

A Church without Borders

Ephesians 2:12-22

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 1) 2019

Kyle Childress

You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.

-- Thomas Merton

Most of you know that Jane and I have been in McAllen, Texas as part of a three-day immersion with Texas Impact learning about immigration, asylum seekers, U.S. policy, and humanitarian concerns. (Texas Impact is a coalition of Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, ELCA Lutherans, progressive Baptists, and others working on public policy issues. Our CBF of TX and Fellowship SW works with them.)

We gathered with about a hundred clergy at the First Presbyterian Church of McAllen and listened to speakers give us background on the Rio Grande Valley. For example: the Valley is made up of about four counties along the tip of Texas, including cities like McAllen, Edinburg, Brownsville, Harlingen, Weslaco, etc. which total about 1,300,000 people. There are no public hospitals among those over one million people! None! The nearest public hospital is in Corpus Christi two hours away. Over 300,000 have no insurance of any kind. These four counties are among the poorest urban areas in the U.S.

Speakers also gave us an overview of what's going on along the border for asylum seekers and immigration. To say there is a crisis is an understatement. On the Mexican side of the border it is almost chaos. We were told that every inch of the Mexican side of the border from the tip of Texas up to at least Nuevo Laredo is controlled by organized crime cartels. If you are not paying them money for protection and transportation they will kidnap you for ransom or kill you or torture you in order to get your family to pay money. Refugees are fleeing kidnapping and torture, ransom, extortion, and on and on from all over Central America. For example: due to U.S. trade policies, farmers cannot grow corn anymore because they can't compete with subsidized U.S. corn. They are forced to grow marijuana for the cartels or seek refuge and work in the U.S. If they have a business in a village, say a bakery, they are forced to pay extortion to a cartel or else be tortured and killed or their children tortured and killed. So they flee seeking refuge in the U.S. On the Mexican side of the border it is becoming so harrowing that the cartels shoot up the shelters housing refugees seeking to get into the U.S. Last month some cartel members tried to force their way into a Catholic church shelter in Matamoros in order to kidnap a particular person. The priest blocked the door and would not let them enter. A few days later, the priest disappeared and has not been heard from for two weeks. Twenty years ago most immigration across the border were the stereotypical workers coming north looking for jobs. Now it is people seeking asylum from violence and chaos.

United States policies accentuate these conditions. First, we create the conditions so that they cartels thrive. Everything from U.S. drug use to economic policies to how we do immigration underscore the desperate conditions in Mexico and Central America. Increasing militarization and criminalization of the border has been going on at least since the first Bush administration. President Clinton

passed NAFTA, which gave U.S. corporations immense economic power and put massive numbers of Mexican and Central American farmers either out of work or in desperate straits. George Bush and Obama continued these policies, and under Trump it is worse than ever.

Now, for example, everyone who crosses the border is charged with a federal crime of illegally entering the U.S., even if they are applying for asylum. Once they are charged with a crime they are put in criminal detention, however their children are not charged and therefore, are separated and put in different detention centers. They may be in detention centers for months while working through the very complex and deliberately difficult immigration judicial process. After finally being released from detention they are dumped by ICE at bus stations and churches. If they have family somewhere in the U.S. perhaps they can get some money in order to get a bus ticket to them. Maybe. Otherwise, they are stranded. Meanwhile, they still are facing hearings, paperwork, and more hearings.

This is the place where most church related ministries are trying to help and serve. We are not allowed in the detention centers but after the refugees are released from detention they need somewhere to go at least temporarily. Churches have set up shelters to feed and provide bedding and shower facilities. Some groups, like Catholic Charities are able to work on both sides of the river – for those in Mexico in shelters awaiting a chance to declare asylum in the U.S. and for those in the U.S. who have been released from detention and need a temporary place.

On Friday a group of us were at the bus station in Brownsville and visited with two brothers from Nicaragua who had been released from detention a couple

of hours before and were trying to get to another brother in Houston. They were fleeing assassination squads from the Nicaraguan army because one brother had been in the army and when ordered to shoot protesters in Nicaragua he refused. As a result he was beaten and overheard officers ordering his execution. He was able to escape, found his brother (who was a young preacher), and they paid a cartel \$3000 for a bus trip to the border.

We talked to another young man from Cuba who was trying to get to his brother in Florida. He flew to Brazil and walked from Brazil to the border taking eight months, dodging cartels along the way. I also visited with a young mother with her baby and through a translator learned that the baby had been ill and she was trying to get to Maryland where she had family. On and on I could go with story after story, many of them more horrifying and more brutal.

In the past, the U.S. immigration officials waited in facilities about 100 yards beyond the actual, physical exact line of the border. Now, they have armed officers standing exactly on the line creating a further physical barrier of intimidation. Asylum seekers approach and are told to go back to Mexico to obtain the proper papers but it is very difficult to get the proper papers in Mexico. And it gets much more complicated through the lengthy process. The wall is being built all along the border along with a militarized Border Patrol.

Which brings us to our Scripture this morning from the Apostle Paul. In that day and time, the conflict and division between Jew and Gentile, between circumcised and uncircumcised, was the prototype for all human division. The Apostle Paul asserts that those of us who are Gentiles, who have been far off from God and God's people, have been far off from God's way of healing and right

relationship, have been brought near by the blood of Christ and his death on the cross. We have been separated and divided but Christ is our peace. In and through Jesus Christ, the dividing wall has been broken down, Paul says (Eph. 2:14). We are no longer strangers and aliens, no longer foreigners, no longer illegals, but now we are common citizens in the household of God.

I am not suggesting and I don't think the Apostle Paul is either, that the Rio Grande border no longer exists. But I do think that for the church, because of Christ, we do not hold walls and divisions and borders as sacrosanct. Because of Christ we hold them lightly and we do not live easily with them or with any division. Just because the U.S. and Mexico signed a treaty in 1848 making the Rio Grande the southern border of the U.S., does not make it final. The church knows that all borders, all walls, and all divisions are contingent and temporary.

For us, our calling is to reconcile, make peace, heal, and unify into the one big house of God, all who have been left outside. All who are segregated. All who are on the other side of the walls we build. In Christ, we reconcile and become citizens of God's household.

In June 2008, two San Diego area ministers led a prayer vigil and service of Holy Communion at the border fence in Friendship Park in San Diego. They did so again in Feb. 2009 with choirs on both sides of the border singing together. But the Feb. 2009 service had loud counter-protesters trying to drown out the worship services and there was a line of heavily armed Border Patrolmen preventing clergy from serving Holy Communion through the fence. When Pastor John Fanestil approached the fence with the elements of Communion, he was arrested, cuffed,

and detained (see Ched Myers, *Our God Is Undocumented: Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice*, p. 1-2).

Jesus Christ says in Rev. 3:20, “Listen! I stand at the door, knocking. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and we will share communion.” We know that Jesus is with and in the foreigner, the immigrant, and the person in detention. We know Jesus is with and in the least of these. If we do not open the door we miss Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.