

This past Thursday, the Fourth of July, I woke up in a very strange country. Of course, for some time it's been hard not to wake up in a strange country, (with the exception of a recent weekend in Toronto). The news was telling me, on the one hand, that thousands of immigrants seeking asylum are being held like cattle in fenced pens, with poor or little food, no way to keep warm at night, no soap or showers or medical care. The children have been separated from their families and are struggling to care for each other, the older for the younger, some in quarters so crowded that they can't even lie down, since their beds were removed to make more room.

By way of contrast, the President was going to stage a massive "celebration of the greatness of America" – by which he meant military greatness. He would be giving a speech at the Lincoln Memorial, thereby removing that space from the ordinary people who usually gather at this monument beginning on the afternoon of the Fourth. They come to sit on the steps and surrounding grass, a mélange of different races, religions and class, an ad hoc community enjoying fireworks together in the darkness.

This space was now reserved for more important people, like campaign donors and cabinet members. In addition to fireworks, speeches and military bands, there would be displays of armed might including fly-overs of stealth fighter bombers, and tanks on the Washington Mall. It seemed reminiscent of similar productions usually seen in places like Russia, North Korea or China. This display of muscular wealth was, for me, incredibly dissonant with the treatment of the impoverished at our borders.

We live in a nation built by immigration, over 30 million Europeans arriving between 1836 and 1914. Each of the arriving ethnic groups, in their turn, were attacked as outsiders and shoved into ghettos, criticized for not learning English fast enough. Each group in turn contributed their knowledge and skills to the country.

The 6-7 million involuntary immigrants, brought as slaves from Africa, created with their sweat, broken bodies and disintegrated families much of the economic value of the southern US in its first two hundred years. Receiving no recognition or honor for their labors, their descendants remain the object of humiliations and judicial murder.

In my own prayer time I pray for the deceased. I have a small notebook with their names: one section for those of St. Johns who have died since I've been here; one for the martyrs of Central America; another for the martyrs of Algeria. The largest section by far contains the names of the Black men, and some women, killed by police or vigilantes since Trayvon Martin.

These prices exacted from those least able to pay has cost us dearly in our ability to see our nation in a morally realistic way. The fallout has left us today a country deeply divided, filled with anger and suspicion. In such a setting, it is our task, as a community of The Way of Jesus, to live with and into the disagreements, dissonance and contradictions that are so vividly present. This is no easy work, but we are not left without guidance.

The message from the book of Deuteronomy which we heard this morning, is a place to start. "For the LORD your God is Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

It is typical of Jewish tradition that they listen to their history as completely present in the here and now, not confined to a long ago past. Thus, Jewish law teaches that there is no separation between their past sufferings and those of their neighbors now, no difference between God's care for them and the care they are to show others. Can we too hear God's saving past as present to us now?

Most of us have seen the heart-rending photo of the father who drowned ten days ago, trying to swim across the Rio Grande after he heard how long people have had to wait for asylum hearings. He is clutching the body of his less than two-year-old daughter whom he carried in a plastic bag to try to keep her close to him. What is our response to Border Patrol Agents mocking his desperate attempt to care for his child? One agent said, "At least it's already in a trash bag."

Will any official investigation carry our grief, our desire to do better than this? Will we attend to the words of Moses about, "...the great God, mighty and awesome, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing."

We have further guidance for our response in the words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? ... And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

But what kind of help can we receive from such an impossible demand? "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." We are all a long way from perfection, and I don't think that Jesus is deceived about our failings. For he knows how we are made – he remembers that we are dust - not like angels in heaven, but passing like the grasses of the field. He can't realistically expect us to be perfect the way God is. So, this must be more like a pep talk than an actual commandment. Isn't it?

The Reverend David Lose points out that the Greek word which we translate 'perfect' is 'telos'. This does not refer to moral perfection but to reaching an appropriate goal. If you shoot an arrow at a circle painted on a wall, that target is the arrow's telos.

So, we might translate this passage more loosely to mean, “Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be. Read this way, Jesus’ words are less a command than a promise. God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for you.”

All these words of scripture this morning actually are what we need in order to live The Way of Jesus in our strange time and place. God’s goal for us is to hold in prayer all those with whom we disagree, all whose view of the world is different from ours, even those whom we fear, or who have injured us in some way.

You may be thinking, ‘I’ve been doing that. I’ve prayed, and I’ve prayed over all this, and nothing has changed, not even a little.’ But that misses the point. We don’t pray in order to change others. We pray because that is what can change us. We pray not in order to become God, but to become more truly human.

Following The Way of Jesus as our fully human selves we can point toward better lives for ourselves, for all who call this country home, and for all whose gifts and service we need to bring among us. This is our way forward, into the Kingdom of God.