

Tearing Down Walls – A Pathway to Peace, Healing and Humanity

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As we meet, walls are being constructed all over this world that separate, divide, isolate and destroy life. Nowhere do we see these walls more clearly than in the global migration crisis. Today over 65 million people find themselves displaced. Natural disasters, civil wars, political, tribal and religious persecution, and extreme poverty are some of the major contributors to forced migration. Each one of these contributors to the global migration crisis builds walls – physical walls, walls of bias and prejudice, and walls of containment. None of these walls allow for a pathway to peace, healing and humanity.

I grew up along the southern border between Mexico and the United States. To this day my family lives on both sides of this border. I remember the crossing points of the border, but more than anything else, I remember the natural border, the Rio Grande River. My maternal grandfather, Rafael, was born and reared right on the edge of this life-giving river.

As a child seeking to understand my own identity I once asked my grandfather whether he was born in the United States or in Mexico. With a characteristic impish grin, he said to me, “It depends on the rain.” I was stumped. I had no idea what he meant. After allowing me to struggle a bit he said to me, “If the rains were heavy on the day of my birth and the river overflowed and came gushing down the middle of our one-street town, well then I was born in Mexico. But if it was a dry day, the Rio Grande River flowing down its usual course to the back of our home, then I was born in the United States.” I don’t know whether my grandfather Rafael was born in Mexico or in the United States. What I do know is that he was born a child of God, God who loved him and cared for him throughout his life, just as you and I and every person is a child of God. We are God’s beloved; God who watches over us and cares for each and every one of us.

Over the years, touched by the spirit of my grandfather, and inspired by the Word of God, I have come to know that God’s good earth was not made for walls. It was made for God’s creative pleasure and creation’s great blessing. We are to be good stewards of God’s creation, standing in awe, wonder, and loving respect for the Creator and for the Creator’s handiwork, including the peoples of God’s creation whom God loves without exception. A slightly different perspective than that of a U.S. Congressman I encountered when I was invited to give witness to a House of Representatives’ Judiciary Committee hearing.

The subject of the hearing was the intrinsic evil nature of the immigrant and then President Obama’s corrupt ways manifested in his allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. rather than boot them all out at once. I thought I was going to a real Congressional hearing where information is shared and thoughts and ideas are respectfully considered for the sake of the common good. If I had known that the hearing was to parade a pre-determined and false understanding of immigrants, and merely an exercise in negative political rhetoric, I might not have gone. But then again, I do like a good fight for a good cause!

After a quite heated hearing the Congressman from Nebraska on the panel shared how he loved the passage in Acts 17, specifically the story of the Apostle Paul on Mars Hill teaching that God had determined the boundaries of nation states just as they are today! The subtle implication being that what is today the U.S. had been divinely designated for White persons who alone deserve to live in the U.S. The good Congressman had clearly taken scripture out of context for his own purposes. He had failed to study the passage and thus missed the point. Our sovereign God created us all from one ancestor thus making us all brothers and sisters to inhabit the fullness of the earth. God's hope was that from every place around the globe we would search for God, even grope for him and find him, for our sovereign God is not far from us. (Acts 17:26-27).

I could not believe what the Congressman was saying, but I was not allowed to respond. So, what went into the Congressional record was a wrong and absurd interpretation of scripture, something that is happening all too often these days. I hope that in the future those who read the U.S. Congressional record will not believe the witness of the Congressman from Nebraska, but rather see it for what it truly is: a sign that the walls of bias and prejudice and ignorance are tall and strong in the United States and have been so for a long time. President Trump is today simply giving voice to the bias, prejudice and ignorance that have been prevalent in the U.S. throughout its history, and prevalent in other places around the globe as well.

On a cold winter day, I found myself in Geneva, Switzerland at a migration conference sponsored by the United Nations. A young Israeli lawyer who had given her life and soul to defending migrant women in Israel was speaking about the atrocities that migrant women face. She shared the story of a Filipino woman who had migrated to Israel to work as a maid to help her family overcome poverty. What a sacrifice; to be separated indefinitely from one's family so that the family can live!

The woman had given birth to a child and had subsequently been fired from her job. She had lost her job because she now had a child to take care of. The young lawyer had assumed her case and defended her in court and come up against a legal wall that had caught her off guard and a wall of attitude that shocked her.

