

# MIGRATION AS GRACE

*Robert Chao Romero*

The God of Abraham is the God of radical hospitality. He invites all to the banquet table of the Kingdom of God. Through the teachings and example of Jesus we know that, although God's invitation comes to all, it goes especially to the poorest and most marginalized of society. Then, and only then, does it come to the rest of us. In the language of Latin American liberation theology, it cannot come to us without first going to them.

The radical hospitality of God is expressed by Jesus in the Parable of the Great Banquet. In this parable, Jesus tells of a certain man who invited many guests to a great celebration. The first guests, were those of economic means, who made excuses and rejected the invitation because offer materialistic reasons: they had just bought fields and oxen (Luke 14:18–19). The third guest likewise rejected the invitation because he was a newlywed. Jesus then tells us

Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

"Sir," the servant said, "what you ordered has been done, but there is still room."

Then the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full." (Luke 14:21–23)

As this parable teaches, God invites many to the banquet table of the Kingdom of God, but it is especially the poor and

disenfranchised who respond to his invitation. Indeed, God is such a gracious host that he desires that his “house be full.”

Expressing God's the hospitality of God, specifically to the “stranger,” or, “xenos,” Jesus says in Matthew 25 that when we welcome the stranger we are welcoming Jesus himself, and we when reject the stranger, we are rejecting Jesus himself.

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger [*xenos*] and you invited me in. . . ." Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in . . ." (Matt 25:34–35, 41–43)

To paraphrase Mother Teresa, “Jesus appears to us in the distressing disguise of the immigrant.” In the language of Latino theology: “Those whom society rejects, God welcomes and calls his very own.”

A broad review of Scripture reveals a further, more specific principle with respect to immigration: Migration is a source of grace both to migrants and their host country. Here, I define “grace” not in its limited sense of forgiveness, but in its broader biblical usage as God’s unmerited favor. So, to restate the previous principle in light of this definition: Migration is a

source of God's unmerited favor to both immigrants and their host countries.

Many biblical narratives bear out this spiritual principle. The call of Abraham is one primary example. God affected the salvation of the world through Abraham's obedience in emigrating from Ur. Through Abraham's faithful act of migration and the process which this set in motion, all the peoples of earth have been, and are being, blessed by him.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3)

Abraham's moniker, "The Hebrew," found in Genesis 14:13, also reinforces the special nature of his migration call. As used in this passage, *ivri*, the root of the Hebrew word for "Hebrew" means literally "to cross over." This appears to be a clear image of migration. Abraham is one who "crosses over." He is the "crosser-over," if you will.

The patriarch Joseph offers another example of God using, in this case a forced migrant, as a source of grace for many. Joseph was slave trafficked to Egypt by his jealous brothers and, through a series of divine interventions, rose to the rank of second in Egypt. Through this position, Joseph saved his whole family, Egypt, and Canaan, from famine. Joseph states as much to his brothers in Genesis 50.

“You intended to harm me [by forcing me to migrate through slave trafficking], but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Gen 50: 20)

Working in the other direction, the Scriptures also indicate that God provides for the immigrants' food and other basic needs when host countries are faithful to notions of biblical hospitality. In Genesis 12:10, Abram (not yet called Abraham) flees to Egypt to find food and escape famine. In Exodus 2, Moses finds refuge for forty years in the land of Midian and the household of Reuel. In the book of Ruth, we are told that Elimelek and Naomi sought relief from famine in the country of Moab. Subsequently, Ruth emigrates from Moab with Naomi to Bethlehem in search of food, and in the process becomes a mother of the Jewish faith. As stated in Deuteronomy 10:18, “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.”

It is worth noting that hospitality to strangers is modeled biblically not only on an individual basis, but also on a systemic, or structural, level. Stated another way, God's grace was extended to immigrants on a structural level through the legal requirements of the Mosaic law. Within an agrarian economy based upon land ownership and kinship networks, immigrants (or *ger*) were an extremely vulnerable population. Because of their sojourner status, the *ger* were excluded from owning land and meaningful participation in the agrarian sector. As a result, they were dependent upon the larger Israelite community for food, employment, and protection from

discrimination. They worked in lowly positions as day laborers and in temple building/conscription. In times of drought, crop failure, or disease, immigrants were especially vulnerable because they did not own land and lacked a familial socio-economic net to supply their basic needs.

Divinely instituted, Mosaic law provided structural provision for the immigrants' basic needs to the immigrants is reflected in the gleaning laws and special tithes divinely instituted in the Mosaic law. According to Old Testament law, landowners were to leave the grain along the edges of their fields, and the fallen remnants from harvesting, for the *ger*.

