

Oscar Alberto Martinez and his 23 months old daughter (Anna) Valeria drowned trying to cross the Rio Grande. She was tucked into his T-shirt with her arm around his neck, hanging on for dear life. His wife and mother of the child watched on in despair as they were swept away by the currents. They had left El Salvador months ago where they had lived with his mother in a tiny home in San Salvador. Oscar worked for a pizza place but they could hardly make ends meet. Much of the country and their neighborhood was run by gangs who threaten and extort and make life miserable for people. El Salvador has once again become one of the most dangerous and chaotic places to live, especially for women and girls. Corruption is also rampant in the government and security forces have a track record of murdering and abusing civilians.¹ When talking about why Oscar and his family left, his sister named the violence around them but focused on how they were driven by the hope of finding a better future for their daughter. The same reason why so many of our ancestors came here. They hoped to join other family members in Texas and find work.

They journeyed for months, spent time in a Guatemalan refugee camp, and eventually obtained an asylum seeker visa from the Mexican Government, hoping to enter the US legally. Given the slow processing and general overwhelm at the border (we have also seen disturbing images and reports of ongoing child separation and inhumane conditions in often privately run detention centers), they waited for weeks in sweltering heat to get their application processed on the Mexican side of the border in a situation where their basic needs could not be met. They did not have a place to lay their heads to quote from the Lukan passage (Luke 9:58). They were getting worn out and losing hope and ended up making the fatal decision to cross illegally. They moved with great urgency and purpose. On the day of the drowning, Oscar had already brought the little daughter safely to the other side of the shore and was heading back to help his wife

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/el-salvador>

but the little child was apparently scared and overwhelmed and fell back into the water. He turned back and grabbed her but both ended up getting caught in a current that carried them away. They were not the only ones to die this way.²

Now let us shift from this 21st century scene to our Gospel text. Jesus is also moving with great urgency on a journey that will lead to his tragic death. He has “set his face to go to Jerusalem” where he will clash with the religious and political authorities of his day. He “will be taken up” on his cross (and later the ascension).” Along the way, he faces rejection, misunderstanding and opposition which foreshadows the greater rejection in Jerusalem. In our text, he and the disciples are not welcome in a Samaritan village “because his face was set toward Jerusalem (9:53).” Samaritans only shared parts of the religious tradition with the people of Israel and did not regard the Temple in Jerusalem as the primary place of worship. Perhaps they were thinking, ‘If Jesus is moving on to our enemies, why should we welcome him?’ Although Jesus had found open hearted people in Samaria before, this rejection may serve to illustrate the kind of tribal and sectarian thinking that Jesus actually wants us all to transcend.

The disciples James and John, known as the sons of thunder, are caught in their own trajectory of judgment and rejection. They suggest commanding fire to come down on the Samaritans to consume them (9:54), as the famous prophet Elijah had done twice to punish his opponents.³ Jesus wants nothing to do with violence and rebukes the disciples instead for suggesting such vengeance. They move on to the next village and meet someone on the road who declares their desire to follow. Jesus names the real hardship of being on this journey as one who has no place to call home in the physical and perhaps even cultural and spiritual sense. They are sojourners dependent on the hospitality and grace of open hearts.

By being such a sojourner, Jesus actually connects with a potent but often forgotten, or not practiced, aspect of the identity of the Hebrew people as strangers and sojourners in the land. Psalm 39:12 reads: “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien like all my forebears.” Israel is a “passing guest,”

² 383 people drowned in the Rio Grande in similar circumstances in 2018 and 2019 is on track to match that, if not go higher (of course, many more die trying to cross the desert).

³ See David Lose in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol.3 (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY) 2010, 195.

“an alien” in the land that ultimately always belongs to God.⁴ From Abraham and Sarah embarking on a journey to the experience of the Exodus and subsequent experiences of exile and restoration, the ancient Hebrews lived and named a life of utter dependence on the providence and welcoming mercy of God. They have what we could call a “corporate identity” of being “strangers.”⁵

Pohl suggests that the ancient Hebrew Scriptures “[make] the experience of marginality normative for the people of God.”⁶ This identity of being marginal strangers generated the mandate to offer special care for aliens living in their midst. Acts of hospitality toward the stranger are clearly commanded in the Law of Moses.⁷ Leviticus 19:33-34 states: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” It can be said that welcoming the stranger is a central theme that runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is also a central theme in the New Testament. God who is the ultimate host of the world in some aspects intentionally becomes a vulnerable guest through the incarnate presence of Jesus who intentionally dwells on the margins from the time of his birth in a stable, stories of exile in childhood (Matthew 2:13-15),⁸ to his death on a Roman cross. In our text today, Jesus warns those who seek to follow that they, too, may find themselves turned away at the gates of a town or the threshold of a home, the gates of a heart, and the recesses of a mind. The love and vision he embodies is never forced upon and often rejected as naïve, dangerous, or offensive.