According to the Israeli court system, the Filipino migrant worker had a choice to make. She could leave the country with her child or she could send her child away and then regain the opportunity to work. The shock had come when in court it was argued that migrant women like this Filipino woman characteristically lacked a maternal instinct and thus were easily able to rid themselves of their children so why bother the courts with such needless legal proceedings!

It is incredible how we can so easily objectify the other for our own gain and comfort. Filipino women now live and work all over the world caring for the needs of others so that they can feed their own children and care for their family's needs back home in the Philippines. Undocumented women and men from Mexico, Central, and South America and from Asia are the back bone of the United States' agriculture and service industries. They are in the United States

not because it is necessarily where they would prefer to be, but because it is their best means of survival. What is ignored is that their survival and their labor benefits the many.

Africans have migrated to Europe not because they enjoy the dark adventure of piling up onto unsafe rubber boats and risking drowning in the Mediterranean. They have migrated because it is their last chance for life. Too many of them have been able to go only as far as a refugee camp where they and their families might wind up stuck there, spending as many as 21 years in those camps.

Hundreds of thousands of migrants have disappeared all over the globe. For some, oceans have become their tombs. Others have been swallowed up by desert places. Some have been enslaved sold to the sex industry, others becoming indentured workers, never to be seen again by those who love them.

Unjust economic systems like the North American Free Trade Agreement, the ongoing impact of colonization that destroyed civilizations in the Americas, in Africa and Asia and that even today continues to strip countries of their human and natural resources, and economic and political corruption, have forced people to migrate leaving behind their country, their home, their family and even their children. And rather than being amazed by these men and women, young people and children's resilience, resourcefulness, hard work, tenacity and deep and abiding faith in God who loves them, we judge them and build walls to hold them out and to contain them.

What is it about holy scripture that is unclear to us in our relationship with the immigrant among us? Hear the holy word again.....

*When a stranger resides with you in your land,
you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who
resides with you shall be to you as a native
among you, and you shall love him as yourself,
for you were aliens in the land of Egypt;
I am the Lord your God. Leviticus 19:33-34*

*So show your love for the alien,
for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:19*

*You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother;
you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were
an alien in his land. Deuteronomy 23:7*

*The Lord protects the strangers;
He supports the fatherless and the widow,
but He thwarts the way of the wicked. Psalm 146:9*

And Jesus said,

*When you welcome the stranger, you welcome me.
When I come among you as a stranger and you do not
welcome me you bring a curse upon yourself
and you shall burn in hell.” (paraphrase of Matthew 25:35, 41, 43).*

Above all Jesus said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:31)

What is unclear to us in scripture? As people of faith we know the path to peace, healing and humanity, but instead of walking down that path we continue to be drawn to the path of wall building, or at least the path of wall preserving.

There is much talk about the building of a wall between the United States and Mexico. It is a major concern but it all too often eclipses our view of other walls that are being built every day that are just as damaging, if not more. When thousands of children began to come through Mexico and on up to the United States from Central America, United Methodists and many others living on the border responded with compassionate care. Some of us traveled to the border to help.

The group I traveled with was shown the places along the border where the children were arriving and then we were taken to meet some of these children. Some we met at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas, a church that welcomed the children with clothes, food, medical care and assistance to connect with their families. Every time a child entered the hall of the church where they were received everyone would stop and shout, “Bienvenido,””Bienvenida”. Welcome, welcome, welcome! Watching the faces of those little ones light up as they were welcomed, brought tears to our eyes. But then there were the children who were being detained whom we also saw.

Some miles from Sacred Heart Catholic Church we were taken into an old factory that had been repurposed to hold the children that were being detained. We were led through an inspection process then moved along into the belly of the factory. It was frigid cold. So cold that it took us a minute to focus, but when we did, what we saw confused and then sickened us. Before us was an enormous box that covered most of the floor of the factory and stretched up toward the ceiling. It had compartments, and its walls were made of chain-linked fencing. At first we thought it was an animal pen, but then upon looking more closely we saw that it held children. The youngest was 3 years old and the oldest that day was 16, contained within cruel, porous walls for us to see.