When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God. (Lev 23:22)

Moreover, every three years, the entire tithe of produce was to be given to the clergy, immigrants, orphans, and widows, “so they can eat in your cities until they are full.” (Deut 26:12 CEB) Because of their susceptibility to societal discrimination, the Mosaic law also guarantees what might be labeled civil rights protections for the immigrant community.

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Lev 19:33–34)

In striking similarity to modern U.S. constitutional law, the Mosaic law also required equitable treatment between immigrants and native Israelites, and prohibited applying the application of disparate legal codes for the two groups: “You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev 24:22)

These legal requirements bear a striking resemblance to the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution and represent one of its earliest historical precursors.

Returning to the theme of migration as grace, it is important to highlight that migrants often come to know the love of God through the habitually difficult, immigration process. This is born out in multitudinous biblical examples, including, as previously discussed, the lives of Abraham, Ruth, and Joseph. Others examples include Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joseph, and Mary. In each instance, these biblical characters experienced God's grace and provision through the migration process; and the end result was the deepening of their faith and relationship with God. The apostle Paul hints at this spiritually transformative aspect of migration in his famous sermon to the learned Areopagus.

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth [an implicit reference to migration]; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek

him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. (Acts 17: 26–27)

In as much as the Bible uplifts the spiritual principle of migration as grace, it also offers counterexamples in which migration is treated as “ungrace” and condemned by the Scriptural record. The Exodus narrative is particularly illustrative in this regard. Xenophobia in a time of war led the king of Egypt to cruelly enslave the Israelites and relegate them to forced labor.

He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. (Exod 1:9–11)

When the strategy of oppressive labor proved ineffective to subdue the imagined political threat of the Israelites, Pharaoh then turned to the even more insidious policy of male infanticide.

But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites . . . The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on

the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” (Exod 1:12, 15–16)

As a consequence of its oppression of the Israelite community, Egypt experienced divine judgment in the form of the ten plagues and its miraculous military defeat in the Red Sea.

[Referring to the divine plagues] Pharaoh’s officials said to him, “How long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God; do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?” . . . So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. (Exod 10:7; 14:27–28)

As reflected by the Exodus account, the Bible clearly condemns abusing of immigrant populations is clearly condemned by the biblical record. God takes it seriously when host countries exploit immigrant communities and treat them with “ungrace.”

### *Migration as Ungrace: U.S. Immigration History*

Unfortunately, much of the U.S. immigration history over the past 150 years does not square with biblical understandings of migration as grace. Instead, U.S. immigration law and policy has more often reflected an attitude of migration as “ngrace.” Anti-Chinese xenophobia produced invidious legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which, for the first time in

United States history, barred an entire ethnic group from immigration. Racism towards Italians and Eastern Europeans fueled passage of the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, the Cable Act of 1922, and the Immigration Act of 1924. Together with the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924, and the Tydings-McDuffe Act (1934), these laws slowed immigration from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe to a trickle, and expanded migration flows from Northern and Western Europe. Between 1930 and 1935, repatriations and deportations of Mexicans totaled 345,839. Tragically, Mexican Americans were also not excluded from these deportations. In California, over 80% of the repatriates were citizens or legal residents of the U.S. Moreover, between 1947 and 1954 the Immigration and Nationalization Service boasted of apprehending more than 1 million unauthorized Mexican immigrants as part of the notorious “Operation Wetback.” Racially discriminatory quotas favoring northern and western European immigrants and barring immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and southern and eastern Europe were not overturned until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965.

Regrettably, such mass deportations are not just a thing of the past. Since 2009, the presidential administration of Barack Obama has destroyed the family structures of untold numbers of immigrant families through the deportation of more than 2.5 million individuals. At this rate, President Obama is on pace to deport more people than the combined total of the 19 presidents who held office from 1892–2000. From January 2014 to October 2015, moreover, the United States government

deported 83 El Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran refugees to their deaths in violation of United Nations protocol. Tragically, “ungraceful” anti-immigrant federal and state laws have also proliferated over the past two decades. Examples include California Proposition 187 (1994), the federal Sensenbrenner Immigration Bill (2005), the Hazleton “Illegal Immigration Relief Act” (2006), Arizona SB-1070 (2010), Alabama House Bill 56 (2011), and 162 other anti-immigrant laws passed by state legislatures in 2010 and 2011.

Although held to be largely unconstitutional and never implemented, Proposition 187, the so-called “Save Our State” initiative, barred undocumented immigrants in California from receiving health care, K-12 public education, and other public social services. It also required police, teachers, public school officials, and public healthcare providers to check the immigration status of individuals and report undocumented immigrants to the federal government for deportation.

