

"I Love That I May Understand"
Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on March 12, 2006
United First Parish Church, Quincy MA

As many of you know, Jane Pentheny, Pat Artis and I went to El Salvador during February school vacation week with The Sight and Bite Team to provide free eye, dental and medical care to approximately 350 campesinos. Over the past several years, Dr. Jane has been going to El Salvador providing free eye care. Her stories inspired Pat to go last year. Both their stories inspired me to join them this year.

Campefino is the Spanish term for the rural poor, often translated as peasant. The campefinos of El Salvador are very much like peasants. Over the centuries they have been dispossessed of their land by duenos or land lords (the plantation owners) so they are forced to work the sugar fields, cotton fields, coffee plantations and other plantations for meager wages. Today only half of El Salvadorans have completed at least 6 years of formal education. Less than two percent of the population go to college, with only a fraction of these graduating. Presently, El Salvador's greatest export is their people. The people come to the U. S. to earn money in order to send it home to their families. It is said the El Salvadoran economy would collapse without this significant boost of income.

El Salvador is a beautiful country with two seasons: rainy and dry. We were there during the dry season. When vehicles ride over dirt roads, clouds of fine dirt spread over the countryside leaving a layer of grit giving the impression that everything has a grayish -brownish tint to it. Most of the houses we saw were small and made of cinder block, or layers of sticks and caked mud, or corrugated tin/aluminum that is often rusting. Many homes are put together in a combination of all three. The houses of campesinos have no lawn; instead they are surrounded by bare earth. Many houses do not have electricity; most homes do not have indoor plumbing. The houses of the affluent are walled, with serpentine wire or shards of broken glass on the top of the wall creating a

dangerous obstacle for those who might try to scale the wall. Great disparity in wealth leads to isolation and protectionism.

There is much poverty. BUT there is also the incredible dignity, which the campesino men and women convey in their manner of standing, walking and being. There are the beautiful smiles of the children. In spite of language differences, the people had a wonderful sense of humor even though some waited four to eight hours. After being seen, many made the kind and gentle effort to shake each of our hands, saying "Gracias."

Our first location was in Cabanitas, a very poor section of the town Apopo. Many of the people came toward us smiling with their arms wide open to embrace us. The team comes here every year because some of the members from VT and CT have a sister church relationship with the Lutheran Church. The eye and dental clinics set up their equipment at a school in two classrooms, that had been vacated for us. The walls had chunks of paint missing. The windows, which are jalousies, were gray with a layer of grime. There were two electric fans in the room for the eye clinic, neither worked. In spite of the austere conditions, a startling transformation occurred and we became a functioning clinic. The equipment, prescription eyeglasses, medications, and more, all came down with us on our flight in boxes and suitcases. This meant each team member was allowed 2 carry on pieces so that all checked luggage was filled with supplies. It was a feat of phenomenal organization!

At the clinic our own Dr. Jane Pentheny worked tirelessly as she talked with the clients and examined their eyes. Although the Site and Bite Team brought hundreds of donated prescription eyeglasses, all too frequently the donated glasses did not meet the specific requirements of an individual's eyes. Then compromises had to be made. Periodically Jane expressed her frustration. One elderly gentleman reassured Jane, "As long as I can see well enough to plant my corn, I will be happy."

The dentists also had to struggle with compromises. At the beginning of the day, the dentists were told that there were 60 patients to be seen, so they were advised to do only what was most pressing for each patient, instead of doing all that was needed. One frustrated dentist explained, "My allegiance is to the client that is sitting in the chair before me. I believe it is imperative that I do all that I can for that individual." But the dentist also knew that his traditional approach would mean many would not receive any dental care.

These decisions of unwanted compromise were a small window into the experience of injustice created by the extremely lopsided distribution of resources. Although we were there to serve others, we got a taste of the injustices with which the poor have to contend on a daily basis. Having to triage the need for treatment left some feeling frustrated and disoriented – like being in a spiritual wilderness. We had the paradoxical experience of making a positive difference in people's lives while at the same time coming up against the enormity of the many needs caused by poverty - knowing all too often these needs were and are exacerbated by U.S. policies. It is true when the U.S. sneezes, El Salvador catches pneumonia.

So how do we as Unitarian Universalists live our faith in the face of enormous inequality of resources for the campesinos? For the poor in our own country? A few weeks before leaving for El Salvador, Paul Wilcynski had asked me, "What features of Unitarian Universalism, if you took them away, would leave us with something that is no longer Unitarian Universalism?" Now you may be surprised that Paul asked this weighty question but Paul does a fair amount of reading about Unitarian Universalism and I recommend that you visit his blog to consider other questions and comments of faith. This question was also asked by Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King Theological School in the report "engaging our theological diversity." In reading the report Paul was disappointed that the question was not answered. He asked me what was my

answer. I said: "The quest for truth in the spirit of love and freedom is what makes us uniquely Unitarian Universalists."

This question and my answer were very much with me in El Salvador. What is truth for the campesinos we served? What is truth for the El Salvadorans, who are extremely wealthy? And what is truth for those El Salvadorans who work hard to help the poor to overcome the obstacles of poverty? How do U.S. citizens understand our past history with El Salvador and our current relationship? I bet most U.S. citizens don't think about El Salvador, but they and we should. We, as a country, are already committing the same injustice elsewhere and will continue to do so until we fully acknowledge our actions and their consequences.

