

“The Seeds and the Sower”

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I wonder if the name of that sower could be Bruno, or Theofan, our Beninese brothers who helped us identify some of the thorns that threaten to choke our faith here in the West.

During their visit to Waterford in October they surprised us with the observation that *time* has become an idol in North American culture:

starting on time, stopping on time,
saving time, spending time,
wasting time, making time.

“Making time”? That’s what you do when the speed limit says 55 miles per hour but you drive 70 instead because you’re running a little late...

But no human I know can actually *make* time. In the well-known account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, God creates time on Day 1, separating the light from the darkness and establishing the rhythm of day and night. [And as Jesus later asked his disciples “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (Matthew 6:27)]

From the African perspective, we Westerners honor time more than we do our relationships with our brothers and sisters or the free-flowing movement of God’s spirit among us.

Has time become an idol to us? If so, then we owe something to two honest and perceptive men from the other side of the world that can see the thorns (or weeds) that are growing in our midst, and are not afraid to call them out.

Here in Northern Indiana we have great spiritual soil. Our faith is supported by generations of believers – our parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, great grandparents and friends. They have established a rich and fertile place for us to grow. But as Jesus explained, when referring to the thorns that grow among that third group of seeds in the Gospel of Mark:

“The worries of this life,
the deceitfulness of wealth
and the desire for other things” can choke the word,
so that it yields nothing.

Some of you may remember a sermon I delivered on this very topic back in 2008...

But today my perspective has changed. Our family has had the opportunity to lead the Goshen College Study Service Term program in Peru for what amounted to 3 years and 4 months, 10 groups of students in all.

[It's a joy to see some of our students here with us today!]

After our time in South America I hear the Parable of the Sower with new ears.

And I wonder what the sower -- or sowers -- were doing when that second group of seeds, those planted in rocky soil, were being scorched by the sun?

You may have seen this movie, “The End of the Spear,” released in 2006.

Or you may have read this book, “Through Gates of Splendor,” written by Elizabeth Elliot and published in 1957.

These are two of the many accounts of the martyrdom of a group of North American missionaries who were killed by Auca warriors using spears much like this one [Grab my spear] while serving as missionaries in the Amazon rain forest in 1956.

The deaths were tragic, but the unexpected responses of the survivors were what make this story so remarkable. You see, soon after the massacre, Jim Elliot's wife, Elisabeth, and Nate Saint's sister, Rachel, decided to reach out to the very people who had killed their loved ones and demonstrate through their example the power of forgiveness and the love of Christ.

Our family had a chance to visit this part of the world during breaks between SST groups in 2011, 12 and 13 – and we became enchanted by the power of this story.

We visited the house in Shell where the Saint family lived, the airport nearby where the mission was based and the village, Arajuno, which the men and, later, their families, used as a staging area for their trips into Waorani territory.

There are a hundred or more tribes, or nations, that inhabit the Amazon basin – what is now Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil and Bolivia – each with its own language and customs.

One of these is the Shuar.

The Shuar were never conquered by the Spanish. Europeans found the land they inhabited difficult to penetrate and the people who lived there fierce defenders of their territory – you see, the Shuar were head shrinkers.

The first Shuar we met was a woman I remember as Maria. Our family encountered her and her husband while walking along the Pastaza River near the city of Puyo in what is today Ecuador. Maria asked if we wanted to see some of the jewelry she had made, including the necklace I'm wearing today and this pendant [photo]. I'll give you a closer look [second photo].

Maria explained an ancient custom that is no longer practiced among her people. After killing an enemy, they would sever his head and boil it in a mixture of herbs until it was a miniature of the original. She explained that her ancestors felt peace when their enemies' heads were small enough to wear around their necks or hang from their doorposts.

But this was not a lasting peace – soon the relatives of the deceased would exact revenge and perpetuate the cycle of violence. Revenge killings were so common that the ratio of adult men to adult women was about 1 in 3 – polygamy became the norm due to the shortage of eligible husbands.

The arrival of missionaries several decades ago – courageous men and women who brought the message of Christ's love and forgiveness – taught Maria and her relatives how to bring a more lasting, sustainable peace to their community.

