

Give Thanks for What We Have – Sunday, November 27, 2005

Happy Thanksgiving to everyone!

Wednesday afternoon, I left Yerevan for a couple days in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia, to visit Florida UM volunteer Marcia Evans. She was here and now is there until just about Christmas time when she and her husband will rendezvous in London for a week in the Welsh countryside. I was joined in this special Thanksgiving vacation/visit by Michael Halbert, UMCOR regional finance director, whose wife and family live in Georgia; and a special friend Marcia and I met here – Michael Cooney from Rhodes Island. He's been in Yerevan a while, working on a water metering system under contract with U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

UMCOR Driver Socrat took us to the Georgian border, where we had our passports checked and we walked to the other side. There we were met by UMCOR Georgia Driver Thomas for the final leg of our trip. In all, it took about six hours by the time we walked into Marcia's apartment for the start of our holiday.



And a grand holiday it was!

Tbilisi has a different feel to it. For example, the city has a large, wide river running through it with rather dramatic cliffs on one side and churches as well as homes perched atop. Water slowly drips from the cliffs and must be as spectacular as those we'd see along the Mississippi River if they ever freeze in Tbilisi. There are more trees and a variety of types, giving you a few more fall colors. The old portion of the city has very narrow, cobblestone streets and buildings that show



every year of their ages. Along the major streets in the newer portion of the city are red brick buildings as well as brightly painted facades along with stone structures.

There are also many aggressive beggars. Marcia and I even had one young boy of 12 or so follow us for a few blocks, hanging from

us and knowing only the word "money" in English. There were many elderly women standing or sitting along the streets frequented especially by foreigners, begging for money. At least one woman sat in the middle of the sidewalk with a child asleep in her lap and her hand holding a tin cup.



I know how to say, “Hello” in Georgian and people such as taxi drivers seemed to appreciate it when we used it. Marcia knows a few more Georgian words as well as Russian. Without that and her little notebook in which she has written her address in several languages, we would have been struggling to get around.

There’s a McDonald’s restaurant and a great, big Goodwill (pronounced Goodvill because “w” is a hard sound to make here) supermarket that looks like the MegaMart in Jamaica or a Sam’s Club in Madison! When Michael Cooney, Marcia and I walked into it, we were like kids in a candy store! I managed to take one photo before the store security told me “no” – or at least that’s what I think they said since I don’t speak a word of Russian nor Georgian. (I take that back, my University students taught me a couple Georgian words!)

We shopped and toured on Thursday because Michael Halbert said it would be better to give ourselves a day to prepare. Mike C., Marcia and I even took time to stop in a Georgian Orthodox church for a time of personal reflection and to thank God for what we do have.

At the store, we found – or improvised – the makings of a real American Thanksgiving meal. Frozen young, self-basting turkey from Brazil. Stuffing made from Armenian and Georgian breads and an improvised Italian type of seasoning. Beans in mushroom soup made from a mix. Beets with butter. Carrots with mushrooms and butter. A heap of mashed potatoes with parsley, onion and garlic. Turkey gravy from meat drippings and one bullion cube. Pumpkin (or what that a type of squash, we couldn’t tell) with brown sugar and walnuts sprinkled on top. For dessert? Warm apple crisp with vanilla ice cream. Afterwards, we turned on the TV and guess

what? We watched the final 10 minutes of the Dallas-Denver game. Well, everyone else watched since you all know the only reason I believe they invented football was to give the tuba players a rest. I even donned a Christmas sweater I brought with me and gave Marcia two CDs of Christmas music I burned for her.

Friday’s meal also included one of Marcia’s students. She’s 17 and quite impressive. Besides knowing English and conversing easily with us, including with Mike C. because she wants to be an economist (accountant) like him, she played several songs on the piano. I think I found the new piano player for North Freedom UM Church. Now, we just need to get her enrolled at Boo-U, a part-time job in Wisconsin Dells....and a green card!

This had to be one of the best holidays in my life. Out of nothing, we created something filled with so much fun...and I think Marcia and I both



really did give thanks for what we do have here as well as back home.

We really needed this time together, though I never realized it until we got to her apartment. We enjoyed each other in Armenia and we genuinely missed each other's company since she headed north. We sat each evening and talked about everything.



But our time together ended too soon and Mike C. and I took the marshutka (mini van) back to Yerevan on Saturday morning. The trip was about six hours and took a different route from the one we took heading north. I read a whole book on the way home and chatted a couple times with the Armenians. Mike napped and watched the scenery.

Sunday morning, Pastor Levon surprised me by calling me up front to give people a short explanation of Thanksgiving. (He purposely said short because he thinks I can talk...has someone been telling him that or did he discover it on his own?) ☺ I did the basics and included what Gary and I always say...Thanksgiving Day is OK, but a person

ought to thank God everyday for even the smallest of gifts in life.

A few weeks ago, my students and I had a discussion about how difficult life can be. I let them talk though they kept asking what I thought. At the end, I agreed. Life is difficult. Sometimes, it's even harder for others. Yet, we need to keep our faith and we need to keep His joy in our hearts. As we must always hold on to the hope that tomorrow brings. I told my students that it was faith, hope and even small joys that kept their parents and grandparents going in those first hard years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is what they must find inside themselves, in their hearts and in their souls, to keep going, too.

Whether your life is easy or difficult right now, I pray you thank God for all that you do have right now and every day. Keep your faith and keep your hope. And, if you have difficulty thinking of anything to be thankful for right now, email me and I'll give you a few suggestions!

Peace!

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Back in Yerevan, Armenia