

December 24, 2018
Rev. Scott Shreve

“For All”

St. Paul UMC, Omaha
Luke 2:1-20

We rose early in Panajachel on Lake Atitlan in Guatemala on December 3rd, Monday morning. Wow, that was just three weeks ago. It was our first day of work with the stove builders. I arrived on late afternoon Sunday with my wife Marjorie and St. Paul member Mary to join the rest of the United Methodists who journeyed from Kansas, Arkansas and Texas, 18 of us in total. We arrived just in time for dinner and an orientation session. Monday morning the sun was shining and the temperature was in the low 60's a little before 7 a.m. as we walked from our rooms to the dining room of the hotel. The breakfast was great. After a review of the day and final instructions the 18 of us and the four Guatemalan stove builders squeezed into the 15 passenger van that transported us on switch back roads up the mountain to the neighborhood at an altitude of nearly 8,000 feet where we found the first set of homes we were going to build stoves in. We divided into four groups, one stove builder and four gringo assistants at each house

After a trek of about a half mile on a dirt path that passed many homes made of cinder block and topped with tin roofs we found the home we were to work. Like the other homes it was on the lush green of a mountain side. It had a room for sleeping and room for cooking, both with dirt floors. Like all the houses in the area it had a large three section sink outside the house. The community of homes shared outhouses. There was a decent size yard of hard pack ground that served as our staging area for sifting sand, mixing cement and preparing the concrete blocks, red bricks and concrete stove pipes for the building of the stove for the family. Our stove builder's tools included a tape measure, a three foot level, and trowel for spreading cement. The family provided a hoe for mixing cement, water, various sizes of plastic tubs and buckets for holding cement, and a machete for cutting the concrete blocks and red bricks to size and to cut a hole in the tin roof for the concrete stove pipe.

We gringos helped by sifting sand, mixing and carrying cement, soaking the concrete blocks and red bricks in water and then carrying them over when needed. A lot of time was free to look at the surrounding terraced fields that had plots of onions, coffee, cocoa, bananas, potatoes, corn, beans and other crops. Mostly men and boys were in the fields with their hoes preparing the ground for planting or weeding around the crops. A good number of workers were harvesting onions, by hand. There were poinsettia plants that stood ten foot tall scattered along the mountain side, very beautiful. As the men and boys were out in the fields the mothers, girls and younger children were around the household.

We had two or three young children at the home we were building a stove. After lunch I made a mistake. The tasks on the stove buildings had full attention. A woman in our group had been entertaining the young ones with bubbles and a few stick-on tattoos. As the bottle of bubbles ran out and all the tattoos had been applied I walked over and lifted up the youngest one, about 3 years old, in the air.

That was the mistake. Now brother and sister wanted to be lifted up. Soon children from the nearby homes got in line and I had a dozen children I was tossing in the air and catching. My one toss in the air all of a sudden became tossing in the air “for all.” I tired soon in that altitude but we played ring around the rosary and many other active games as the afternoon wore on. The stove was finally completed and I was totally spent. I went back to the hotel that first evening exhausted but I felt so good. The children and I did not have a common spoken language but we had a common joy in playing together; duck-duck goose, doing the hokey pokey, hide and seek are universal in nature. I paced myself the rest of the week.

A toss in the air for one child for one time became game playing with all the children for the whole afternoon. That was a sacred experience for me. That is who God created us to be. Our individual lives are to be tied into the whole of creation, for the betterment of all.

That is the Christmas message. Yet the nativity story from Luke starts with the polar opposite. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Yes, the Roman Emperor wanted to register “all the world” in his census but it was not for the betterment of all.

The census had the purpose of making sure each land in the Empire was paying in its proper share of tribute monies so those in power might increase their power and their life of luxury. Luke's opening verse is in contrast to why Jesus came into the world. He was and is for "all the world" in manner that the power elite could not understand in his day or in any generation.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.

There it is again, "for all the people." Jesus came to show us a new way; the way of universal, all-embracing, radical love. That is the reason God created each of us, to love one another. Love your neighbor here in Omaha, in Guatemala and to the ends of the earth. Our individual lives are to be tied into the whole of creation, for the betterment of all.

That was the message of the angel to the shepherds:

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Our individual lives are to be tied into the whole of creation, for the betterment of all.

That was the message of the angelic host:

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Our individual lives are to be tied into the whole of creation, for the betterment of all.

That was the message of the shepherds after they visited the holy family in the manger:

¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. . . . ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Christmas story invites us to find those spaces and those opportunities to move beyond ourselves and live "for all," even if that just means playing with "all the children" of the neighborhood for the afternoon to a point of joyous exhaustion.

This evening I invite work and play "all people" here at St. Paul in the coming year.

For you that might mean the first time to join the St. Paul congregation to work and play "for all." If that is the case, come and explore the possibilities in our Habitat for Humanity build each fall or our Guatemalan stove builders' trip each winter. Maybe it is being trained as a Stephen's Minister so you can be present with those going through loss and/or critical transition in life. To have a listening ear and a calming presence "for all" is a true Christmas gift to share throughout the year.

This evening I invite work and play "for all" here at St. Paul in the coming year.

For you it might mean re-engaging in the St. Paul congregation after having a Christmas Eve relationship for many years. If that is the case, nurturing a consistent presence might include joining St. Paul folk serving meals at homeless shelters each month, or knitting prayer shawls for newborns or those in the hospital, or teaching refugees in citizenship classes, or organizing the Angel Tree for families in need at Christmas.

This evening I invite work and play “for all” here at St. Paul in the coming year.

For you it might mean a continuation in the St. Paul congregation working for all through singing in the choir, ringing bells, volunteering in the Refugee clothes closet, teaching children in Sunday School or serving as a sponsor for youth group activities.

I walked over and lifted up the youngest one, about 3 years old, and tossed her in the air. That was my mistake.

I invite you to make the mistake of committing yourself to Christ this Christmas Eve, recommitting yourself to Christ this Christmas Eve and living your life “for all.” It will be the best mistake of your life. It might be exhausting but it will bring joy to the world, joy to your world and joy to all in the world.