But the story isn't over yet.

Soon after our encounter with Maria we met an American pilot named Chad who flies for a relief organization known as *Alas de Socorro* (Wings of Mercy). He is based at the same airport where the Saints and many others initiated the first generation of mission work in the 1950s.

Chad offered to fly our family in his six-passenger Cessna to a village named *Copataza* to meet an indigenous pastor named Pedro Vargas. We jumped at the chance and asked if we could stay for more than a few hours – how about overnight? Chad smiled, almost like he knew something we didn't.

The flight lasted less than an hour. As we approached the village we could see black clouds building on the horizon [photo]. Chad told us we needed to unload our bags as quickly as possible when we landed so he could depart before the rain began. So we jumped out of the Cessna, waved goodbye to Chad and said hello to Pedro and his young, timid family.

Given the history of the Shuar, we wondered what kind of welcome we might receive when we arrive. It was very different, of course, then the reception the Spanish had received when they came looking for gold in the 1500s, or the reception the Shell Oil Company workers received when they came looking for oil in the 1900s. You see, we were arriving on the heels of a group of North American missionaries.

It rained hard, then it stopped and the sun came out [photo]. Pedro took us on a walk around his village. This is his house [photo].

He told us about the founding of his church several years ago [photo]. A group from the US had helped build the sanctuary, preach the word and baptize members of the community. And then they returned to North America [photo].

During a walk down to the river Pedro told us something I'll never forget. "*Tenemos muchos convertidos, pero pocos comprometidos.*" (We have many people who are converted, but few who are committed).

Afterwards we returned to the sanctuary and Pedro showed us the one resource he had for leading his young congregation: his Bible, both Old and New Testament, translated into Shuar by linguists from Wycliffe International.

"Great!" I thought, "he has a Bible."

But then Pedro started asking questions: "What does this mean?"

"How can I explain to my congregation that Jesus is the 'good shepherd' when my people have no shepherds, no sheep, no animal that we take care of like a sheep – you see, we are hunters and gatherers by tradition."

Every pastor begins with a Bible of course, but every North American pastor I know relies on more than this – resources like Bible commentaries, workshops on theology, books about church management, not to mention a seminary education – all of this to help understand the scriptures, place them in context and apply them to the life of their congregation.

We spent the night in Copataza and visited the school where Pedro teaches the next morning. (Like almost every pastor we met in South America, Pedro receives no salary from the church.) Then we packed up, said our goodbyes and listened for the Cessna to return and take us back to town.

When it arrived, we were in for a surprise. Chad wasn't flying the plane – the pilot, I don't remember his name, was new to the organization and wanted to do everything by the book. There were six seats in the airplane and, with the pilot, seven of us. "Can't Jordan sit on his mother's lap like he did on the way here?" (He was only 6 years old at the time.) "We're not even close to the plane's weight limit."

“Who’s going to stay in Copataza?”

Let’s see – Teresa? Naomi? Sierra? Jane? OK, I guess I’ll be the one to wait here until the next plane comes...

So they boarded the plane without me [photo]. I wondered if this might be the last time I see my family. And the plane departed [photo].

Pastor Pedro had to return to school for the afternoon session, and I was left to wander the village on my own [photo] .

At some point I ran into Pedro’s brother, who had recently been elected mayor of the village. He invited me to join him for some chichi, a fermented beverage made of yucca (or casaba) at the home of a friend.

In some villages women mash the yucca with a wooden spoon and let it ferment for several days before serving. In other villages the women chew on the yucca before mixing it with water – apparently their saliva speeds up the fermentation process. I decided not to ask which recipe was used in this part of the rain forest.

I drank what I could, which was about this much [show how much], and took in the scene around me. Pedro’s brother was gracious and talkative. He told me all about the village and invited me to help put together an economic development project for the community.

I asked him if he had ever attended Pedro’s church and he said, “Yes, I was once Christian.” I asked him why he had left the faith, and he said it just didn’t seem relevant to him anymore.

