



*This is the fasting that I wish: Setting free the oppressed...Sharing your bread with the hungry...
-Isaiah 58:6, 7*

Dear Friend,

It is Lent, the season in the liturgical church year when Catholics and other Christian traditions reflect on the gut-wrenching passion of Jesus to his glorious resurrection. In these forty days up to Easter, we will be encouraged to take our spiritual lives up a notch by intentionally practicing the three pillars of Lent: Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving.

The Lenten daily and Sunday scriptures proclaimed during liturgies, and the homilies preached will likely include these themes. Apart from Scriptures and sermons, God recently spoke to me about almsgiving, prayer and fasting in ways that surprised and then moved me, beginning with a morning visit.

Dona Rosa, my elderly mother-figure, came to my house one morning, as she often does, (she lives just across the gravel road that separates our houses) and gifted me with hot fresh tortillas.

Lucho, my white- with- brown- spotted dog, trotted into the kitchen where we sat, and I think the tortillas and Lucho moved her to share the following story...

Dona Rosa's family has a black and white dog named Chester. Chester and Lucho are brothers. Although, they come from the same litter they have very different personalities. Lucho is very aggressive and possessive especially when it involves food. He loves his food and will not share it, no matter how full he is, no matter how gaunt and bedraggled a visiting dog is, who inches near his food, hoping for a bit of the bounty. Lucho hunches down, bares his teeth, growls menacingly over his bone, tortilla or whatever it is that he is eating. And the poor beggar dog who is starving, doesn't get one scrap from his table. Not one. One recent morning Lucho was at Dona Rosa's house where Chester lives. Dona Rosa was slapping

a ball of moist corn flour between her hands, shaping it into a flat tortilla, then placing it on the hot circular grill to cook. Chester was seated inside the kitchen near the door and Rosa tossed two fresh-from-the-grill tortillas to him. Instead of gobbling them right up, he delicately picked up the tortillas with his teeth and hurried outdoors. Dona Rosa was curious. "Where is that chucho (dog) taking those tortillas?" She left the kitchen and followed Chester outside. Sitting in front of their house was hungry Lucho. Chester, trotted over to him, and with no fanfare whatsoever, dropped the tortillas at his feet! Lucho, snatched them up and strutted across the street, the tortillas dangling from his mouth, back to my house, to eat them.

"You're kidding, Dona Rosa," I said in unbelief. "That can't be true!" "Cierto," (It is certain) she retorted. "I saw it with my own eyes! *Este chucho* (Chester) *es entendido.*" (That dog understands.)

Chester, a dog, going out of his way to share food with his selfish, undeserving brother?!? Really?

And then I ask, *who am I in this story- Lucho or Chester?* A lesson in Almsgiving.

One Friday morning in March, seven women left their kitchens, (their children and husbands fed, the basic chores done) and without telling anyone where they were going, they walked silently along a gravel road that narrowed and changed to dirt, and then branched off onto a windy uphill path surrounded by thick trees and vegetation. This path led them to a simple solitary one-room cabin we call the Poustinia - the Russian word for desert (пустыня). (The name is taken from Catherine Doherty's book - Poustinia -Encountering God in Silence, Solitude and Prayer.) Their common bond was already formed - their husbands or sons are alcoholics.

A few months ago, we formed an AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) group here. The going was slow and painstakingly difficult. I felt weak, discouraged and needed prayer support; and I knew where to go - I went to the wives and the mothers of men who have drinking problems.

The seven women whom I approached, agreed with me to pray on Fridays of every month, and to meet twice a month (with fasting) in the pousinia; to share, to listen to one another and to pray. (I think we started the first AIAAnon group in all of the Ixcán!)

Each woman sat on a long wooden bench in the simple room, the window shutters opened to green; but before anyone shared, we promised that what was disclosed would not leave this sacred space. Then, one by one, the stories of abuse, and drunken rage poured out of them like a flood. We all cried. I knew that some of what was told would have implicated jail time and refuge in domestic violence shelters in the U.S. But here, things are different... Breaking the law often goes unpunished, and very few women will turn to human rights organizations and law enforcement authorities in Playa Grande, an hour and a half away. Most of them decide to endure, run or take the blows. There is no 9-1-1 here.

But, in all of this, they do what they know – they drop to the ground on their knees and turn their hearts and minds to God, and in voices that come close to shouting - they ask, implore, and work things out.

And God is working.

One of the women shared that after we started meeting, her husband had a startling dream. Without sharing the details here, he concluded, "I know I need to change my life. I know I need to stop drinking. Maybe I can quit. I feel that someone is praying for me!" The woman just nodded and said smiling, "Tal vez." Perhaps (someone is praying.) "Tal vez."

This Lent, I am looking to my touchstones – a dog named Chester, and a group of women storming heaven in a small hidden house on a hill – to help keep me faithful to the Lenten practices, in the hope of deepening my relationship with God and others; and to help keep me believing that the cross will end at the empty tomb of Easter.

May your Lenten journey be blessed and lead you and yours into the hope and promise of the Resurrection.

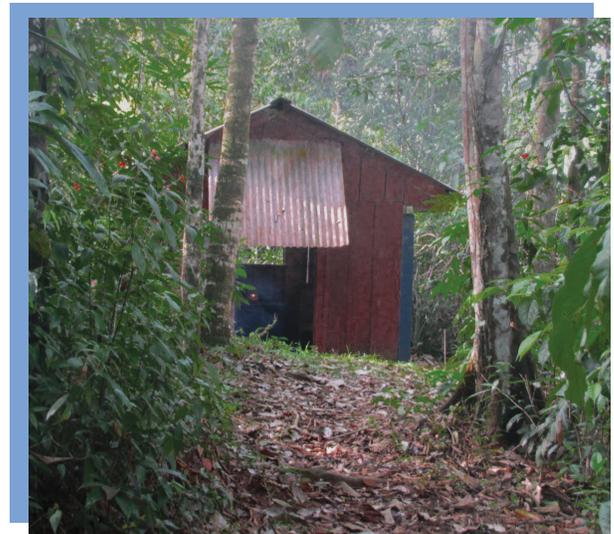
Thank you for the many ways you support this ministry.

Know that you are in our prayers.

Sincerely,



Kathy Snider



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Ixcán Ministries is a Christian lay mission serving as a ministry of presence with the Maya people in the Ixcán jungle of Guatemala. We act as a bridge between cultures for the exchange of gifts to transform lives and society.

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