

January 4, 2012

By Andrea Roske-Metcalf

Luke, Olivia, and I went to the mall yesterday. We don't go very often, and maybe 25% of the times that we do are to have Olivia's photo taken with various holiday characters. But yesterday was January 3. I know what you're thinking: "A little late for Santa, were you?" Well, actually, yes, we were, but only because we waited until 4.30pm on Christmas Eve for *that* photo. Yesterday we went to see *Los Tres Reyes*, or the Three Kings. In two days, on January 6, the Christian calendar celebrates Epiphany, the seasonal sentimentalists celebrate the twelfth day of Christmas, and Mexico celebrates *El Día de los Tres Reyes*, or Three Kings Day. Children write letters to the Three Kings, just like they do to Santa, they leave snacks out for the Three Kings and their camels on the night of January 5, just like they do for Santa and his reindeer on Christmas Eve, and they wake up in the morning to find gifts. The whole business seemed a little hokey to me at first – like a commercialization of an actual piece of the Christmas story – until I remembered that, when I was younger and asked why we gave gifts at Christmas, I was told that it was to remember the gifts that the three wise men brought to the baby Jesus. Santa is relatively new here, actually, and arrived largely as a result of U.S. influence and globalization. *El Día de los Tres Reyes* has been around for much longer.



I'm not sure that Olivia will have anything to open on the morning of January 6, because this isn't yet a tradition in our family, and really, she's too young to know any

better. (The only thing we got her for Christmas was a potty chair, and she was over the moon.) But as this holiday approaches, I find myself thinking more and more about gifts, and how it is that we, as a global community of faith, participate in giving and receiving.

During November and December, I visited all my Young Adults in Global Mission volunteers at their work sites. I have a general idea of what they all do on a day-to-day basis, but spending an entire day – or even a few hours – with each of them gives me a close-up sliver of the very specific ways in which they spend their time. Before they arrive (and even sometimes after they've been here for awhile), these volunteers often have very romanticized notions about what it means to be a missionary of the ELCA, and how they'll be spending their time in service to their Mexican sisters and brothers. This is often the case, even more so, for their friends, families, and supporting congregations. We tend to imagine that our missionary volunteers spend their days rocking orphaned babies, or building houses for people living in cardboard huts, or reading the Bible to people who have never heard the Good News.

We don't, however, tend to imagine that they spend their days carrying large quantities of condoms from place to place on the subway; or setting fires in dry, open fields; or pushing wheelbarrows full of small children around the streets, shouting over and over the name of a lost dog.

But, indeed, that *is* what they do, at least here in Mexico. Now, before you over-react and withhold your financial support from Global Mission for the foreseeable future, let me explain. Kyle works for Casa de la Sal, an HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention, and educational organization in Mexico City. He spends his days giving workshops to people of all ages, dispelling myths about HIV and AIDS (both of which are much more prevalent here than they are in the U.S.), and teaching the basics of safer sex. Ian works on Rancho La Troje, an organic farm and permaculture education center. The day I visited, he and the other farm hands were doing controlled burns to prevent wildfires from sweeping across the hillside. And Kent works for Caminando Unidos, an alternative education center in Cuernavaca. The center's dog had run away the day before I visited, and the curriculum there is very hands-on. The staff wanted to teach the children responsibility and the value of looking out for one another. So half the school, everyone from babies to staff in their mid-20s, went on a dog-hunt! Kent piled the four youngest in a wheelbarrow, and we were off. We didn't find the dog that day, but those kids took care of one another, and they took care of their dog in the only way they knew how.

These are only three of my volunteers this year, but suffice it to say that all seven of them are serving their communities in ways that they, their supporting communities, and even I could never have imagined. They are living and learning and loving alongside God's people here. They have frustrating days and amazing days, boring days and bizarre days. But in the midst of it all, they are learning more about themselves, more about the world around them, and more about how God fits into all of it.

These are the gifts they are giving to their communities in Mexico, these are the gifts they are receiving here, and these are the gifts they will bring back to the church when they return in July. And all of these are the gifts that you, our sponsors, provide, as you accompany ELCA missionaries through prayer and financial donations.

Olivia wasn't too sure about having her photo taken with the Three Kings at the mall. It took her awhile to warm up to the idea, and even when she did, it wasn't enough

to avoid making it a family affair. But I don't think she's alone. I often have to step back from the daily routine – from sippy cups and logistics reports and language barriers – in order to see the big picture. I can get too wrapped up in the little things to recognize the divine gifts in the people around me, and even (or especially!) in myself. My prayer for all of us, on this *Día de los Tres Reyes*, is that we're able to step back and recognize the divine gifts all around us. They're everywhere...sometimes we just have to warm up to the idea.