The missionaries had come and gone – with no follow through, what we in the North call *discipleship* – many had lost interest.

But what about their supposed conversion? As one missionary had explained it a few days earlier, “people like to have another god in their pocket.”

Well, the plane finally came. This time the pilot was Ecuadorian, Eduardo was his name. I boarded and waved goodbye to Pedro, to his brother and to the children who had gathered around us.

I had two thoughts as I flew back to Shell to be reunited with Jane and our children.

First, Pedro needs help – I vowed to do something to help him understand the words written in his Bible, to give him some explanations, some interpretation, that might be of

use to him as he thinks about the message he wants to share with his congregation each week. Soon after returning we got in contact with our pilot friend, Chad, and decided to send Pedro a Bible commentary translated into Spanish by William Barclay (the same one my father used to prepare sermons when he was a pastor in California). I don't actually know if Pedro received it, and I certainly have no idea if it's been helpful to him, but I needed to do *something*.

Second, I reflected on Pedro's hospitality. He had only had a few hours' notice of our coming. He had dropped everything to give us a tour of his village, a place to sleep and some tasty meals. He had introduced us to the teachers and students in the school where he worked. He had talked with us about theology, culture, tradition and globalization. He was keen to know more about the world outside his village but, at the same time, intensely proud of his Shuar heritage and customs.

And I asked myself, could I have dropped everything to entertain a complete stranger, a friend of a friend, with less than a day's notice? Could I have offered a warm reception to people I had never met, overnight guests at that, given the demands of my schedule and all of our family's comings and goings? Probably not. Maybe I have something important to learn about priorities from my indigenous brothers and sisters.

Pedro's desire to embrace Christianity and other positive aspects of the outside world while simultaneously preserving his rich native heritage seemed to be a theme among many of the indigenous leaders we met.

On another occasion we met a man named Clever (as in Clever), a talented pastor who spent a few days with us describing his vision for a training center for church leaders that would help contextualize the scriptures. The term he used was *evangelio integral*, or a holistic gospel, an integrated gospel, a gospel that brings good news to an entire village.

- Does Christ want our indigenous brothers and sisters to enjoy good health? I believe so.
- Does Christ want the land where they live to be fruitful, the water they drink to be free of contamination, the fish they eat to be plentiful, the air they breathe to be as clean and healthy today as it has been for thousands of years? I believe Christ does.
- Does Christ want a life of dignity, distinctiveness and interdependence for our indigenous brothers and sisters? I am sure that he does.
- Do we as Christians have something to learn from our Waorani, Shuar, Awajun, Ashaninka and Yanasha brothers and sisters. I know we do.

But this may not happen on its own. You see, friends, Pastor Clever informed us of a sad reality during our last visit to his community in April. He recounted how some of his peers, young church leaders who felt called to share God's word in their own languages, are leaving the church.

They are talented and articulate and many are being drawn into politics. It is one thing to be poorly paid. It is another to feel a lack of support, a lack of training and a lack of resources to succeed in leading a congregation of new believers.

These obstacles are like the rocks in Jesus' parable that keep these young believers roots from going deep. Their soil is fine; it doesn't need to be replaced with ours.

Missionaries are not always model examples of Christ's love, of course. We all know stories of mission workers who have damaged local cultures, bringing with them consumerism, materialism and other evils from the North.

Indigenous culture is distinctive and worth preserving; it doesn't need to be replaced with ours. But the indigenous church in the Amazon basin could use some help nonetheless to become more fruitful. It is, in fact, asking for this.

And, in the spirit of two-way mission, we North Americans could some help getting our priorities right, either managing our time or taking a break from "time management" altogether.

I think we could learn a lot from getting to know our brothers and sisters in the south. Their unique customs, their generosity to strangers, their ways of living in community with each other and in harmony with the earth, are characteristics that we too often lack, or at least don't seem to have time for. Forgive us.

Whether it is rocks or thorns that get our way,
I believe Christ is ready to help us remove them from the rich soil we have been given,
so that we can be fruitful ... so that the good news can multiply.

This is my prayer for you, for me, for them, for us.

Amen