

Wage peace - a mile-wide and worldwide

Ruth Padilla DeBorst

CCDA -Raleigh, NC

September 26, 2014¹

The Ilamatepec volcano erupted: incandescent rocks crashed down on homes and ash poured down on fields. Then came the water. And it kept coming. Day and night: rain. Rain. Rain, unending, unstoppable. And then the earth shook and the mountains shed whatever loose mud still clung to them. Believe me, I'm not retelling a movie. All this did occur –and in one same week!

Meanwhile, in the same small country of El Salvador, a new edition of *Blur* hit the newsstands. It's the latest, trendiest magazine. "Are you in?" reads the caption below the title. *Blur*: are you in? English in a Spanish speaking country! Glossy pages portray, in rich, bright colors, the people you *must* meet, the bars and discos you *must* hang out at, the hobbies you *must* take up, and the diets you *must* follow if you want to be somebody in Salvadoran society. If your face does not show up in *Blur*, you don't exist. Everyone who is anybody is in *Blur*.

The blur of the few and the reality of the great majority. The natural disasters of that October week washed the makeup off and revealed the naked face of El Salvador. They bared the crude core, the heart of darkness, that lies beneath the veneer of our consumptive society. Because, who was instantly buried under tons of mud? Whose homes were washed away? Whose sustenance was left rotting in the fields? While the few *ins* hit the bars, thousands crammed into shelters and had absolutely nowhere to go. While the few *ins* shopped Hilfiger, whole families shared one mattress. While the few *ins* travelled to Miami to weather the storm, thousands had no home to return to and no prospects of employment.

¹ This talk was prepared in response to the invitation by CCDA to explore Jeremiah 29, especially verse 7, "seeking the well being of the city," in light of global realities and interconnections. It includes portions of talks previously delivered in Wheaton and Australia.

More than half the population of El Salvador lives under the poverty line. Hope for many comes in the shape of a long and life-threatening journey to this country. Over five hundred Salvadorans emigrate to the US every day. Today many of them are children. Some make it.

Like this family. First, Mom ventured North and got a job as a maid; then Dad joined her and began shining shoes in an airport. They had a couple kids. They religiously sent money to Grandma in El Salvador so she could feed and clothe their son, whom they had left behind. Eight years later, they were able to save up enough to pay the *coyote* to escort Pepe to Florida. Six months after his arrival, Pepe pulled his dad's gun out of the drawer and shot his own sister to death. How come?! Well, we must dig a little deeper.

Pepe lived with his grandma and his uncle in a one-bedroom shack on the edge of a big chunk of land since he was five. His job was to help grandma find timber for cooking and haul water from the river four miles away. But ever since his school had been destroyed by the earthquakes, his uncle had taken him along to pick coffee whenever he was off duty from the army. He enjoyed spending time with his uncle—his parents were far off and he barely remembered them—though picking coffee in the hot sun for hours on end, day after day was no fun! But coffee prices had dropped and the landlord had kicked most of his laborers off the land. So Pepe, grandma and uncle migrated to the city.

The money his parents sent was not enough for the three to live off of. So when uncle found out that the US army was recruiting foreign volunteers to fight its war, he took off. Then one day, they got a call: cousin Carlos was being deported from LA and would come live with them. Pepe was excited: maybe cousin would take uncle's place as a caring friend. But Carlos already had his friends. They too had been deported and now lived together, as homies, in a run-down house. They lived off the taxes they charged from their neighbors for security.

Only two months after his arrival, Carlos was rounded up with nine other gang-members and thrown into jail. Pepe was glad when he was released. But happiness never lasted in Pepe's life: two days later, Carlos was found, dead, in an alleyway of his neighborhood. This is when his parents decided they just HAD to get Pepe out of there. So he was packed into a truck, behind boxes and boxes of fruit, and shipped off. Six months after his arrival, Pepe pulled his dad's gun out of the drawer and shot his own sister to death.

