All Saints’ Church September 25, 2016

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year C

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Amos 6:1a-, 4-7 Luke 16:19-31

Psalm 146

Let us pray in the name of the Living Lord. Amen.

During the summer of 2015, when I was 12 years old, I arrived for the first time at Centro Victoria, an orphanage, a children’s home for abandoned children in Juarez, Mexico. We woke up at 4:00 in the morning, and, after 2 flights, landed in El Paso, TX at around 3:00 in the afternoon. We then drove over the border, to Juarez. I immediately noticed the change in scenery, as the buildings became less perky and more depressing. The people looked sad, and the cars were heavily damaged. It was an immense culture shock to go from a thriving US city to a corrupt, war torn one. After 15 minutes of driving through an area of devastation, we arrived.

As we drove through the gates of Centro Victoria, all I could hear was children yelling “Patty! Patty!” This, of course, was my grandmother, Patty Wheeler. I found that very fascinating how her going down to Juarez year after year could get more than 90% of these kids to be yelling her name in unison. She is a bit like the prophet Amos for me, never lounging on couches or resting at ease. Once myself, my grandmother, members of our congregation and other members from our community, 18 of us in total stepped out of the van, the kids ran up to returning members, hugging and asking to play games. This was very overwhelming, as it felt like the children kept pouring in from every nook and cranny of the campus, and I had no idea who any of them were. This was very frightening, and it made me feel very uncomfortable, but the children always win you over. When you first see them, you immediately notice their manners, lining up and taking turns greeting everybody, with the older kids keeping everything in order. You also pay attention to their clothes, which are tattered, but they don’t care. The only thing they care about is the safety and well being of every human being, every animal, and every part of the Centro Victoria community. This is shown when they are playing, as they share toys without hesitation, and make sure anyone who wants to be is included.

The grounds of the home consist of girls’ and boys’ dorms, a multi-purpose building, where the top floor is used for the church and the bottom floor for dining. Next to the church is Pastor Joel’s home, and now, after this past summer, a newly built recreational room that sits on a hill by the entrance, where karate and dance lessons will be taught weekly by a local Juarezeno.

On the most recent trip this past summer, 18 others and I helped four construction workers from Centro Victoria lay down the foundation for this building, a difficult process to say the least. We had to mix concrete manually because the area was being built on a ledge, and we could not get the concrete mixer up the stairs, so we had to put rocks and sand in buckets and lift them up the ledge. As for the concrete mix, it took everybody to lift the bag up the ledge, which wasn’t exactly easy, but the building of this structure shows the progress that Centro Victoria has made. It was back breaking work in many ways, and it was extremely hot, but it was worth it. To know that the work we do will go directly to the structural needs of the children is amazing, because many charities and organizations do not give you an opportunity to feel like you are actually making improvements to the children's’ lives.

Eleven years ago when my grandmother and a few adults and kids, maybe about 5 or 6 others, went down to Juarez, to what was then a small home of 10 starving children, and one man, Pastor Joel, with a vision to build a successful home for abandoned children in Juarez Mexico, providing them with education through public schooling to become self sufficient citizens. He wants to teach them the values of love, kindness, and responsibility. As a self-sufficient citizen he wants his children to make a positive effect on the community that they will live in, rather than being a gang member or a prostitute. The majority of the children who reside at Centro Victoria see Joel as a father figure, and many members of the neighborhood consider him a “child whisperer”, as many parents drop off their kids to talk to him and then pick them up, in hope that the issue presented will be resolved. He is like the prophet Amos as well, grieving over the ruin of Juarez, but with God’s help, knows he can make a difference.

The steady rise of Centro Victoria has been astonishing. Now, Pastor Joel is only a couple weeks away from starting his own elementary school on the campus of Centro Victoria. He is doing this because many of the elementary schoolers are being bullied at school. They are viewed as street kids, and are then are considered the lowest of an already low public schooling system.

The relationship that my grandmother, Patricia Wheeler, has built with Pastor Joel, with the staff of Centro Victoria, and with the children is amazing. I remember being with Pastor Joel when he came up to New Hampshire, and I remembered the kindness that he displayed to my brother, Sam, and myself. I’ve been hearing about the home for as long as I can remember, and I remember the very day when my grandmother asked me to accompany her on her next trip. She wanted someone else from the family to experience Centro Victoria.

I was curious to go down, and I knew that I couldn’t really comprehend the situation. I felt like the day would never come, so I kind of just brushed it off and forgot about it, but when it did come I was extremely nervous. I felt that the situation would feel familiar considering that I have heard Juarez for so long, but then I realized that I did not know anything!! I did not realize how poor the community was, or the health problems that these kids face.

As I mentioned before, the first day was very overwhelming, and I honestly thought I was going to hate it. I had no idea what I had gotten myself into, but as soon as we got there the next day, children were running up to me, asking me to hold them and play games with them, which made me feel right at home.

That was one of my first lessons….. what is home? Home is the true feeling of togetherness, joy, and love, which these children brought to me without any hesitation, and would bring to anyone who spends a mere 15 minutes with them. These kids are my peers- they invited me into their family.

I also realized that we could have easily been born into opposite situations. I could be there, a kid on the streets with no one to take care of me, and one of them could be living in America with all of the resources I have. I always find it so perplexing how the people with the least resources are the most gracious people; I feel as if the children and staff of Centro Victoria would still be that way if they were more fortunate. How can that be? For one, they do not take anything for granted, and persevere to make the most of every opportunity they are given.

The plot of land that Jeremiah buys in Jerusalem is a direct resemblance of Centro Victoria. Jerusalem is being besieged, but the Lord tells Jeremiah to go buy a plot of land, a field. Who buys land when everyone is fleeing? Yet the Lord assures Jeremiah that there is an oasis in the middle of Jerusalem, of Juarez , on the rise alongside the city. He promises Jeremiah that there will be fields and vineyards again and the place will be returned back to health. There is this same kind of hope for Centro Victoria, and I want to be a part of that.

On my last trip back from Juarez, as the plane from the final flight to Manchester was enduring the final stretch through the city, I struggled to hold back tears. These were mixed, as it always pains me to leave Juarez, but it was great to know that they were also tears of joy. At that moment in time, I realized that the person I want to become is centered around the feeling of home that Centro Victoria gives me, a feeling of togetherness and joy.

This is the person I want to be. Not like the person who lays in his purple linens and watches Lazarus struggle. I want to know that I can make a difference and my actions matter, even if it is just one building at a time, because I know the children will be extremely appreciative of anything I do to help them. I also want to be a kind and compassionate friend, and to treat everyone else the same way. You cannot judge somebody by their wealth or valuables, and these people are a perfect example, as they are the kindest people you will meet. This all can connect back to my baptism, and the vows I took, and confirmed ”...striving for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being…”

I will be this person, with God’s help, with the help of All Saint’s, and with the help of Juarez.

Amen