⁴ Leviticus 25:23: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.”

⁵ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 17. We find this understanding powerfully stated in Exodus 22:9: “You know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt.”

⁶ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 105.

⁷ See Deuteronomy 24:14 (wages for alien workers), Exodus 20:10, 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5:14-15 (sabbath rest for all) for references on the treatment of aliens. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 17.

⁸ Whether this detail is intentionally created by the author to tie Jesus’ story to the story of the Exodus or not, it reflects a portrayal of God in solidarity with all on the margins of displacement and exile. There are also countless stories in which Jesus turns the marginalized into worthy hosts (i.e. Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10).

Our text offers two examples of how Jesus confounds and offends unless one follows his urgent and dramatic paradigm shifts in how to understand the world. One person who wants to follow Jesus first wants to go and bury his father (9:59) but Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God (9:59).” This is a shocking response, especially with the image of Oscar Alberto so fresh in our minds. It also clashes with the commandment to honor your parents and the cultural emphasis on the primacy of honoring one’s own family. I do not believe for a second that Jesus is saying ‘don’t care about a father like Oscar.’ In Jesus, God is present in solidarity with all people who suffer oppression and violence. Instead, Jesus is likely challenging the confining paradigms of patriarchal nuclear family conceptions of his own time which demanded a narrowly focused obedience and loyalty within a confining honor and shame system. Women and their bodies were often the flashpoint of this system. We still see this played out in “honor killings” in some cultures in our day.

Jesus also rejects another person’s request to first say good-bye to the family before following him, a gesture that the prophet Elijah had actually granted his disciples Elisha (I Kings 19:19-20). It appears that Jesus is again upping the ante in undermining attachment to traditional notions of the primacy of a separate family in a tribal context as having a say in determining one’s identity and belonging. Elsewhere, Jesus says that all who do God’s will are members of his family and rejects the limited identification as belonging with his original family (Luke 8:19-21). They are to commit to a future which holds a completely different paradigm of freedom and belonging to God and each other in the Kingdom/KINdom of God.

Paul understood this well when he called on the Galatians to affirm and claim that their identity was not built on keeping the law of an exclusive cultural and religious identity. Their new identity rested in being baptized into a life where former distinctions and hierarchies between Gentile and Jew, male and female, master and slave have lost their meaning (Gal 3:28). Theirs was a life in a new freedom for which they had been set free by Christ (Gal 5:1). While they are freed from having to keep the law as the way of being in right relationship, their new lives are to be characterized by the disciplined freedom for and with each other in mutual interdependence. It is a life guided by the Spirit, yielding fruits of “peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:1-23). Paul is saying that thanks to

the Spirit, the heart of the law with its commandment to love God and our neighbor as we also go on loving ourselves is written into our hearts. This love and freedom are rooted in faith in the unconditional love of God.

Where does this leave us in relation to the tragic deaths with which I began the sermon? First of all, these texts remind us that the land on which we stand, the air we breathe, the soil we cultivate do not belong to us. They belong to God and emanate from God, as do we. At an ultimate existential level, the boundaries we create on a map or through exclusive cultural or religious identity are our own inventions. For Christ, it is absurd to think that Oscar and Valeria are not our brother and niece just because they grew up on the other side of the Rio Grande. Every single child separated from their parents at the border and stuck in an under resourced facility and even a cage is our son or daughter. Their distraught parents are our sisters and brothers in Christ— as are those serving at the border. Secondly, all of us, whether we are already here or coming to this country to seek asylum or simply a better future, as countless of our own previous generations have done, have to expand our notion of what real freedom is and who we are as a global family of humanity.

Thirdly, I don't believe that we can pretend that the enormous suffering because of poverty, corruption and violence in other countries, especially Central America, has only local, isolated causes. We are also dealing with a legacy of propping up dictatorships and repressive regimes during the cold war and protecting economic interests has at times trumped human cost. I am naming this because Biblical prophets consistently criticize unholy alliances. We are also seeing more and more evidence, especially in Africa, that the reasons for migration include the increasing ravages of climate change, another global human problem to which industrialized nations like ours contribute at a disproportionate rate. Without dealing with the complex causes that drive others onto dangerous journeys, those journeys will not cease no matter how high the cost and dire the danger.

Our biblical faith does not give us policy details of how to handle a migration crisis but it is abundantly clear that we are to treat each other with dignity as children of the same God. In Jesus of Nazareth we meet this God as one who proclaimed good news to the poor, liberty to

the captives, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). He died in solidarity with all who suffer and that includes Oscar and Valeria. May the spirit of the risen Christ guide that we live into Christ's vision of interconnected freedom and not squander it in the tribalism he sought to undermine. Amen.