Believe me, again: I am not retelling a movie. All this does occur. And hundreds and thousands of times over. A legacy of the so-called civil war, not one family in El Salvador has not been ripped apart. Remittances -money sent by family members in this country- constitute the first national income. One of the few Salvadoran exports are hundreds of girls trafficked monthly for prostitution. El Salvador is part of what today is known as the "Triangle of death", which includes neighboring Guatemala and Honduras, where more people die violent deaths per day than in any war zone in the world.

Global Connections

Logically, you may ask, "What does this story of ES have to do with me, with us, here in the US?" "Are we not called to pray for the peace of the city where we are planted and dig deep commitment into its soil? Don't we have enough issues of our own for you to come dump yet more on us?" Beside, the global scene is so complex, "Is there really any good news? How on earth can we wage peace world-wide when we can barely do so mile-wide!" Small questions, right? Well... let's at least begin to consider them together...

"Why, we ask, should Christians in the US be concerned about what happens places far from here?"

Well, it is true that in El Salvador, underneath the gloss of Blur, lies much darkness: injustice, oppression and corruption. And we could then easily write these off as local problems, that US-Americans have nothing to do with and Salvadorans should deal with. But, actually, the deeper you dig, the more obvious it is that these expressions of death are not mere relics of some remote and under-developed civilization. They actually are part and parcel of an ever-more extended civilization, of a complex web of world power. The values expressed in Blur result from what Walsh and Kesmaat denominate “a homogenized global consumerist consciousness”². Mass media, business, travel and concerted trade agreements work together to erase local tastes, lifestyles and values, and convert the globe into one big Mac-world.

In this world of idolatrous consumption, we are made to believe that financial independence, autonomy in our economic decisions, the ability to spend without constraint, and the right to make and bear weapons to safeguard our treasures, constitute the good life, true freedom and the pathway to peace. And we become unaware of the deadly chain that saps life by keeping a tight leash on our movement. We have become enslaved and don't even know it! Under the delusion of free choice we are free only to serve ourselves. Globalized consumption today is consuming our very soul. It thrusts itself as the only and absolute faith. As Walsh and Keesmaat so poignantly portray it,

Globalism is a religious movement of previously unheard-of proportions. Progress is its underlying myth, unlimited economic growth its foundational faith, the shopping mall (physical or online) its place of worship, consumerism its overriding image, “I'll have a Big Mac and fries” its ritual of initiation, and global domination its ultimate goal.³

El Salvador, small, underdeveloped, and vulnerable as it is, cannot afford to stay out of the game. The Blur must go on. So images and advertising must fill people's minds and imaginations: they must become and remain more real than the reality of violence, inequality and death.

Advertising –be it commercial, political or social—varnishes and embellishes reality. It makes it

² Silvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh. *Colossians remixed: Subverting the Empire*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004, p 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

more palatable and, most importantly, more sellable. Value, in our current world culture, is determined by the market. Everything is susceptible to being bought and sold: shoes and jewels, thoughts and rocks, sex and yes, even people.

Around the world, an estimated 27 million people are being held in bondage: today there are more slaves than at any other time in human history. In Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of slaves toil in brick-making kilns. In India, desperate parents sell their children to weave carpets for the global market. The Myanmar government forces villagers to build roads and bridges so global products can be transported. The "Lord's Resistance Army" in Uganda kidnaps children to serve as soldiers and sex slaves for global customers. Gangs in Eastern Europe and Latin America enslave women into prostitution, and more than 10,000 people in this country are forced to work in brothels, farms and sweatshops⁴.

People sold as things. And the greatest victims are children. We might cringe at the graphic description of the Israelites sacrificing their boys and girls to the idols, such as we find in Psalm 106. (Ez 16.20-22; Dt 12.31). However, as Wright points out:

We may not actually sacrifice babies in religious rituals, but there is certainly an appalling mountain of child suffering caused by the various idolatries of western life—the unfettered pursuit of material wealth and individual freedoms, the total selfishness that focuses on maximum pleasure now without a concern for responsibility towards those who will inherit the consequences of our actions (or inaction) in the next generation...⁵

And to death by this sort of social abortion we must add the more than ten million children that die every year in the world in spite of the fact that two-thirds of them—some seven million—

⁴ Osha Gray Davidson. "Heart of Darkness: Inside the dangerous race to liberate tens of thousands of slaves in Brazil" in *Rolling Stone*, 8 September, 2005.