What I saw was our sin; the sin of the lack of care for the most vulnerable among us. I could not help but remember Jesus speaking strongly to his first disciples who rebuked the children who were brought to him for a blessing. Jesus said to them and says to us, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” (Matthew 19:14)

Is placing children in a cold animal pen the way to treat them before Jesus our Lord? If the kingdom of heaven belongs to the children and those like them, is containing them within cruel walls like animals gaining us entrance into the holy and eternal kingdom of peace, healing and humanity or banishing us from its doors?

You do know that the way migrant children are treated not only in the U.S. but in other places as well is but a precursor of how they will be treated as adults. We imprison those who are different from us and if we can make a profit from their imprisonment that's even better.

Holding undocumented immigrants behind the walls of for-profit prisons has become big business in the United States. Our government has consistently said that only alien criminals will be detained and imprisoned, but we are imprisoning grandmothers, pastors, men whose only crime is crossing the border to work to feed their families, and immigrant women whose vehicles happened to have broken taillights.

Our inability to reach humane and just immigration policies in the United States, here in Mexico, and in many other places in the world is not because the issue is too complex, and it is complex. I am convinced that we have failed to enact humane and just immigration policies because our governments are controlled by those who profit from the abuse of undocumented immigrants. They profit from their labor, their detention and their imprisonment, and even profit from the building of walls between our countries, our families, our brothers and our sisters. God have mercy on our souls!

Friends, where is our moral voice? In our teaching are we teaching persons to find their moral compass and their voice for peace with justice? In our preaching are we proclaiming the good news of our Savior, Christ Jesus who came that we might know the love of God and be enabled to love one another? Are we lifting high the vision of a world redeemed from the violence and death of the human sins of greed, avarice, racism, and just plain disregard and even hatred of the other, into a world where all are beloved, treated with dignity and respect, but with love above all? Where is our moral and faithful voice?

"Oh, but this matter is a political one," some say, "and we should not be political." Well, friends, I am here to say that the suffering of those who are afflicted by the death-dealing walls they face when they are forced to migrate and find themselves aliens in a strange land, is definitely a political matter and we should be deeply involved! We should be smack in the middle of it.

But let me be clear. This is not a matter of partisan politics. It is not about political parties and their favored positions. It is not about the politics of nation states. It is much bigger than all of that. It is about being the voice of the politics of the reign of God! The politics of the reign of God are mercy, justice and righteousness.

Not that long ago I learned of a migrant child who died after facing many walls. He was 11 years old and from Honduras. One day his mother sent him to the United States to escape poverty,

violence, and the possibility of premature death. I wonder whether as she sent her little boy down the road not knowing whether she would ever see him again, she felt what Moses' mother felt when under similar circumstances she placed baby Moses in a basket and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.

This little boy came alone, starting on a van packed with humanity, then walking across countries, and then joining the thousands who have now traveled on the deadly train here in Mexico called The Beast. Migrants travel not in the train but on top of it holding on for dear life many of them falling and losing limbs and life. But that little boy faced each wall on his journey and conquered it, even The Beast.

When he got to the wall of the Rio Grande River, somehow he got across it winding up on the land of a family he did not know and who did not know him. But from that moment he and that family would be eternally bound together as he faced his last wall. On the land of that unknown family he fell and died.

He died of hunger and dehydration. I wonder if he also died of a broken heart having experienced the cruelty of our world of walls. The family upon whose land he died did not know what to do with him, but assuming that he was one of the thousands of unaccompanied children who have come through that region of the world, they called the Border Patrol. It is reported that when the Border Patrolmen came and saw the fragile, broken, dead body of that little boy they fell on their knees by his side and wept. Eventually someone called a local funeral home to come and retrieve the child's body.

At the funeral home, someone began to examine that child's body, carefully removing his clothes. When the examiner got to the boy's belt and began to remove it he discovered something of great significance. On the back side of the small belt buckle was a note that had been taped on. The note stated who the child belonged to and where he was going.

I think of that child all the time. His life and his death will not allow me to rest until sanity and justice comes to this world and no child dies as he did. He also constantly reminds me to consider who I belong to and where I am going. As I share his story with you I hope that you will consider who you belong to and where you are going.

My prayer is that daily you and I will remember that we ALL belong to our Creator God who loves us, making us brothers and sisters to each other, and calling us to love one another as Jesus has taught us. And, that where we are going is down the pathway to peace, healing and humanity, committed to tearing down walls. May God be our help.

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