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THRIVING Together IN CHRIST

A group of thirty-one people from our church recently traveled to Nicaragua to assist in the building of an orphanage, as well as to provide much needed medical and educational services. In the days and weeks prior to the trip anxiety levels were high.

Most team members had never traveled to this part of the world, and they were worried about the barriers and obstacles they might encounter. After all, this would be an experience in which people who seemingly have nothing in common—who speak different languages, share different traditions, live in vastly different social and economic realities, and practice different expressions of faith—would live and work together for eight days.

Several days into our trip something occurred to me that I hadn't considered previously. A lot of energy had been expended on considering the barriers we would possibly encounter with our Nicaraguan hosts. However, we never considered the barriers that existed among ourselves. Although we attend the same church, our team was actually a group of people who seemingly have nothing in common, speak different languages, share different traditions, live in vastly different social and economic realities, and practice different expressions of faith.

This reality is simultaneously a grace and a challenge, and it is, in my opinion, at the heart of what it means to live a holy life. It is a grace because the church calls us into relationship with people we otherwise would never choose to know. It is a chal-

lenge for the same reason. For our team, this grace and challenge were experienced both in our nascent relationship with our Nicaraguan hosts as well as in our relationships to one another.

Over the course of a week, barriers began to fall. Soon, English-speaking Americans were testing their newly learned phrases in Spanish. Our Nicaraguan counterparts would laugh, even as they shyly tested their fledgling English. As cement was poured, ditches were dug, and walls were painted, so too was trust established, interest heightened, and mutual respect birthed. While the work we shared was important, it was relationships that made the experience holy—the relationships we established with our new Nicaraguan friends, and the relationships we began with one another.



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Life itself is much like this. It is our relationships to God and to one another that determine the content and quality of our lives. Jesus himself summarizes his mission by saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself . . . Do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:25).

Holy living, therefore, is not ultimately about acquiring spiritual disciplines or mastering the self as much as it is about learning how to be a good friend. Authentic friendship requires, even demands, that barriers be dismantled, that risks be taken, that trust be mutual, and that a loving investment in the other be constant. Such relationships change us and sustain us, and without them we are diminished. They require intentionality and hard



work. That is the grace and challenge of friendship.

This is precisely how I've chosen to conceive of ministry—as a lifelong course in learning how to be a good friend to God and to others. Thankfully, I serve a church that also conceives of its mission in a similar fashion. We see that Jesus' mission, from the inception of his ministry, was to tear down the walls that separate us from God and from each other. He sought

to dispel myths and half-truths that caused division and suspicion. Instead, Jesus sought to reveal God as the consummate lover of humanity and as the God who refused to be used as an excuse to keep people apart.

We learned a powerful lesson in Nicaragua. It is possible for people

who have almost nothing in common to eventually know mutuality and respect and admiration for one another. We realized our common dependency on the other and that our lives are inextricably linked. In the span of one short week, preconceived notions of the other were challenged and must now be considered in a new light. Barrier after barrier after barrier fell.

In hindsight, it was a sacramental experience, for we came into close proximity to the sacred. We could touch it, feel it, and taste it. As we drove away on our final day, we looked back at the edifice we

helped build, at the people we worked and shared life with, at the neighborhood schools and clinics we visited and staffed—each outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace we had yet to fully understand. All we knew was that in sweat and tears, in laughter and frustration, we approached holiness, and it changed us.

It would be easy to dismiss this experience as the spiritual equivalent of a one-night stand. Some have suggested that it served only to make the

Americans feel better about their wealthy, comfortable lives. And I would certainly agree if, in fact, that is where this experience ended. However, much like our baptism, the power of the experience lies in remembering it and regularly renewing it. Thus, in our context it has meant fostering an ongoing relationship with the orphanage, clinic, school, and people who hosted us. At times remembering means returning, not unlike Eucharistic remem-

brance requiring our regular return to the Lord's table. We will return to Nicaragua hoping to continue making a difference in lives of its people but also to remember the divine grace and challenge that met us there and changed us in the process.

Sacramental remembering also

requires of us something far more personal. A commitment of this sort cannot be something we engage only with those who remain at a comfortable distance and whom we see only occasionally. The real challenge exists in making this a way of life in our present context. It means a willingness to tear down barriers in our personal relationships, a desire to risk together and to develop mutual trust, and a constant investment in the other. It means having this as a congregational vision for the communities in which we minister, ensuring that the church is never a place where walls of division and exclu-

sion are encountered. At Mamaroneck United Methodist Church we have learned as a congregation that as we grow in our commitment to this vision, we more faithfully approach what it means to be the body of Christ.

An individual once asked Mother Teresa if he could join her work with the poor and dying of Calcutta. So taken was he by the magnitude of her ministry that he decided nothing short of joining her there would suffice. She responded by telling him that he didn't need to come to Calcutta to help people, there were plenty of people where he lived who needed the loving presence of Christ. And that is the challenge for many of us. It is often easier to love the person living a hemisphere away than it is to love and work with the committee chair who makes daily life difficult. It is often easier to struggle for justice in a foreign land than it is to advocate for recent immigrants who live a few blocks away. Yet our Christian vocation and ministerial calling compel us to do both.

So too this is becoming our congregational discipline. Convinced that the work of Mamaroneck United Methodist Church is primarily the fostering of friendship with God and with neighbor, we are increasingly finding the courage to ask the difficult questions that authentic friendship requires: What barriers need to be dismantled? How can I/we be more present to the needs of the other? How can truth be spoken in love? What does our mutual dependence require of me/us? How can I/we be the presence of Christ for the other? In asking these questions, we continue to learn that they are as applicable for us in our daily context as they are for our relationship to people in a distant land.

Aelred of Rievaulx described a good friendship as people thriving together in Christ. Such was our work in Nicaragua. Such is our work at home. Such is the work of a holy life. □

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