The Sensenbrenner Bill, passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2005, sought to construct a 700-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexico border, eliminate the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, categorize all forms of unlawful presence and visa overstays as felonies, and arguably made it a crime for churches to minister to undocumented immigrants. In passing the “Illegal Immigration Relief Act” in 2006, the city of Hazleton, Pennsylvania tried to take the issue of undocumented immigration into its own hands by fining landlords who rented to undocumented immigrants and suspending the business licenses of people who hired them.

In its explicit terms, Arizona SB-1070 called for the goal of immigrant “attrition through enforcement.” SB-1070 requires police to determine the immigration status of someone arrested or detained if they have “reasonable suspicion” that such individuals are undocumented. Civil rights organizations have criticized the law because of the severe danger it poses for racial profiling. Indeed, in May 2016, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio was found in contempt of the Federal District Court for his failure to limit racial profiling in the implementation of Arizona SB-1070.

In stark moral condemnation of Arizona SB-1070, Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared forcefully

I am saddened today at the prospect of a young Hispanic immigrant in Arizona going to the grocery store and forgetting to bring her passport and immigration documents with her. I cannot be dispassionate about the fact that the very act of her being in the grocery store will soon be a crime in the state she lives in.

Or that, should a policeman hear her accent and form a “reasonable suspicion” that she is an illegal immigrant, she can—and will—be taken into custody until someone sorts it out, while her children are at home waiting for their dinner . . .

But a solution that degrades innocent people, or that makes anyone with broken English a suspect, is not a solution. A solution that fails to distinguish between a young child coming over the border in search of his mother and a drug smuggler is not a solution.

I am not speaking from an ivory tower. I lived in the South Africa that has now thankfully faded into history, where a black man or woman could be grabbed off the street and thrown in jail for not having his or her documents on their person.

Alabama House Bill 56 and Georgia House Bill 87 are like Arizona SB-1070 on steroids. Though partially invalidated by the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals, Alabama HB-56 barred undocumented immigrants from attending college, criminalized the rental of residential property to undocumented immigrants, and prohibited them from applying for or soliciting work. It also required school officials to submit an annual tally of all suspected undocumented K-12 students to the state department of education. Georgia House Bill 87, signed into law by state governor Nathan Deal in May 2011, authorized police officers to question individuals about their immigration status in certain criminal investigations and threatened to fine undocumented immigrants \$250,000, or send them to jail for 15 years, for using fake identifications in search of employment. In 2010, the Georgia Board of Regents also passed rules effectively barring undocumented students from all public universities in the state.

### *Political Scapegoats: Donald Trump, Tea Party*

These various anti-immigrant laws and policies of the past decade have occurred within the context of political scapegoating. Since the economic downturn of 2008, undocumented immigrant labor has been scapegoated by the white working class population and opportunistic politicians eager for election.

Such anti-immigrant rhetoric has fueled the rise of the Tea Party movement. White workers have condemned immigrant workers as unfair labor competition and culturally inassimilable; politicians have seized upon this discontent among the electorate, adding that immigrants are also a drain upon state and local economic resources because of their use of social services such as education and healthcare. Campaigning on this anti-immigrant, restrictionist platform, many Tea Party politicians have been successfully elected to local, state, and federal office over the past decade. Most notably, reality TV personality Donald Trump has successfully ridden the tidal wave of anti-immigrant sentiment to the position of Republican presidential nominee. In his now notorious words

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

I will build a great wall—and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me—and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.

“Donald Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”

### *Migration as Grace: The Vast Economic Contributions of Undocumented Immigrants*

Contrary to the claims of the loud chorus of anti-immigrant politicians such as Donald Trump, undocumented immigrants serve as an important source of grace to the United States through their vast economic contributions in the form of labor and taxes.

Undocumented immigrants account for 4.3% of the U.S. labor force—about 6.3 million workers out of 146 million. They are clustered in construction, agriculture, the service sector, and domestic work. Undocumented workers make up

27% of drywall/ceiling tile installers

21% of roofers

20% of construction laborers

26% of grounds maintenance workers

25% of butchers/meat and poultry workers

18% of cooks

23% of misc. agricultural workers

22% of maids and housekeepers

18% of sewing machine operators

Note that these are national statistics. In places like California, Texas, New York, and Florida, the percentages are much higher. In California, 1 in 10 workers is undocumented.

To fill our ravenous need for cheap labor, approximately 850,000 undocumented immigrants came to the U.S. on an annual basis from 2000–2005. It is estimated that more than 11 million undocumented immigrants lived in the United States in 2014.

It is further estimated moreover, that undocumented immigrants contribute hundreds of billions of dollars to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product. In 2006, unauthorized immigrants contributed \$428 billion dollars to the nation's \$13.6 trillion gross domestic product.