⁵ Christopher Wright. *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001, p 141.

could survive if they merely had enough food, un-polluted water, maternal milk, and inexpensive medication against simple things like diarrhea, malaria, and pulmonary illnesses. Children, in a culture of self-advancement can be such a hindrance! Even worse if they are not mine but they show up at my doorstep or the city corner, begging, dirtying my windshield with their greasy rags or threatening with rocks. Silent bystanders and calloused governments contrive methodologies to rid the cities of the scum: police round them up by the dozens, often killing them on the spot, often throwing them in already overcrowded jails with major offenders. As we sit comfortably in this auditorium, dozens of children are being stored in detention centers or sent back to the gang-ridden neighborhoods they fled from. Society aborts them all in the name of Blur.

But back to our question, "Why, again, should the picture of this little country so far off concern us?" Well, gone are the days in which what happened in some small village in El Salvador was unrelated to any other World event. If we like it or not, current-day globalization makes each and every one of us a world citizen. And as in a spider web, tugs and pulls in one place are inevitably felt and determine life in another. Global idolatry affects all of us. The story of El Salvador, then, is not only theirs but ours. And ours also must be the cry, a plea that, in the midst of such rampant death, wells up from a profound dissatisfaction and beseeches: Choose life! Choose life!

Choose full life—for all!

This plea, I believe, is clamoring deep inside each of us, if we only dared turn down the volume of our self-construction, our image building, our approval seeking, our striving for security and prestige. "Choose life!" we would hear the still, small voice inside. Cut out the make-believe and choose *real* life for yourself, for others, for our disintegrating world...

This plea also bursts forth from dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions of men, women, girls and boys. Stifled by the noise of supermotors, superhighways, superpowers and firepower, the cry is

there, if we only dared to tune in. “Choose life!” we would hear the agonizing voice of our fellow human beings.

Nature also cries out while she is battered and rapped to death. “Choose life!” she calls out. “I cannot hold together while you rip out all my trees, drain all my water, poison all my air”. If we only shut off the bulldozers and steam-rollers for a moment, if we only developed a listening epistemology,⁶ a relational rather than consumerist form of knowing, we’d hear the faint cry: “Choose life!”

The Blur may hold us deaf to the cry of our hearts, the plea of our neighbors, the call of nature. But if we merely turn to God’s Word, we cannot escape from hearing the cry of God’s heart ringing through the ages:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, and death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; they you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess... Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord you God, listen to his voice and hold fast to him. For the Lord is you life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Dt 30.15-20

The choice, for us today, as well as for the ancient Israelites in the desert and later in exile, is radical and clear-cut: On this one thing there are no shadows of grey. There is death. And there is life. There is stunting and there is flourishing.

Our consumer world defines flourishing according to Blur’s parameters. But is that the abundance Jesus was referring to when he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”? Born into a poor family in a remote corner of the Roman empire, a refugee baby in a foreign land, a wanderer with no stable income or home, followed by fisherfolk, tax collectors, and women, persecuted by the powerful, and finally executed as a criminal—nothing in Jesus’ life mirrored

⁶ Keesmaat and Walsh, 124.

the abundance being preached by present-day proponents of the prosperous life. And that simple carpenter dared to declare himself the ultimate expression of life and guarantee that through him God would bring abundant life to the world! This seems a naïvely bold claim to make! How could he even think about promising life in the midst of the lashings of the Empire and its lackeys who expropriated land and exploited people with oppressive taxes for cities and temples they would never get to see? Life under the fist of immigration officers and military forces that threatened the identity of the people and their ability to be self-sustaining? Life in the midst of suicidal armed resistance against Roman authority? Life in the midst of an exclusive religiosity? Abundant life amidst so many expressions of death? If the abundant life Jesus claims to be and to bestow is not measured by the parameters of Blur, then what abundance is Jesus talking about? What model of life did he incarnate in his historical moment? Is there good news of abundant life in our world today?

