

## JAMES 2:1-8

Gordon E. Ellis  
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### IT WAS A BLESSED EVENT

Our Scripture Lesson today makes me think of an experience had by those of us who went on the *Mission Education Trip* to Mexico this past June. I wrote about it in my journal at the time, so I'd like to share with you what I wrote.

They call it Le Stationne. It's an abandoned railroad station in Cuernavaca, Mexico. There are no cars, no garages, no lawns -- just rusting, metal-roofed SHANTIES, one upon another, housing 60,000 of Mexico's poorest; 60,000 SQUATTERS, who know that their homes might be BULLDOZED any day, whenever the government decides that it needs this precious, downtown property for some other purpose. Oh, they DO have electricity in the Station, hot-wired from telephone polls that look more like COBWEBS in the basement of an abandoned home. The government looks the other WAY so that EVERYONE will have a TELEVISION set. How else can ANY government shape the MINDS for its people?

Every home in the Station ALSO has a FENCE, many made of rusted bed springs; as well as a 55-gallon drum to hold the family's WATER supply. MOST people in the *City of Eternal Spring* get water once-a-day, whenever the city turns it on to FILL people's CISTERNS. The POOR, on the other hand, must PURCHASE their water from vendors at exorbitant prices, and THEN, make their 55-gallon drum of water last ALL week long.

There are no STREETS in the Station, just muddy PATHS, which combine the EARTH with DOG droppings and HUMAN waste. Children run BAREFOOT, or sometimes sneakered, by the DOZENS, and the many DOGS there ignore them. CHICKENS seem to be everywhere: on the footpaths and in CAGES, on shelves next to pigeons, and on COUNTERS, freshly plucked.

EVERY home in the Station is different. In ONE, there's a DIRT floor with 2 couches and a table, surrounded by rusted metal walls and roof. ANOTHER has CONCRETE on 6 sides, with very LITTLE furniture and only *Our Lady of Guadalupe* to brighten up the walls. Another is painted PINK inside, and there are pictures EVERYWHERE, though the home is DARK and DIRTY, with giant COCKROACHES on the wall. But IN and around EVERY home, FLOWERS bloom to beautify the squalor, and maybe take away some of the PAIN.

We come to meet the PEOPLE of the Station, to LISTEN to the POOR. Carmelita is FIRST. As OLD as she is, she walks MILES every day to the MARKET. She buys fruits, veggies and more, whatever she can afford, so that she can put them on a table outside her home and SELL them to her neighbors. A few PESOS per DAY are her WAGES, hardly enough to provide for the 6 people who live in her home. The USUALLY eat just once-a-day, she says, but she feels BLESSED, and RECEIVES us, she says, as CHRIST. We ask her how she maintains her HOPE. She tells us that God is GOOD and has NEVER abandoned her. She ALWAYS seems to have EVERYTHING that she absolutely NEEDS in order to survive. And she KNOWS that God HEARS her PRAYERS and ANSWERS them.

ALMA is next: a young MOTHER of MANY. Her husband is *in jail for ROBBERY*, she says. *He got a little too DESPERATE*, she tells us. Alma sells us the BASKETS that he's made, and in SPITE of the threat of bulldozers, she talks of adding a new ROOM onto her one-room home. Alma is a woman of HOPE, whose persistent smile makes hope CONTAGIOUS.

In the NEXT home, a 2-room SHANTY, they still await WORD from their SON and BROTHER. He's gone to the U.S. to find WORK, so that he can send money HOME to help them build a better house, a LARGER one. Six YEARS he's been GONE now, and there's STILL no word. Most of their neighbors hear QUICKLY when their MEN cross the border. They fear he must have DIED, or been killed, at the border, like so MANY these days. YET, they talk about God's LOVE and their OWN grateful HEARTS. MANY are their BLESSINGS, they tell us.

The CHILDREN in the home with pink walls are SKINNY. They SHOULD be: 4 eggs are ALL they HAVE for today, with a little RICE and a few TORTILLAS. It will barely provide ONE meal for the 16 people, 3 generations, who LIVE in this tiny home. BUT, there ARE some cookies, though the children give 3 to Sister Maria and 4 to the DOG. Maybe tonight, when the children sell their chicklets and chocolate, they'll do BETTER. Maybe there will be MORE food tomorrow. WE give them a good START on their sales. They ALWAYS have enough, they tell us, but usually JUST enough and never MORE than enough. And it's because they trust GOD to PROVIDE, and GOD always DOES!

The house with the pink walls was to be our LAST visit. And it WOULD have been, except an OLD woman MET us on the dirt path and BEGGED us: *Won't you PLEASE come to MY house?* We GO. All 20 of us SQUEEZE into it, and LIKE all the OTHERS, the old woman finds SEATS for us, some of us on BOXES. She wants us to be COMFORTABLE, though NONE of us have been comfortable all MORNING. She wants us to feel WELCOME in her tiny cement block HOME. *What are you DOING here?* she asks.