Undocumented immigrants are viewed positively by the federal government because of their multi-billion dollar contributions to Social Security and Medicare. In order to secure employment, many undocumented immigrants provide false social security numbers to their employers. Billions of dollars in payroll taxes are in turn collected by the federal government based upon these false social security numbers—to the tune of \$12 billion in 2007 alone. According to Stephen C. Goss, the chief actuary of the Social Security Administration, unauthorized immigrants contributed up to \$240 billion to the Social Security trust fund by 2007. Moreover, if not for these monumental tax contributions, the Social Security administration would have experienced payment shortfalls as early as 2009. Ironically, undocumented immigrants support the pensions of droves of Tea Party members who are of retirement age and yet who most vehemently support draconian immigration restrictions and deportations.

Unauthorized immigrants contribute in many significant ways to state economies and state and local tax revenues as well. Immigrants make large economic contributions not only in traditional immigration receiving states such as California and Texas, but even in southern and Midwestern states not typically associated with large Latino immigrant populations.

For example, in California, unauthorized immigrants constitute 10% of the total workforce and contribute \$130 billion annually to the state Gross Domestic Product. A 2006 study by the Texas Comptroller found that undocumented immigrants contributed \$17.7 billion dollars to state GDP and generated \$1.58 billion in

state revenues. The University of Chicago reported that undocumented immigrants spent \$2.89 billion in the Chicago metropolitan area in 2001 and helped support more than 30,000 jobs through their spending.

Even in southern states such as Georgia and Virginia, undocumented immigrants supply hundreds of millions of dollars per year in income, payroll, and property taxes. In 2006, the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute reported that unauthorized immigrants contributed more than \$215 million in the form of income and property tax and aggregated sales. The Commonwealth Institute, moreover, calculated that undocumented immigrants provide up to \$450 million per year in tax revenue in Virginia and that they represent a critical source of labor in the construction, manufacturing, and leisure and hospitality industries.

More recently, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) found that undocumented immigrants paid an estimated \$10.6 billion in state and local taxes in 2010. These contributions varied state by state, with California receiving more than \$2.2 billion and the state of Montana receiving less than \$2 million. These state and local tax contributions derive from sales and excise taxes, personal income taxes, and property taxes.

The legalization of undocumented immigrants, moreover, would result in huge windfalls of state tax revenue. This increase in tax revenue would result, in part, from an increase in wages and taxable income for unauthorized workers. Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda of the UCLA N.A.I.D. Center projects that

legalization would increase state tax revenue by \$5.3 billion in California, \$540 million in Arizona, \$297 million in Colorado, \$1.13 billion in Florida, and \$4.1 billion in Texas.

A “Mathematics of Injustice:” The “grace” provided to us by immigrants goes unrecognized by our broken immigration system

Although an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants supply upwards of 400 billion dollars per year to the national gross domestic product, and contribute hundreds of billions of dollars more to federal and state coffers through tax contributions, guess how many unskilled labor visas the United States granted to all immigrants from every country in the world in 2010? The answer is 4,762 unskilled labor visas. Moreover, even if the U.S. wished to grant more than that, it is limited to a maximum of 10,000 unskilled worker visas annually for all nations across the globe. On paper therefore, the U.S. government claims the nation has but a small shortage of unskilled labor that requires supplementation through the awarding of a miniscule number of unskilled labor visas. In reality, however, the U.S. depends upon, and exploits, the cheap, supplemental labor of more than 6 million undocumented immigrant workers.

Fairness, indeed, biblical justice, requires that the U.S. government recognize the manifold economic contributions of immigrants by granting them a concomitant number of work visas and/or legal residency status. To refuse to do so is biblical exploitation (Deut 10:17–19; Exod 23:9; Matt 25:35–40).

Failure to provide immigration relief constitutes biblical oppression, for it perpetuates a system in which 11 million immigrants are exploited for their multi-billion dollar economic contributions but denied denies them basic civil and human rights. It is tantamount to slavery—benefiting from the human being's labor of a human being but purposefully denying her or his fundamental humanity. Stated another way, although undocumented immigrants already participate as economic citizens of this nation, they have not been granted the concomitant rights of political citizenship. Even worse, despite their vast economic contributions, undocumented immigrants have been scapegoated for the economic woes of our nation and are being manipulated in the national discourse for short-term political gain.

### *Conclusion*

The Christian community of the United States has a serious moral choice to make with respect to the 11 million undocumented immigrants that God has brought to live with us as neighbors. Will we model to them the radical hospitality of the God of Abraham, or will we reflect to them the oppression of Egypt? Will we be Pharaoh or Jesus? As a reflection of Pharaoh, will we continue to exploit their cheap labor in order to buttress our economy while at the same time scapegoating them as part of an imagined political threat and the “war on terror?” Or, in reflection of Jesus and his radical hospitality, will we humble ourselves to recognize the manifold expressions of grace we receive from them and reciprocate this grace through the compassionate reformation of our immigration laws?