Jesus explained his task, echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 61) in his message in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk. 4): he announced in word and deed the good news that God is still making straight what is twisted, healing the sick, compensating the offended, restoring the marginalized, and revitalizing the land itself just as he had intended to do through the people of Israel with the Jubilee (the year of the Lord's favor, Leviticus 25). This is good news for each individual, for all of humanity, and for the entire creation. It has spiritual as well as interpersonal, social, economic, political, and ecological implications. And the church's mission is neither more nor less than living out and proclaiming the good news in every place and time throughout history.

The gospel, the good and surprising news, is that it was Jesus, the poor itinerant teacher from Galilee, who best incarnated the abundant life that God wants for all God's creation. He fully recognized that his identity and vocation were rooted in his intimate and loving bond as part of the Trinitarian community (Jn. 13-17). He took on the ancient role of the prophet who announced and lived according to God's purposes and called others to do the same, even when his message and lifestyle clashed with his environment. In word, deed and sign, he fully reclaimed the heart

of the law that God had given to his people to guarantee them life (Deuteronomy 30.19). According to this law, God was worshipped through just human relationships, and the fear of God was manifested in political and economic positions that sustained the health of the earth and of the community, especially the life of the most vulnerable, the widows, the orphans, and even typically rejected foreigners (Ex. 22.21; Lv. 19.33-34 and 25; Dt. 10.19).

The Gospels paint a picture of God the Son that abounds in relationships: first with God the Father and God the Spirit, and second with other people, including those marginalized by society. He touches lepers, he lets himself be seen in public with disreputable women (Lk. 7, Jn. 4), he eats in the home of a tax collector considered a traitor by his people (Lk. 19), and he heals the son of a soldier of the despised occupying army (Lk. 7). Far from concentrating on his own well-being, Jesus lives attentive to the needs of those around him. Instead of seeking his own security, he risks everything for the sake of others. He urges his followers to serve, not to be served, and to find in that service the meaning and purpose of their lives (Mt. 20.28; Mk. 10.45).

Through the reconciliatory work of Jesus Christ on the cross and through the dynamic presence of the Spirit, God carries out God's life-giving plan through interpersonal relationships so radically renewed that they affect even the social systems and power structures that deprive the vast majority of abundant life. The triune God, the God-community, is not just creator of everything that exists but also the sustainer of all life (1 Cor. 8.6). Abundant life is possible because God, in Christ, continues to work the reconciliation all things (Col. 1.15). God continues providing the resources necessary for righteous relationships to exist in God's creation, the fertile ground from which new life springs.

Jesus Christ declared that he was sent into this world to give life, full and abundant life, the essence of which lies in justice-based relationships with God, between human beings, and with all creation. Where does that put us, here, now? When forces like Blur impose a individualistic, tribalistic and nationalistic cultures, the good news of the kingdom of God inspires its citizens to dedicate their energies, abilities, and resources to a radical, communal, and creative solidarity

characterized by mutual respect, sacrifice and celebration. Blur tells us that what we see, measure, weigh, and value determines the boundaries of what is possible. On the other hand, the hope of the gospel calls us to imagine, believe, live, and fight for more just possibilities for everyone. When Blur leads to non-stop consumption and accumulation without regard for the future, the community of those who identify themselves as sons and daughters of the God of the world and of history exercise the twin disciplines of simplicity and sufficiency, discerning between need and superfluous desire. They grow in awareness, confession and change regarding the mega-proportions of global natural resources that are going into maintaining privileged lifestyles for some while depriving vast majorities of the minimum necessary to live. When Blur says that the good life can be bought, when it lives large on consuming and seeks security through bank policies, Jesus' followers recognize that life is a gift to be received that can only be enjoyed by sharing and cannot be secured except by giving it fully away on behalf of others so that the God of life can fulfill God's good purposes in all creation.

Living here in light of there

I know here tonight there are many who **are** resisting the Blur. You are part of communities that are giving testimony in word and deed of the liberating lordship of Jesus Christ, the life-giving action of the Spirit, and the sufficient grace of God the Father. You are waging peace in your place. You are bringing good news to lives throttled by trauma or oppressed by addictions, to streets stained by violence, to contexts of impunity and injustice. Thanks be to God for your lives and work! By all means, dig into your local soil, dig deep. Plant peace, nourish life, sow hope, make your moral dissent heard, combat the Blur in this country, in your neighborhood, in your church, in your family.