*We're on a MISSION trip,* we tell her.

*OH,* she says. *You're NOT some of those North American EVANGELISTS, are you? You're NOT some of those, what they call fundamentalists, are you, who come here to SEPARATE us from our Catholic religion and our culture? THEY cause us FIGHT and ARGUE, even in our families. You're NOT here to do THAT, are you?*

I say: *NO, no, we have come to learn from YOU about God. We know that Jesus was very POOR, just like YOU, and so, we think that YOU can TEACH us about JESUS.*

*Oh, I'm GLAD you aren't like those EVANGELISTS,* she says. *They do GREAT damage here. Yes, Jesus WAS very poor, just like US. WE can teach you about Him.*

She sends her GRANDSON out -- we don't know WHY -- as WE continue to TALK. After a few moments, the boy RETURNS with TWO 2-Liter bottles of Coca-Cola and a SLEEVE of plastic CUPS. His grandmother asks him and his sister to pour EACH of us a drink. We are THIRSTY and thankful, but wonder HOW she can AFFORD to PROVIDE it for us. AS we SIT there, EACH with a half-full plastic cup of Coca-Cola, SOME of us begin to get a feeling that we are sharing COMMUNION, and that Christ HIMSELF is PRESENT. We somehow KNOW, in our hearts, that THIS is a moment we'll NEVER forget. I look at ALL the FACES around the room. MANY are in TEARS. We sip from our cups of Coca-Cola SLOWLY and REVERENTLY. We KNOW that this is a SACRED moment, and that we are standing on HOLY ground.

It's the old woman's BIRTHDAY, we find out, and spontaneously we sing her a chorus of: *Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you!* She GIGGLES like a little GIRL again. Sister Fabiola POINTS to me and tells her that I'm the PADRE. She ASKS me for a BLESSING, a BIRTHDAY blessing. I RECALL how my ANOINTING oil, that very morning, seemed to cry OUT to me, ASKING to come with me. I had REFUSED saying: *But you're just for OUR group, and you're for LATER on.* Now, I REGRET not bringing it.

I GO to her, and lay my HAND on her head. Her granddaughter shouts, *Me TOO! Me TOO!* So I put my OTHER hand on HER head. SLOWLY, I begin asking God to BLESS this old woman, AND her granddaughter. Sister Fabiola translates EVERY line. It's a GOOD prayer, a MOVING prayer, telling EACH one that she is LOVED and VALUED, and invoking God's FAVOR upon BOTH of them. As I finish, she looks up at me and SMILES, whispering: *Gracious, Amigo* (thank you, friend).

Her FRIEND, another elderly woman, has just come IN. SHE asks for a blessing ALSO, and I pray for THIS beloved daughter of God as well, my hand on HER head. And THEN, we begin to LEAVE, hearing THEIR thank you's, and THEM hearing OURS. Our moment of COMMUNION and SOLIDARITY has come to an END.

Well, THAT'S the story of what WAS. And it WAS a beautiful and powerful moment, which NONE of us will EVER forget. For ME, however, the story was NOT over. I just could NOT seem to get that VISIT out of my head. WHY, I wondered, *had I been so SHY and RESERVED? WHY had I been so insecure? WHY didn't I CLAIM my priestly authority and MAKE that precious moment even MORE precious, even MORE sacred? After all, I COULD have gone around that entire ROOM, offering a SPECIAL blessing to EACH and every person. It COULD have been a moment of DEEP solidarity between brothers and sisters in Christ -- between these POOREST of the poor, living at the Station; and these hard-working Mexican NUNS, new HEROES of us ALL; and their RICH, North American GUESTS. Yes, it COULD have been SO much more*

*SPECIAL, as well as an opportunity to make a PROMISE to one another -- to remain in SOLIDARITY and to PRAY for each other.*

The moment, of course, will LONG be remembered. It will ALWAYS remain SACRED in the hearts and minds of ALL those present. But for ME, it will remain a MIXED blessing. Yeah, though I will always CELEBRATE what WAS, and it WAS beautiful, I will ALSO always recall SADLY what MIGHT have BEEN, and what MAY be AGAIN someday. I'll tell you: I vowed, at THAT moment, that should God EVER choose to BLESS me with SUCH a moment AGAIN, it will NOT be in VAIN.

And sure enough: on our last DAY with the Sisters, I DID use my anointing oil, AS I had planned. BUT, I anointed not only our OWN group, as I had planned to, but all of the SISTERS as well. And it WAS a sacred moment, and a moment of SOLIDARITY. But it was made even MORE sacred when young KARLA Archambeault, a young woman from our church, whom I had confirmed a number of years ago, TOOK the anointing oil from my hand and gave ME a blessing in return.

Well, SINCE that time, God has given me ANOTHER such opportunity, this time in Ecuador. And let me tell you: it was NOT in vain. BUT, I'm afraid you'll have to WAIT to hear THAT story until another time. AMEN.