If the Christian community continues in the historical trajectory of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, Operation Wetback, Proposition 187, and Arizona SB-1070, then we will be known as Egypt. We will also destroy the witness of Christ which is just now beginning to be rehabilitated through the important work of organizations such as the Evangelical Immigration Table, Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, and the Christian Community Development Association.

As our other alternative, we can choose to embody God's grace to the immigrant community by drawing from the biblical examples of Abraham, Ruth, Naomi, and Jesus. It is interesting to me that Egypt got a second chance. Although it was condemned in the Exodus narrative for its exploitation of the Israelites, in the book of Matthew we are told

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." (Matt 2:13)

Egypt got a second chance to show hospitality—in this case to the refugee Christ-child and the holy family. Reversing course from the xenophobic pattern expressed in the Exodus account, Egypt lived out radical hospitality towards Jesus the Messiah, Joseph, and Mary.

If this biblical narrative were to take place in the United States today instead of in Egypt 2,000 years ago, would Jesus and his

family be welcome? Or would we pass new immigration laws and policies to deport them? Indeed, this is the exact challenge posed to us by the spiritual principles of Matthew 25 and the various selections of Scripture which have been explored in this essay.

Jesus and his mother now appear to us in the distressing disguise of 11 million undocumented immigrants and refugees from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, China, the Philippines, and Syria, as well as from many other countries from throughout the globe. Like Jesus and Herod, many of them, especially those from Central America and Syria, are fleeing violence and bloodshed. Many others are fleeing poverty and social displacement caused by the forces of economic globalization and U.S. international economic policy. For the past 150 years, the United States has treated most immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia like Pharaoh and the Israelites.

Like Egypt and the holy family, the United States now has a second chance. Will we make it right by welcoming, with radical hospitality, the millions of immigrant neighbors who now live in our midst? Will we pass compassionate immigration reform which takes seriously the biblical principle of migration as grace? The choice is ours.

# UNRECOGNIZED REFUGEES: CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND MOTHERS FLEEING VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

*Alexia Salvatierra*

The 9 year old girl had arrived from El Salvador two days before. Her mother was listening desperately to a lawyer giving an orientation to a group of women about how to file their own asylum applications. I had given the girl a coloring book and she was making beauty with careful strokes while she told me a horror story about the beating of her brother by the Marasalvatrucha and the police. “Sangre salio de su cabeza, de su boca, de sus oidos, mucha sangre” (Blood came out of his head, his mouth, his ears, lots of blood) she said with wide eyes. And then she whispered, “Pero ya estamos bien. Vamos a quedarnos aqui.” (But now we are ok; we are going to stay here.”)

Unfortunately, it is not likely that she will be ok. The Obama administration has prioritized the deportation of mothers and children from Central America if they have deportation orders. The vast majority with deportation orders have received deportation orders in absentia, as the result of missing a court date, not as a judgment on their case. If they have legal representation, the statistics are that 78% of them will be awarded asylum. Without a lawyer, 91% will end up with deportation orders back to hell. El Salvador is vying with Honduras and Syria for the most murders per capita in the world. In 2015, El Salvador reached the level of 108.5 murders out of 100,000 residents. In comparison, the U.S. hovers around 2–3. Our immigration system does not provide free

legal defense to other asylum-seekers, including unaccompanied children, regardless of the objective situation that they are fleeing.

The 9 year old little girl and her family are not an unusual case. Here are a few of the documented stories. First, I want you to meet the boys.

### *Josue*

Josue is the grandson of Trinidad, the manager of the Lutheran Guest House in San Salvador. It is the place that you will stay if you come to El Salvador on a short-term mission trip with the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. When Josue was at high school, one day two members of the Marasalvatrucha (also known as MS-13) approached him and told him that he would become a member or die. MS-13 is often referred to as a gang but that may be a misnomer; it is one of the most powerful international mafias that has ever existed. It earns most of its money from trafficking—guns, drugs, people—and from the extortion of small businesses (\$600 million in 2015.) They are controlling increasingly large territories of Central America’s Northern Triangle (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.) The Marasalvatrucha recruits by force. Their threats are not idle. Josue is a Christian and he did not want to become a member of the MS-13. He ran home for his father’s protection, knowing that his father was spiritually and physically strong. His father had just returned from his shift as a bus driver; he stepped outside and said to Josue’s pursuers; “You cannot have my son.” One of the MS-13 took out his gun and murdered

Josue's father in front of his eyes. The next morning, Josue ran for relatives in the U.S.