At the same time, as the story of Pepe, his family, his people, invites you to, recognize how yours is actually part of a much larger picture of interconnected relationships. His story is your story. You see, the Blur would like us to believe that division, separation, indifference and war are inevitable, cultural wars, ethnic wars, racial wars, religious wars, ideological wars. The

global war machine needs to keep fabricating the clash of civilizations, building taller walls, and tearing us apart simply to justify its existence. But as followers of the Prince of Peace we can denounce those as lies! We can reclaim our identity as a global community separated by sin but drawn together by God's reconciling work. And we can then begin to wage peace not only a mile-wide but worldwide.

The big question is how? We have heard the story of Pepe and acknowledged it is not only his but ours. We have reviewed why there is good news thanks to God's gracious action in human history. But the question remains: How? How do we step into the complexities of global injustice when we can barely tackle the local issues? Time only allows a few hints and a couple cautions.

1. Ask. Ask questions. Ask many, deep, tough questions. Dig under the surface of your everyday life, and you will find a world of issues. Ask where, how and by whom your clothes were sewn, your coffee or your tomatoes were grown. Ask who is being sent to fight your wars, who is being vilified in order to justify them, whose interests are truly being furthered through them.

So first ask.

2. Listen. Listen deeply. Listen to the stories of immigrants, refugees, foreigners in this land whose experiences often point to the complicity of this nation in the cycles of death in theirs. Don't assume, don't stereotype, don't jump to conclusions. Just listen.

Ask. Listen.

3. Pray. Pray fervently. Pray for forgiveness. Pray for discernment. Pray with lament. Pray with hope. Pray for understanding about what you are hearing. Pray for visions and for partners in those visions about how to wage peace not only locally but also globally.

Ask. Listen. Pray.

4. Engage. Engage courageously. Engage prophetically. Befriend outsiders. Open your homes and churches to the victims of global injustice. Recognize Jesus in their faces and learn from them. Leverage your power as citizens of the empire of this age. Yes, it is a crumbling empire. But it is still the ruling empire, and the policies cooked up here mark

the fate of millions around the world who currently pay taxes to the Rome of our day.
So engage in advocacy for global as well as local issues.

Before closing, I offer one central caution in the name of Christ and of your sisters and brothers the world round. Please beware of paternalism, the sneaky enemy of true flourishing. CCDA has developed wonderful models and principles. It is light years ahead of many who still only conceive of mission as something done with words alone. However, and I trust this is not news to you, God has actually been at work in similar ways in other corners of the globe. Solid experience, wise insight, fruitful models of wholistic engagement have been honed outside this country. So inasmuch as your local church, your NGO, or CCDA as such step beyond the borders of the US, please build relationships with brother and sister churches, agencies and leaders who have been in those trenches for long years. Respect them. Believe it or not, you might even learn from them! I close with the words of Roland Allen, who more than a century ago said, in reference to the churches outside of the centers of power of that day:

Want of faith has made us fear and distrust native independence. We have imagined ourselves to be, and have acted so as to become, indispensable.” “We have desired to help them. . . And we have done much. . . We have done everything for them except acknowledge any equality. We have done everything for them but very little with them. We have done everything for them except give place to them. We have treated them as ‘dear children,’ but not as ‘brethren.’”⁷

The issue, for him is not lack of trust in others, but lack of trust in the Holy Spirit!

So as you return to plant, build, and wage peace in your local community, bear in mind that you have brothers and sisters in other corners of this beautiful and suffering globe. Sisters and brothers who, as you, are often complicit with the Blur. Sisters and brothers who are also striving to plant, build, flourish, and wage peace.

21. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 143.

As we return to our places, may we do so with courage and hope, recognizing that full human flourishing does not take place by human might nor by human power but by God's Spirit. And may we wage peace in full confidence that the day will come when there will be no more tears or bloodshed because the wounded Lamb will rule.