Mexico who asked them to take pictures and they were able to video of some of the Guard. The accompaniers were witnessing this interact from inside the shelter as well.

In times like this we as accompaniers must also be tough, enduring patiently the tension that such situations create yet being tender and loving to those who are most directly impacted. We are there for just a short time while they are enduring this over a long time period. I feel called to return to Agua Prieta. I invite you to join me. Speaking Spanish is not a requirement. We go in pairs and your partner will speak it. There will be training in October. Please talk with me afterwards if you think you might be interested.

Regardless, I challenge you to think about who you are called to accompany. I'm sure God is calling you to accompany others—a lonely neighbor, a caregiver, youth who are struggling to find themselves, migrants who seeking to be accepted for who they are right here in Takoma Park and Silver Spring or the black or lost sheep of your family. Go and use the gifts of the Spirit to be tough yet tender.