Fifth Sunday of Lent All Saints’ Church

March 13, 2016 Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21 Philippians 3:4b-14

Psalm 126 John 12:1-8

It looks like any bridge…..steel, concrete, arches, many lanes, and lots of traffic. The Cordova International Free Bridge cuts a path from El Paso, Texas to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a large span across a river, the river below..… The Rio Grande…..also called The Rio Bravo.

The only thing is, that when you look down, all you see is a gray concrete channel. There is absolutely no water, dry as a bone, with chalk and cement dust rising up from its deep cuts of slab.

Maybe this is what they mean, when they say, “the gringos stole the water.” Upstream dams have been built to meet the needs of flourishing towns in the US, drying up anything south of the dam. Feels criminal to me; since water is such a precious commodity, a life source… does anyone really own river water?

But that’s not what really got my attention. As we crossed into Mexico, parallel to the highway, to our right, was the rising concrete of the border wall, with its rolls of razor wire, with blue and white border patrol vans parked routinely along designated look out points. It reminded me of the Berlin Wall, the Separation Wall in Israel, the walls still visible in post-Apartheid South Africa, and Robert Frost’s sardonic poem, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

We were leaving El Paso, the safest big city in the US, with rising economic growth and driving into Juarez, maybe one of the most dangerous of all cities…. Maybe 20 minutes apart. I felt very safe: Patty as our driver, Brian riding as navigator, and Max and I in the back seat of our sassy bright red car, all with American passports, buoyed by our own health and hope, privilege and prayers. I did feel sad, though, so very sad. Aren’t there better ways to solve murder, drug trafficking, car accidents, poverty, drought, open sewage, hungry children than to divide us into the have’s and have-nots? Walls of Separation. Geographically, El Paso and Juarez are a “stone’s throw” apart… yet we were driving into the chasm of a different universe- the under belly of the Beast.

Paved roads soon turned into dirt roads with annoying speed bumps so high that it didn’t matter how slow we drove over them, we scraped the bottom of our vehicle. Flying debris, open garbage, dying brush, gaping holes, and slabs of concrete dwellings, framed with heavy plastic windows, were all leaning into rubble. It was hard to know when a home ended and when another one began; all was crumbling.

We turned the corner, up a steep hill and drove into Centro Victoria, an oasis in the suburb of Filipe Angeles, not much more than a shanty town of Juarez. As we parked the car, the children came running. Hugs and laughter and high fives. Max was soon throwing a basketball, Patty was dancing, and Brian and I were playing paper, rock, and scissors as all the children swarmed us- a poetry of homecoming. I was impressed immediately by the sense of collaboration, sharing, and simple connections- without a doubt this was a family of 93 children. And we were family as well.

With little Leydi holding Pastor Joel’s leg, the youngest of all the children, found by neighbors, she and her three siblings abandoned on the streets, infested with lice and hunger, was now safe, at home, with Papa Joel and Mama Carmen…. Leydi, who is maybe now three years old, holds on as Pastor Joel gives me a tour, proudly showing me the improvements in the girls’ and boys’ dorms and the new classrooms for his new school. His children, often seen as street kids, are bullied in the schools, and so he wants a safe place for them to learn. He’s building an elementary school, with the promise of retired teachers in the area to come and to teach. Isaiah from our reading this morning speaks on behalf of the Lord: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

There was a cry of excitement. The older children were returning from high school, and also Jorge, Leslie and Angelita were returning from their walk across the Sante Fe Bridge, from their Community College in El Paso where they were studying English and working toward their degrees. The same bridge that we would travel the next night, Saturday night. And two hours into our inch-by-inch crawling toward the US check point, we would be pulled over for a “random search”….. “Right, you’ve come from New Hampshire, another border state, all the way to Juarez for a weekend to see children at Centro Victoria (where’s that?)… no way.” And so we had to get out of the car and walk over to our outdoor waiting station as Patty, our potential drug lord, drove our car through e-ray machines. I loved it when Brian leaned over and said, “I wouldn’t believe us, either, it’s so extravagant what we are doing.”

True. In actuality, if the four of us had pooled the money we had spent on our air flights, hotel rooms, car rental, meals at IHop, we could have stayed at home, written a large sized check and given it to the poor, just as practical Judas recommends when he admonishes Mary for her wasteful excess. Putting aside his possible ulterior motives, Judas also just doesn’t get it, as Jesus reminds him when he says, “Leave Mary alone.”

Like Mary, by visiting Centro Victoria, we were anointing the Christ. It’s that simple. And what price tag can you put on that? How do you break down barriers, the massive walls that separate us into the haves and have-nots? You lift up the Christ, the unity of Love that binds us all. It’s our only hope.

You roll up your sleeves, you remove rubble, you build roads, you lay down cement, you create safe space, you touch, you laugh, you cook, you tease, you play games, you help a child up a step, you color, you remove lice, you build playgrounds, after school centers… just as the men and women and children were doing as they drove their van filled with tools all the way from Wisconsin into New Beginnings, the Amigos en Christos hostel where our folks will stay in June when they return to Centro Victoria to work.

And in those acts, in so many unlikely places, we find the Christ. What is the Christ? It is the invitation to believe that death never has the last word and that love will triumph. It’s the invitation to surrender your autonomy, your separate self, your own “I am”….into the one Divine Life of the Great I AM…. You say Yes, and your one mere drop of life enters into the Ocean of Love. That’s the Christ.

In our touch, being up close and personal, we reflect the fragrant offering of Love. And in doing that, we are claiming that we are not our own. Our lives are not about us; rather they are about the love of God shining through us. In that way, we too have been anointed by the extravagant gift of God dwelling within us. You can feel it; no wonder, it’s everywhere. You just have to look: “do you not perceive it?”

This is what Paul means when he writes, “I live no longer, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). This conversion is what Pastor Joel committed to when he, also as an abandoned child on the streets of Mexico, invited the healing power of Christ to dwell within. He and his wife, Carmen, have been taking in children, ever since. And when you do that, you know that you are no longer living your own life by yourself. You realize that Something Else is living in you and through you, and you are a part of a much Bigger Mystery… You are acting as a recipient, a conduit, and a participant. That’s why Pastor Joel so easily says, against all odds, “God will provide.” He has been pruned, no longer a separate vine, and re-grafted to the Great Vine of Life and Love and God. He is connected to the Source, where there are no walls, only the freedom of blowing under the breath of God’s direction.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Pastor Joel is not building bridges, either because bridges assume separation, differences and gaps…. Rather, he has jumped into the living waters, into our baptismal waters that never dam up, into the ocean of love where we all live and move and have our being. “Look there it is- it’s all around you, keep your eyes on the prize.”

In the face of the terrible events of Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion, in the poverty of Juarez, a place forgotten by all, abused and neglected as a habit, God not only will raise Lazarus from the dead, and Jesus from the dead, but God will raise all of us into new life. Even in the midst of glory and agony, our lives are filled with more promise and joy than we can ever imagine because with our Yes, our life is now participating in God’s life. We are anointed, filled with perfumed fragrance, blowing under the breath of God’s direction. Christ Jesus has made us his own, and in everything we do, we press toward the prize of God’s heavenly call to Love.

Tell me if you think there is any other path out of the madness that surrounds us.

1. Insights about “the Christ” influenced by Richard Rohr, Eugene Peterson (his translation of the New Testament) and D.T. Suzuki. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)