Katie Flynn

April 27, 2024

West Parish Sermon

**A Challenge to What We “Know” About Border Crossers**

A recent humbling and immersive experience sent me to the Arizona-Mexico Border in January to learn about migration and health in the borderland region. As some of you may be aware, I decided to take a “leap of faith” by studying Public Health in addition to providing health care to patients. As part of my program, I traveled with classmates to the borderlands south of Tucson. We closely discovered factors that impact the health of people who have lived in, and were newly arrived to, the region.

During our stay, our professors encouraged us to “UNLEARN” what we had learned from some history classes, cable news, social media and government officials. We used our senses to actually gain knowledge based on what we saw, felt, heard and smelled. What is presented to us on our screens is often not a valid representation of reality.

The terminology “migration crisis” is disputed by Harsha Walia (n.d. 4) who is an activist that advocates for migrant justice and Indigenous rights*.* She declares that the “true crisis” is the root cause of why people move, and the systems of violence, poverty, oppression, and environmental destruction that motivate them to cross the U.S Border without documentation while facing life-threatening conditions (n.d. 4). Based on my immersion experience, I agree that the real issue is what prompts people to leave there homelands.

During this presentation, I will encourage you to challenge what you have previously learned, consider what is fair (and unfair), look beyond the headlines to the full story, and act on those new insights.Then, as Micah (6:8) tells us… “do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with…God.”

For thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples have populated the land which is currently called the Americas. European immigrants, many of whom freely traveled here, utilized the labor of indentured servants and enslaved Africans. Through the process of colonization, Indigenous peoples were forced to move away from their sovereign ancestral lands.According to many, the boundaries were artificial. Prior to colonization of the Americas, Indigenous Peoples commonly migrated north and south for ceremonial practices, traveled to seasonal homelands, performed burials in sacred spaces, accessed food and natural medicines, and visited of relatives. Land and water rights were essential to their identity. However, there has been a long history of the governments of Spain, Mexico, US, Canada and other nations, who marginalized Indigenous populations through genocide, creation of what has been referred to as “imaginary” lines that intersect sovereign lands, adulterating lands through mining and dams which rerouted water away from their land, forcing them onto reservations, and demanding assimilation of accepted non-Native practices and languages. Not only were the Border nations not consulted while the US and Mexico divided up their land in 1848, they had to legally choose if they were citizens of the U.S or Mexico. This interfered with their social and spiritual connections. One woman from the O’odham Nation, with whom we visited, described her painful resistance against the 2019 wall construction, as she literally laid down on the ground in front of construction vehicles poised to destroy the Quitobaquito Springs, the site of her people’s spiritual and ancestral burial grounds. All of these changes, constrained their access to water, ability to grow crops, and forced them to rely on highly processed government commodity meals that led to diabetes and heart disease. Their culture and home have been, and continues to be, stripped away.

While some want to cross to continue their livelihoods, others cross in effort to survive*.* In her poem entitled “Home,” the British-Somali writer Warsan Shire (2016) states “no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark, you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well.” Refugees **do not** have time to wait for documentation.

On the other hand, my classmates and I had the privilege of having authorized travel documents, and chose to study at the borderlands. As we drove through the arid climate and traveled over bridges with no water in the river beds, we sensed only a fraction of the thirst and fear of wall that the border crossers endured. Through literally touching the wall in several areas, we could envision ourselves in that desperate state.Our ascent into the mountains adjacent to the Sonoran Desert prompted us to consider the apprehension that undocumented border crossers feel as they strive to avoid poisonous insects, snakes, assault by coyotes (the smugglers who were paid to bring them) and drug-traffickers. We were awestruck by the migrant’s perseverance they needed to endure the harsh terrain and the possibility of rape and violence. The irony was palpable for those who risked drowning during their trek through oceans and other bodies of water, through which they could not swim, only to face dehydration, hyperthermia, hypothermia, and possible death in the desert.

At the high wall in Sásabe, we saw evidence of those who fled their homeland, such as those experienced by Mexican farmers who lost jobs resulting from policies such as NAFTA. We met Dora, who as a teenager, escaped the Salvadoran Civil War after her friend was murdered after he arrived home from a church youth group meeting. The US-backed Salvadoran government fueled violence that led to mass exodus in the 1980s. During Dora’s migration, she spoke of urinating in plastic bottles, and having to drink her own urine in attempts to stay hydrated in oppressive heat with temperatures over 110 even at night. Exhaustion was an understatement as she explained that they could not even lay on the ground to sleep as it would burn their skin. Once traversing the border wall, her teenage friends were raped and murdered in the Arizona desert. She nearly escaped death herself. She had been deported twice before by Border Patrol, but this particular time she was saved by them, and was granted entry through asylum.

Since the 1990s, both Democrats and Republican leaders have increased border wall construction. Bipartisan fear after 9/11 translated into racially targeted practices by Homeland Security and Border Patrol through the tracking and profiling of Black and Brown people. Surveillance and inspection at check points in southern Arizona put us on higher alert, especially for my classmates of color. National policies have funneled border crossers into the desert where they die in the arid environment after they scale the wall. At the same time, the U.S economy needs what is considered “cheap labor” and are grateful to do so they can earn money to live.

While it is not always explicit, the border wall reinforces the concept of “othering” and hierarchal social order based on color. Furthermore, the increased militarization of the US Mexico border has led to the prosecution of asylum-seekers that have never been criminals, and are only trying to survive. This perpetuates the trauma before, during and after their arrival in the United States.

My message is NOT that we do away with national security, the wall, Border Patrol, ICE or the military. My points are NOT that we neglect to secure our nation from illegal drug trade and terrorism. My point IS that we remember why many of us, or our ancestors, came to this land called the United States. Many came against their will and in shackles. Others came for improved opportunity through Ellis Island and sailed by the Statue of Liberty (as my paternal relatives and my maternal ancestors did). Still others couldn’t wait for papers authorizing entry into the U.S, and sought asylum in an effort to survive. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that Indigenous Peoples have had ancestral lands in the Americas for thousands of years; their cultural, spirituality and lifelines are tied to the land and water.

Justice efforts at the Borderland region include Dora’s organization, Salvavision, and other nonprofits like “No Mas Muertes” and “People Helping People” who provides food, water, and other resources to undocumented immigrants in order to help them live. Helping people with thirst, hunger and bodily protection are human rights and NOT illegal activities.

What we can do is: **listen** with humility, **understand** their motivations, and **offer sympathy** with their struggle (or empathy if you have had similar circumstances). Then, UNDO the injustice. We can start by following in Pastor Christie’s and the church’s efforts to assist the Venezuelan and Peruvian migrants who were brought here. We can consider how our national policies and social structures have hurt populations in the U.S. and abroad. We can admit we don’t know everything, find the facts behind partisan headlines, and inform ourselves on all sides of the issues. We can vote for fair immigration reform that is not rooted in profiling and hierarchical social structures. In other words,“DO JUSTICE” as God tells us in Micah.