

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church  
Reflection – May 12, 2019

**“Receiving Stories, Telling Stories”**

Jeff Hornbeck

For these sheep, I will lay down my life.  
– John 10:15

As many of you know, I spent the month of March as a volunteer with the Colombia Accompaniment Program of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF). My reflection today is, in part, a response to the charge I received during my PPF training first to be present to the Colombians, and second to “receive stories and tell their stories.” And is not this exactly what we do each Sunday here at SPC, tell and remember sacred stories?

Today I want to begin with the Easter story. Easter focuses our attention on the passion of Jesus, not just a reference to his own suffering, but his passion for the poor, the forgotten, the displaced; a passion that led him to his death. We are in the fourth week of the Easter Season, known as Good Shepherd Sunday. So listen to this passage on the good shepherd from the Gospel of John with those thoughts in mind. Jesus said,

I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd would die for the sheep. The hired hand, who is neither shepherd nor owner of the sheep, catches sight of the wolf coming and runs away, leaving the sheep to be scattered or snatched by the wolf. That’s because the hired hand works only for pay and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me, in the same way Abba God knows me and I know God – and for these sheep I will lay down my life. I have other sheep that don’t belong to this fold – I must lead them too, and they will hear my voice. And then there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10: 11-17)

Here is another story. My first trip in Colombia was to the small pueblo of Carepa, where there is a small Presbyterian Church, led by a small, very poor, Pastora Martha, who has an expansive heart for ministry and survival. Her inspiration came to life in the refrain from a hymn in the Sunday service she led: El Espíritu Se Mueve en Este Lugar, the Spirit Moves in this Place. She presided as minister, liturgist, choir director, preacher, and yes, good shepherd.

Spirit and music melded us all together that day, first in church and later on the front porch of her house. We quickly built a trust that expanded over the four days we stayed with her in part because the family of eight shared generously the close quarters of the small abode. Sharing with them came naturally and the front porch became a space for the spirit to move in more ways than one. We spent evenings there comparing our church and musical traditions – a “mashup” of Bluegrass and Bambuco.

Pastora Martha tapped into our mutual trust the next day when she gathered my partner and me on the same porch, this time alone. There she carefully relayed to us **the truth** that many in the Presbyterian congregation, including the Pastora and her family, are displaced persons from paramilitary violence. The truth that despite a relative lull,

the fear of resurgent violence remains. The truth that most people are afraid to even talk about it. And the truth that the Colombia Accompaniment Program is one way to help escape the silence that fear wants to impose, a way to bear witness to their truth.

Over the next month, we visited seven other churches, hearing variations of the same story, all from displaced pastors. The story goes something like this:

Picture a large heavily armed band of paramilitaries surrounding a town and herding the entire community into the central square. Once assembled, they identify and quickly kill two or three of the town leaders, including pastors and social workers. They then inform the rest that they have two days to vacate, to leave behind their homes, small farms, livelihoods, churches and communities. The vacated farms are then illegally absorbed into the holdings of the landed elite. In an agricultural world, when you lose your land, you have lost a way to survive. All this occurs with the knowledge and at least tacit approval of the Colombian military, if not the government.

Now imagine this happening over and over again for years in dozens of towns, causing over 3,000 deaths in the region I traveled, and forcing internal migrations of families now numbering 7.5 million nationally. They had to move to other parts of Colombia that are unable to accommodate such a large influx of an impoverished underclass. These people are also disproportionately indigenous and Afro-Colombian and have little chance of recovering what they lost. Most are destitute and their poverty is extending to the next generation.

But know this also. They live simply, relate freely their difficult past, and refuse to accept themselves as victims. They don't want social revolution, but they do want peace with justice. Justice, however, must be more than an absence of violence. Justice demands restitution of land, a livelihood and human rights, all things promised to them in the 2016 Peace Accords signed by the government, promises that remain unfulfilled.

These are the faithful people I visited, these are the people who housed and fed me for a month, these are the people who have asked the PC(USA) to be in solidarity with them. If you speak to anyone there, they will also tell you of their fear that cannot be shed – the return to widespread violence of the 1990s and 2000s. This fear is real. Even as I was leaving Colombia, new displacements were occurring in nearby remote areas because there is no support for these people, including from the new right-wing president, known to them as the “Champion” of the paramilitaries.

So an important question in Colombia is who will be the champion of the displaced? This is where the church comes in. The stated mission of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia includes providing the displaced people with “una chispa,” a “spark” of hope for a peaceful life with justice. So the church leaders become shepherds to this flock, taking on no small amount of risk, and like Jesus, trusting in God's love despite suffering at the hands of those who reject it.

My time in Colombia reshaped my vision of God and church. I saw God's love come alive again and again in the poorest of God's shepherds; In the faithful displaced people, in the clergy that minister to those being killed in the crossfire of violence and in the solidarity of allies standing with those who have no other. For us, especially people of means and privilege, it is a shepherd's call to accompany the displaced. That is all that our Colombian neighbors are asking for: Remain in solidarity; don't run away; and be a witness to our stories.

The church celebrates Easter not as a day, but as a season. It is a time to reflect fully on the life and death of Jesus, not as an end, but as a beginning. We all live in a post-resurrection world where God still calls. God called the disciples then and God calls the faithful today to accompany the marginalized. This is no easy task. Recall that in the resurrection story, Jesus greets his fearful disciples with "Peace be with you," followed immediately with, "As Abba God has sent me, so I send you." **This is the charge!**

In this Easter season, what does Colombia say about the resurrection of life? For me it is this: If God and God's displaced people do not give up, how can we? So what shall we do? At SPC we shall do what we have always done. We will continue to accompany each other on our journeys and respond to God's call to feed, shelter and advocate for those in need; in Jefferson County, southern West Virginia, Washington D.C, Baltimore, the border region, Nicaragua, the Congo, Colombia and other parts of the world where we feel called. And each of us will be present in our own special way because that's where "we most know that God still goes that road with us."

To which I say, Amen!