### *Lucas*

Lucas's uncle was killed by a gang in Guatemala; his brother was beat up a year after that by the same gang. After his brother was beat up, he left for the United States. One day Lucas was walking to church and the same gang approached him, beat him up, cut off his finger tips and told him this is the last time they would be beating him up. The next time they would kill him. He left for the states shortly after that. He has four brothers and one has just been detained at the Texas border. His lawyer, in cross examination, asked him if he would stop going to church if he went back. He said that he would never stop going to church because his love for God was too great. The judge has asked for more evidence.

### *Jose*

Jose is 17 years old, from El Salvador. When he was 16, in his first year at the National University studying electrical engineering, the gangs in his neighborhood began threatening him and his family. They wanted him to join their gang, but he resisted. Finally, they told him that if he did not join, they would kill him, or his family, or both. His parents put him on the journey to the United States, where he has two uncles. He spent two months traveling across Guatemala and Mexico, many times hiding from the police; other times hiding from Mexican gangs. He finally reached the U.S. where he was detained for a month in the "Refrigerator" at a detention center in Texas. The temperature was a constant 60 degrees and he had only a blanket and his underwear. No shoes and socks; no

shirt or pants. It was miserably cold. He only got one meal a day, usually a white-bread sandwich with a piece of baloney in between—dry. Finally, he was allowed to travel to Los Angeles where he is now staying with his uncles and going to high school. His court date has not been set yet. He fears being returned to El Salvador, as he is sure he will be killed as soon as he arrives.

The gangs/mafias in Central America do not pressure girls to join. They pressure girls in other ways. Here is a story from a group of United States journalists on a 2015 fact-finding tour.

### *Marcela*

The girl is dead. She's 15 years old and her name is Marcela. Witnesses tell us she was executed by a gang member. We can't see her face. All we can see is her plaid pants and gray T-shirt. Her family is across the street in a pickup truck. We can't tell you their names because it would put them in danger. Marcela's mother is too upset to talk. So, we talk to her grandmother. She says Marcela left the house that morning with her sister. The two worked in downtown San Salvador, the capitol of El Salvador, making tortillas. The grandmother tells us that Marcela's boyfriend was a bus driver in a gang-controlled neighborhood. First, he got threats. "Help the gang or we'll kill you." Then he disappeared. Then Marcela started getting threats. And now this: Marcela's body, lying on the ground, while people drive to work. We find the police investigator on the case. He says Marcela was attacked from behind and shot twice in the head. He says Marcela's sister witnessed the killing. She's now in police protection. We ask him why a gang member would kill a 15-year-old girl. He speculates that it's because she

didn't want to be someone's girlfriend or didn't want to do something for that gang. Is this normal, we ask? Does it happen to young women a lot? It happens every day, he says. The police later release Marcela's sister from their protection, even though local reporters tell us the gangs will probably go after her now. The family tells us their only option is to leave the country, ideally for the U.S. But they've got about \$200 to their name. It's not nearly enough to pay a smuggler.

Here are two stories of girls that we met in immigration courts:

### *Jasmine*

Jasmine is 17 years old, originally from Guatemala. She is an unaccompanied minor who is under the care of her aunt, whom she met when she arrived to the United States. Jasmine appeared in court for the second time without a lawyer. The judge gave her an extension once again to give her a chance to look for an attorney. During her court session the judge decided to go off the record and have a conversation with her about her current living situation. It appears that Jasmine has found herself a boyfriend who is much older than her. Because of tensions in her aunt's home, she decided to move out of her aunt's house and go live with him. For this reason there are some organizations that are unable to help her since she is no longer under her legal guardian's protection. She is pregnant and no longer attends school. Like many other kids Jasmine seems to not understand exactly what she is facing.

### *Testimony of Maria, 17 years old*

I left Guatemala after both of my parents were murdered by gang members. My father was a humble farmer who was gunned down while he was working in the fields. No one knows

why he was targeted. A few years later, I was home with my mother and my four siblings when a masked man holding a shotgun broke into our home. The man demanded all of the money we had in the house, but we didn't have enough for him so he shot and killed my mother in front of all of us. That was the hardest thing in my life, seeing my mother killed in front of me. I have a sister who is close to my age, but our other three siblings are very young. My sister and I didn't know how we were going to take care of them. After our mom was killed, my sister and I decided to move to another part of Guatemala. We knew that gang members will often break into houses where young women are staying alone and rape them, and we didn't want to stay in the place where we had seen our mother killed. We tried to make ends meet in another part of Guatemala, but we couldn't make enough to take care of our little brother and sisters. All of us were so affected by our parents' death but we weren't able to afford any kind of therapy; we could barely afford enough to eat. We never felt safe wherever we went. So, we decided to come to the United States so that our younger siblings could feel safe, get an education, and have a better life than what my sister and I could offer them after our parents were taken away from us.