The quest for truth in the spirit of love and freedom requires that we be aware of history of our relationships (whether they between family members or nations) and know how this history is told because how it is told shapes our perceived reality and our claims of truth. This perceived reality or we could say illusion or distortion shapes our relationships with one another and the world. El Salvador's history is full of oppression of the poor. Dean Brackley, Jesuit priest at the University of Central America in San Salvador, states in speaking about the purpose of a liberal education [and I add a liberal faith], "We can profit from considering the importance of studying **the real world, the problem of distortion** (the conflictual nature of the search for truth), and **the way contact with the poor and practical commitment** can foster learning." Brackley goes on to say, "We ignore the massive reality of distortion to our peril. ... Distortions (that are perceived as reality) serve particular interests and institutions. It systematically masks social reality, especially in the interest of the powerful. The search for truth is a conflictual struggle to overcome conscious lies and less-than-conscious distortions." In fact, Brackley proposes original sin is the original distortion of truth. Needless to say, the search for truth is not for the faint of heart.

El Salvador's 12-year civil war from 1980 to 1992 was very much over truth. The El Salvadoran government and military, as well as the United States, claimed that campesinos had gone over to the communists and therefore were a threat to security. But the campesinos did not need the communists to tell them they were poor. Because of great economic iniquity, the late 1960's brought mounting social tensions to Central America. To address these tensions the Latin American bishops held a meeting at Medellin, Columbia. In the wake of Vatican II, the Latin American bishops committed the church to the cause of the poor. This was monumental shift! Up to that time the Church had been aligned with the rich and powerful. This preferential option for the poor became known as liberation theology. According to the Jesuit priest Dean Brackley, "opting for the poor is essential for unmasking the lies and uncovering the truth." Jon Sobrino, a fellow Jesuit states, "The option for the poor does not mean directing oneself toward one part of the whole in order to ignore the rest, but rather directing oneself toward the whole from the standpoint of one part." So liberation theology looks at the whole system - the interdependent web of existence - from the vantage point of the poor and questions what are the systems, which create, promote, and perpetuate poverty. They then seek to change the system by empowering the poor [and I would also say the oppressed]. The El Salvadoran priests who embraced liberation theology - not all did - brought hope to the campesinos by abandoning the old teachings of pre-Vatican II - teachings that told the campesinos Jesus loved the poor, therefore they were to accept their lot with dignity and receive their reward in heaven. Instead the priests offered a new teaching saying that the Gospels taught that Jesus gave preferential treatment to the poor, educating the poor that they, as human beings, had rights here on earth in this earthly life. In the 1970's as the campesinos began to organize, dead bodies of the poor and of priests began to show up in the countryside.

The civil war began in earnest after Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980. He was the Archbishop of the people. He received many death threats during his three years as archbishop. It was a brutal war that included El Salvadoran death squads trained by the U. S. military, and became known as the Salvador Option. These death squads were responsible for the deaths of the four American nuns, for the death of Rosa Anaya's father, Herbert Anaya and many others, as well as the deaths of the seven Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter. The brutal killings of the Jesuits brought worldwide condemnation and led to a U. S. congressional investigation. Boston's Representative Joe Moakley's findings confirmed El Salvador military's responsibility for the killings of the Jesuits, as well as confirming U.S. involvement. We need to know this history! The Salvador Option was considered in Iraq by the U.S. military until Newsweek broke the story and resulting in a public outcry.

In Rosa Anaya's writing, she states, "They say that the human voice, even a whisper, can always be heard over the boom of armies when it speaks the truth." Whereas "Vengeance is no more than food for a war, a banquet for hate and violence; but above all a delicious desert for the fear that keeps us silent before truth, before the struggle for the true defense of human rights." It takes a tremendous amount of courage for the human voice to speak truth when the truth being spoken challenges accepted reality. In El Salvador speaking truth cost many their lives; whereas not to speak truth would have perpetuated life without hope. It is the spirit of compassion that sustains us, even during the most ugly moments of truth. Brackely, in identifying the mission of University of Central America, states, "Compassion should inform and focus study and research [and action]. Compassion moves us to ask why so many children die of malnutrition when we produce enough food for all and why global markets function so inequitably. I love that I may understand." And when we love, we are able to transcend differences while at the same time speak

truth to power without the language of violence. As Rosa Anaya said, The opposition has loved ones just as we do, who are wounded when their loved ones are attacked. To speak truth, we do not need to attack.

This past week this congregation bore witness to the power of truth in the spirit of freedom and love when the City of Quincy reversed its decision to deny UFPC from hanging a banner claiming our faith, "People of faith for marriage equality." The banner's statement expresses the truth of our core beliefs without denigrating those who oppose our beliefs. It is a statement claiming we stand with those who rights will be denied if an amendment is passed to change the MA Constitution stating marriage can only be between a man and a woman. Ours is a faith that promotes equality, mutuality and trust between two individuals who love one another.

The quest for truth is unending. When we experience truth, we experience the freedom of the Spirit. It is like being born again. As Paul Rasor said in this morning's reading: "This is import work. But none of us can do this work alone. As much as we do constructive self-examination and critical dialogue, we need each other. We may never come to think alike or to act alike. I hope not. But by participating in each other's faith journey's, by reaching out to each other and sharing in each other's struggles to name and claim our theologies, we can strengthen our public prophetic voice to deepen our senses of community and our commitment to a shared faith tradition. May it be so.