

I spent last week on the Arizona/Mexican border. The trip turned out to be part vacation, part sabbatical, part continuing education, and part mission trip. I learned a lot and this morning I share some of those learnings so that, hopefully, we are all challenged to view some issues from a different perspective.

My trip included a prayer vigil for those who have died trying to cross the border into the United States. My trip included a meal and opportunity for discussion with someone who serves as a border patrol agent. My trip included information learned about immigration issues. My trip included an opportunity for me to revisit the church and ministry where I first felt God call me into the ministry 30 years ago.

30 years ago I served as a youth in mission for the summer through the Presbyterian Church. I was assigned to the border community of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico and Douglass, Arizona. I lived in Douglass with a US missionary family and worked on building the roof of what became the Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church in Agua Prieta.

Last week I was able to look into the ceiling of the church and see the orange beams that we installed 30 years ago. That may shock you that I helped to build a roof that is still standing but I am capable of learning new skills. When I viewed those beams I remember the worst week from 30 years ago.

A group from Florida came over to spend a week putting on a church roof. They worked tirelessly for 4 days straight. The beams were almost completely installed. On Friday morning a different contractor came by the site. He looked at the beams and told us that they were too weak and that they would have to be taken down.

Needless to say the group from Florida was not happy. They spent all of that money and gave up vacation to do something worthwhile. But they accomplished nothing.

That night it was my responsibility to help that group reflect and vent. It was awful. They were understandably very angry. As you would be if that happened to you. But I think it was that night that I began to realize that my calling was into ordained ministry and not into dairy science which I was studying in college at the time.

So my first learning is that God can use our worst experiences and create something good from it. God is not absent during these difficult experiences. It means that God is being revealed in a way that we may not see or that doesn't directly include us. It means that God always is able to bring beauty from moments of darkness.

The second experience which I share concerns this cross. On this cross is the name of Hector Romero Correa. Hector Romero Correa died trying to cross the border into the United States. Every Tuesday in Douglas, Arizona a group of Christians gather and spread out about 100 crosses along the side of the road that leads into Mexico.

As we spread these out last Tuesday, which happened to be the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, we called the names out of each individual and then we said a prayer on their behalf. Some of the crosses do not have names but simply say unidentified male or female. Some of us may see this cross and conclude that Hector Romero Correa was a criminal because he tried to illegally cross the border into the United States.

But for anyone who quickly dismisses Hector Romero Correa as a criminal, I ask you to consider this. Does God not care for Hector Romero Correa as much as God cares for you and me? God does not recognize God's people as legal or illegal. God recognizes people as God's children and loves each of every one of us.

So when we are quick to pass judgement on people like Hector Romero Correa remember that he is a child of God just like you and me. So my second learning I share is to remember that people that we may group together with titles like "illegal" or whatever are as equal in value to God as you or I.

The third experience I share is one which may challenge some of us. Some people make gross generalizations and assumptions about people who wear uniforms and guns like border patrol and police. I even made a snide comment on Facebook last week that I quickly removed about a border patrol agent that I observed sleeping on the job.

I actually removed my comment on the same day that I had dinner with Dan. Dan has been a border patrol agent for about 15 years. He has a wife who was originally from Mexico and became a step-father to her children. In a bizarre set of circumstances I discovered that Dan's mentor into the Christian faith was my former college roommate.

Dan seeks to be a faithful Christian while doing the thankless job of searching for people trying to cross into the US without documentation or trying to carry drugs into the United States. Dan told me about how he reminds his fellow colleagues to treat each person with respect with whom they come into contact.

Some of his colleagues in the border patrol mock him for caring about the people they capture and arrest. But Dan does not see them as illegals or Mexicans or Central Americans. Dan sees them as children of God and treats people he detains as children of God.

So my third learning that I bring back is to challenge us to recognize that the immigration issue is a complicated issue. On the Mexican side of the border I was amazed at the economic progress that has been made in the last 30 years. Nice homes, nice places to walk alongside the border wall, nice art on that same wall.

The reality is that the Mexican side was a more pleasant and engaging place to be than the US side. It was interesting to sit on the Mexican side and watch an impressive fireworks show from the US side on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. But it is also true that people on both sides of the wall are benefitting from the money generated from the drug trade and human smuggling trade.

Organized crime controls both the drug trade and the human smuggling trade. In fact, I learned of one story where a woman in Agua Prieta was trying to help migrants cross the border illegally and representatives of the drug cartel showed up at her house and said that she had to shut down her operation because human smuggling was a monopoly of the drug cartel.

As our government comes up with weak solutions like wall building and deportations of law abiding citizens to address the issues of immigration then organized crime benefits and real families are torn apart. Not my definition of being pro-family or pro-life.

Some may say that Christians should not get involved in issues of immigration and that talking about this in a sermon is inappropriate. But I ask you once again what is God's view? Does God care when families are torn apart due to the actions of our nation's government? Does God care about the evil that exists as people are exploited by drug lords and politicians alike and then cheered on by the electorate?

My fourth and final learning comes from the signs of hope that I saw along the border. We order much of our church coffee from Café Justo. Café Justo or Just Coffee is a coffee cooperative that is a ministry of the Frontera de Cristo border ministry of the Presbyterian Church. Café Justo is a great ministry that is making a difference.

I visited a terrific coffee shop that they operate called Café Justo Y Mas. It is a coffee shop that would rival any local coffee shop in our area. It was a fun place to be with great beverages and fun music. Many of the people employed at Café Justo are recovering drug and alcohol addicts being given a second chance as baristas.

The income generated through the store and through coffee sales goes to benefit the actual growers and not a bunch of middle suppliers that take big financial cuts from the farmer. Café Justo is making a difference as it makes great coffee and seeks to provide job opportunities in Southern Mexico and along the border so that people can remain in their communities where they want to live.

I hope that what I have shared will cause us all to look at these issues in a different light. I know that every time I hear mention about building a wall or deporting illegals I will think about Hector Romero Correa.

Every time I hear mention of adding border patrol agents or generalizations about border agents I will think about Dan and his commitment to living out his Christian faith. Ultimately Hector Romero Correa and Dan are not labels. They are real people.

Real people who in the eyes of God are children of God. AMEN.

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-Given: July 9, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

-Text: Matthew 11:28-30