If the children come alone, they are covered under the Wilbur Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. The Act requires that unaccompanied minors arriving from non-contiguous countries receive a full legal assessment for potential asylum. Instead of going straight to immigration court, their case can first be heard at the Asylum Office, a less hostile environment. However, legal representation is still

necessary for most Central Americans to win an asylum case. The Asylum laws are rooted in a response to the refugee crisis of World War II. Most of the nations in the world, horrified by the Holocaust, signed a United Nations High Commission on Refugees agreement in 1948 to welcome individuals and families fleeing violent persecution in their home countries. If they apply for refuge in a center overseas, they can become official refugees, eligible for a variety of resettlement benefits. If they instead apply for refuge at the border, they can become asylees; the criteria for refugee status or asylum status are the same but there are no resettlement benefits for asylum recipients. However, this system was created to respond to governments that are persecuting their citizens as a result of their race, religion, class or political associations. The system was not designed to protect children running from gangs. It takes a lawyer to prove eligibility.

In 2015, when the numbers of children and youth fleeing Central America jumped from 9,000 a year to 70,000 over 18 months, voices in the press criticized parents who could send their children on this dangerous journey unaccompanied. However, if the parents accompanied their children, those children ceased to be covered by the Act. Both mothers and children end up facing an adversarial immigration court. Hear a testimony from one of the mothers.

### *A Mother's Story*

I cannot return to El Salvador or the MS-13 gang will kidnap my daughter and kill me. I come from a humble background and worked hard to open my own small store to support my family.

MS-13 started taking over my neighborhood, and everyone lived in fear of the gang members. The gang members would come into my store and take things without paying. They would also ask for money almost daily and raise the amount they demanded constantly. They were demanding more than what I could give, so I was forced to close my store. The MS-13 gang was very angry that I closed the store and demanded \$7,000 or they would kidnap my 8 year old daughter. They said she was very pretty and they could do a lot of things with her. They also said that if I were to go to the police, they would kill me and my other children. I would not have gone to the police anyway because they are connected with the gangs and often tell the gang members when victims report crimes. The gangs have killed many people who have tried to cooperate with the police. I know I can't go anywhere else in El Salvador because MS-13 is everywhere, and others who have tried to flee to other parts of the country following similar threats have been found and killed. After the gangs threatened to kidnap my daughter, I could not send her to school anymore. We fled to the United States and asked for protection at the border. We were detained in freezing cold rooms and given very little food to eat. The gangs have now started targeting my mother, and I am afraid that she will be hurt or killed because I left.

It is hard to listen to these stories. Most people, even most Christians, want to cover their ears, to run away in horror. It is easy to feel overwhelmed: one more terrible need; one more burden to take on—or not. Privilege means being able to choose your burdens. If you are born in this country and you are not related to anyone from Central America, you don't ever have to

think about what is happening in Central America or to Central Americans.

That's not the Jesus way, however. I became a Christian in the Jesus Movement of the '70s. Part of the attraction of Jesus to me was his compassion. "Jesus looked at the crowds and had compassion on them" (Matt 9:36). Compassion is not pity. (Pity would have held no attraction for me.) Compassion is an English or Spanish word consisting of two Latin words, "passio" (to feel or to suffer), and "com" (with). Jesus feels our pain as if it were his pain, our hopes and dreams as if they were his hopes and dreams. When everyone else is running away from the suffering, Jesus is running toward the suffering of others, with healing in his hands.

Of course, there is a step that Jesus takes a step in Matthew 9 before he has compassion: a critically important step. He looks at the crowds. He looks deep into people's hearts and he see why they are suffering. He looks deep into their lives and he sees the dreams they long for. We do not really have a compassion problem in the church but we often have a vision problem. We don't see the suffering of the people around us very clearly—let alone people who are far away. If we are to share Christ's compassion, we must see through his eyes.

Hebrews 13:2 tells us that we must not neglect to show hospitality to strangers because by doing so, we may entertain angels. The word for angel in Koine Greek does not merely refer to celestial beings. It refers to any messenger of God, sent to bring a blessing. Jesus does not just see people through the lens

of their need; he sees the potential gift of the person in front of him. He sees the possible divine messenger. He also sees the connection between us. If we have one heavenly Father, we are all brothers and sisters. We cannot cease to be family; we can just be functional or dysfunctional family, healthy or unhealthy family. In healthy and functional families, family members are responsible to and for each other. We are our “brother’s keeper.”

