

April 7/8 Reflection by Sam Kennedy

I must admit, it is odd standing here, so far removed from all of you. I can sort of see faces, but it's hard to tell what you all are feeling, what you are thinking. I just arrived back on Wednesday from a week in El Salvador with an 11 person delegation to our Sister Parish in Arcatao -- in El Salvador, there is no distance like this, even at church people are practically on top of the altar, during the homilies people will raise their hands and chime in.

This was my fourth time going down, and being down there is always so complicated, so contradictory.

I remember my final day in Arcatao, Easter Sunday, sitting on the rocky shores of a river outside the town of SicaHuities. I was talking to members of the family that had hosted me for the last three days, and one of the men, Nelson, asked me a question that I received many times while I was on the delegation: "how did I find El Salvador?"

For whatever reason, this time the question hit and I paused. I swallowed. I didn't know where to begin. How do I capture the complexity, the wash of emotions that I had experienced over these past several days? I looked at Nelson, at all of the family members, and I spoke as honestly as I could in my rudimentary Spanish: El Salvador and the people are beautiful; It is a complicated place, a hard place; there are many problems -- but you all confront them, you have kind and open hearts, you find a way to live with joy. I looked at them all, as tears started to push forth from my eyes, and said that this time with them had been very substantive for my heart; I told them, I felt a lot when I am here -- not just happiness, also anger at the glaring inequalities, and sadness at the lack of opportunities, and disgust for the abuse so many have had to endure, but in spite of this all, it felt good to feel, to be in community with all of them.

Admittedly, I am a child of privilege. I grew up just blocks from here on 16th and Aloha. I walked to St. Joseph's school in the mornings. I was blessed with great opportunities, and it was easy to reside within a bubble of comfort. Often, I passed my time with books or video games. In my sheltered cocoon of privilege, I could hide from my wounds and the wounds of the world.

But in El Salvador, there is no hiding. The wounds stare you in the face.

I think of an elderly woman Esperanza describing the frantic escape at the rio sumpul -- a place where hundreds of people were massacred. Bullets flying, people scattering, desperately trying to keep track of her children. I think of my host brother Juan, telling

me of his dream to play soccer professionally, that he can dance with a soccer ball, and then looking down nervously at his knees, saying he has no idea what else to do if that doesn't work. Or Rosie, who couldn't be with us at the river because her 18 year old daughter Blanquita - with facial deformities and other health issues - who despite her age, must be attended to like a young child.

In El Salvador, there is no hiding.

For most of my life, I have tried to avoid my wounds, to ignore my insecurities. I busied myself with projects, and activities. I filled my social calendar, and worked hard in school and my job. I believed, and I think our culture believes, that pain is to be avoided... that encountering my wounds and the wounds of the world would just make me more wounded, but the reality that I encountered in El Salvador was far different.

When I looked into the wounds of this family by the river - the 18 year old daughter, Blanquita, Juan worried about opportunities, the many family members absent from this gathering because they've had to leave home to seek work in other countries

When I look into these wounds, however, it's not just more pain that I find -- what I find within these wounds is community. Love. True Presence to each other.

This is the community written of in the Acts of the Apostles, this is the first community -- it is a hard place to live. There is not enough for everyone. Opportunities are cut off - and yet, there is not a needy person among them.

By that river, the family cooked a large pot of soup; everyone brought something, and together, the meal took form. No one claimed that any of the items was their own, everything -- the sliced cucumbers, the pupusas, the fried plantains, and the soup -- everything was held in common and truly, by this river there was no needy person.

And it wasn't just food. It wasn't just my stomach that was fed.

As I sat with everyone, trying to answer this seemingly simple question: how did I find El Salvador? I noticed how whole I felt. I wasn't ignoring anything, the anger at inequalities and the sadness of misfortune were still there, but in the presence of this pain, there was such joy. This day spent by the river was so nourishing -- in the face of a much larger subtext: the civil war, the lack of opportunities for youth, the lack of public health infrastructure, we found joy in simple things, splashing around in the river during a game of keep away, laughing at my inability to roll R's as the family tried to

teach me -- it isn't a pretty sound -- even playfully scaring each other with the carcass of a dead snake...

What I discovered is that encountering the wounds of each other didn't wound me further, it opened me up to a deeper sense of vitality. My heart didn't drain, it filled beyond what I thought was possible.

There is no hiding in El Salvador... but what about here? Now that I am back in Seattle, it is tempting to retreat, to pass my days comfortably at home, avoiding pain, hidden from the wounds of the world.

But it doesn't have to be this way. This first community in the Acts of the Apostles, the people of El Salvador, they provide a model for how to recognize our wounds, and yet to find joy, to slow down and celebrate each other.

I know this is a risk, but I want to ask you to do something right now. Just pause and find someone nearby, a loved one or a stranger, and just share a smile. See this person, in their wounds and their strengths. Savor their presence.

This is the beauty of a community that has become one heart and mind. It doesn't mean there is no more pain, but in slowing down, in becoming present to each other, we discover a new richness, an abundant joy that rises in spite of our wounds -- like Jesus who appears before the Disciples, wounded but present -- even in the face of Thomas' doubt...

I invite you all, just as I invite myself, to take this example and live it. The example that the people of El Salvador offered to me, revealing their wounds so that I might know community, just as Jesus offered his wounds to the Disciples so that they might know love and peace...

Can we hold our wounds together so that in this community, no one is alone? Can we realize the fullness of heart that comes when we are present to each other?