If Central Americans are believers, then we are even more than just members of a common family. We are members of the same body, the Body of Christ. We need to feel the pain in our arms and legs. Lepers do not feel the pain in their extremities – but Jesus cures lepers. For us to be fully alive as the Body, we must feel and live our connection. John 17:21 tells us that the world knows that Jesus has come because of the unity of his followers. This has to mean more than Methodists and Baptists getting together. (I have noticed that denominational ecumenism doesn’t seem to convince the world that the Messiah has come.) If our compassion does not cross the boundaries of national identity, we are not followers of the One who loved friend and foe alike.

It is only from that place of seeing and having compassion that we can move to the next step of effective action. What do we need to do for the Central American children, youth and mothers seeking refuge?

First, we have to accompany them. Our Guardian Angels project sends volunteers into the courts in T-Shirts marked by

an iconic picture of a guardian angel. We monitor the court process to make sure that the rights of the children and mothers are respected. (Our presence effectively stopped “rocket docket,” the process of rushing children and youth through the court process in order to deport them.) We also refer these mothers and children to lawyers when possible or to a pro se legal clinic operated by the non-profit legal provider Carecen, where lawyers can coach them in submitting their own initial application. Of course, we also pray for them and sometimes with them.

A hopeful story: In the midst of an economic recession several years ago, Sandra came from El Salvador to work and send money home to her family. She left little Christian with her family. When he was 12, he left for school one day only to find out that his school was now in gang territory and that they would not let him enter. Determined to attend school, he recruited his aunt to walk him to school. The gang members stabbed her. Terrified, he cowered in the house until his uncle took him north to the border. He was placed with his mother and she took him to court. The judge gave her a list of lawyers; the least expensive asked for an initial installment of \$1,200. Sandra earns less than \$1,000 a month making “pupusas” (a Central American popular dish). She could not afford a lawyer. Desperate, she returned to court and asked for time to save the money. The judge scolded her and sent her and Christian into the hallway. Terrified and crying, she was tapped on the shoulder by Guillermo, a Guardian Angels volunteer. He returned with her to court and told the judge that the Guardian Angels would find her a pro bono lawyer. They found the

lawyer, she took on Christian's case, and he has now been granted asylum. Sandra says that Christian is doing very well in school, with the goal of becoming a lawyer, and he has great faith. "We now believe in guardian angels" Sandra says.

Of course, there are not enough legal resources to provide pro bono services to all of the Central American children, youth, and mothers that need them. The UCARE coalition (managed by Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice—CLUE) is a local collaboration of faith leaders and non-profit organizations, including legal services providers. The UCARE coalition is determined to develop and advocate for more legal resources. There is a court case by a number of non-profit legal services providers attempting to obtain free and affordable legal representation for asylum-seekers, particularly for minors seeking refuge. Our Guardian Angels in their court watch activities gather evidence for this court case. However, we have also all come together to start the Pro Se Clinic at the Carecen offices (a Central American Resource Center dating back to the 1980s.) The Clinic accompanies the families in taking the first steps of their legal process without legal representation. The Guardian Angels try to encourage the families to go to the Pro Se clinic rather than falling prey to the "tiburones" (sharks)—lawyers or notary publics who claim that they will represent the families for whatever money they can muster but who actually do nothing to win their cases (so that the people will be deported and they can just keep the money.)

However, none of these activities will actually solve the broader problem. We need to engage the problem at its roots.

In Matthew 9, Jesus does not only see individuals; he sees the crowd. We understand the problem and the solution differently if we do not only see individuals but also see the crowd. It is not enough to help a few individual Central Americans if it is possible to impact Central America. The first foreign aid response by the federal government to this crisis was to increase funding to the Mexican government to stop the children and youth from arriving at our border. For about a year, this was a successful strategy from the viewpoint of the U.S. Government; while the same numbers were leaving, far fewer were arriving at our border. I met teenage girls, of course, who had fled rape by MS-13 only to be raped by the Mexican police. This was not a humane or effective solution from our perspective. We then joined many others around the country in advocating for our foreign aid funding to go towards international policing and international development. When the civil wars ended in Central America in the early '90s, there was no Marshall plan. (The Marshall plan after WWII provided resources to Germany for economic development.) While we have made some advances in this area, it is still insufficient. More advocacy is necessary. Advocacy is democracy at work, citizens calling on our representatives to represent our true values and beliefs. In a democracy, advocacy is an exercise in the stewardship of our influence. When we advocate in a way that is biblically based, we actually minister to our legislators, calling on the better angels of their nature to decide and act in ways that are pleasing to God.

That little 9 year old Salvadoran girl is one of us. She is God's child; she is our little sister. Josue, Luis, Jose, Jasmine, Maria .

. . all of them are our family members and many are fellow members of the Body of Christ. May we do all that is in our power to keep them safe from harm—just as we would for ourselves and our families. May we follow the Lord who calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and the stranger as the native-born.