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 Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

I am a preacher by training, so when invited to reflect, I have this compulsion to sermonize; or, in this case, provide a reflection grounded in a scriptural periscope. Notice I did not say I am a holy person by training.

Those of you who know me, know better.

In fact, when I was running an immigration and refugee office in Trenton, NJ, I was routinely chastised by the diner wait staff (this diner, by the way, was across the street from my office, conveniently located between the pawn shop and the bail bondsman, a stone's throw from the court house) for not even observing Ash Wednesday and Fridays during Lent properly.

(And that's just the tip of the iceberg).

At any rate, as further evidence that my training is one of preaching and not that of an ascetic, and, since this isn't a Sunday, I took the liberty of owning my historic Protestant roots and chose a passage beyond this week's Lectionary reading – this is life on the edge, folks...

The text for our reflection this morning is from the Gospel according to Matthew, the 22nd chapter, beginning with the 34th verse. Let us listen together for the Word of God:

### **Matthew 22:34-46 (NRSV)**

<sup>34</sup>When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup>and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup>He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” <sup>41</sup>Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: <sup>42</sup>“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” <sup>43</sup>He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, <sup>44</sup>‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? <sup>45</sup>If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” <sup>46</sup>No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

### **THE WORD OF THE LORD**

Now I realize that this is a Christian ecumenical gathering, not interfaith. But my life and profession has been so enriched by interfaith experiences, that I often find myself reflecting on what I've learned across the religious spectrum when I'm contemplating my faith and my own walk with God.

This week has been no different.

As we've journeyed together, learning about and hearing the incredible stories of those who have journeyed here, I am reminded of the remarkable faith of Cambodian Buddhists. After the ravages of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime, one might think that there would be little left

that a religion could authentically contribute. But as people of faith and as ones who have encountered others or may have experienced ourselves the ravages of war, we know that faithful people are also stubborn people. And Cambodian Buddhists are no exception. They exhibit an extraordinary resilience. One of the most obvious symbols of this commitment is their insistence on continuing a Cambodian Buddhist tradition.

It's a tradition that one of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown-Taylor, points out, actually has something to say about our Christian faith.

All seekers of Truth in Cambodia spend at least one full year of their lives living as beggars. So, as it is described, these Truth-seekers walk from village to village, minding to stay clear of the estimated 8-10 million live land mines that scourge the Cambodian countryside. Their only possessions are the brilliant bright orange robes they wear and the beggar's bowls they carry.

They own nothing else for the entirety of that year.

Just like Tennessee Williams' *Blanche DuBois*, they must depend on the kindness of strangers in order to meet their most basic needs. After a year of living in complete dependence upon others, they are free to return to their former ways of life. None of them, however, returns the same. How could they? To own nothing and to have nothing but your own need must change a person. To live so that all you have to give is what you yourself have been given is not something that you shake off and move on from as if nothing is different. I would guess that it becomes an understanding by which you would live the rest of your life.

This is, from a Christian perspective, not only talking love of God, but walking love of God every day for a solid year. It is the embodiment of the commandments that Jesus tells us are the most important. It is a life lived with an understanding that love of God equals love of neighbor. After a year like that, you could hardly engage in any sort of ministry and hold yourself apart from the person on the receiving end. When you looked at her, you would either see yourself or you would see God, but either way, whatever sort of ministry you offered her would not be offered out of compulsion to follow a moral teaching, not out of your need to abide by a dictate, but offered out of love of God and, equally, love of the other person.

It would be living out the commandments that Jesus offers as the greatest of the commandments. Perhaps that's what makes these words from Jesus, as recorded in Matthew, so difficult to swallow. Jesus's words are never easy. That's why no one would hire him as a parish pastor in today's world. That's why he ended up the victim of capital punishment. Much of what Jesus says is bothersome not simply to the caricatures of Pharisees and Sadducees that the Gospel writers create, but to listeners with 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears.

The deceptive simplicity of Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question must have angered the listeners of that conversation. See, Americans aren't the only ones who can turn something as simple as the U.S. Constitution and morph it from a 4-page document into an 80 volume, 800,000 page codified system of law. By the time we get to the first century when Jesus lived, the Ten Commandments had morphed from 10 guidelines into over 600 separate commandments.

Generations had spent precious intellectual fuel trying to discern what is meant to be a faithful follower of God.

This was not the only way of living a righteous, faithful life.

The Old Testament tradition, as it were, and the Jewish tradition in the inter-testamental period between Malachi and Matthew speak of the rich heritage of the Jewish faith. Pre-exilic prophetic traditions as displayed in Micah and Isaiah offer the understanding that Jesus offers to the crowd that day in Bethpage.

There is more than one way to skin a cat and Jesus was reminding the faithful that their own heritage offers an “otherwise” to simply following 600 some odd commandments. That’s what’s so deceptive about Jesus’ answer and why what he says speaks so directly to our work together this week. It seems to simplify the faith that people worked so hard at making complex. But, as is often with the case of Jesus’ saying, it is the opposite of simple.

It is, when you think about it, a rather simple life to live in accordance to a list of rules, no matter how many there are. It’s also a rather comfortable way to live.

Clean and unclean. In and out. Good and bad. Saved and unsaved. Black and white. Legal and illegal.

Religion becomes a moral code by which to live and by which to measure good citizenship. It may seem more complicated, but it’s actually easier to live that way, as a sort of robot who simply carries out mandates.

Jesus’ words are difficult.

They’re difficult because they tell us that our tradition, as ones who come out of Judaism, means that life is not to be lived in black and white.

Jesus’ invitation to return to the truth of his own tradition is an invitation to see the world not through the lens of a “must do” list or as a moral imperative that we are to guilt others in to following, but to see it in all its complexity, all its color, and to live in the gray-ness that is life.

It’s so often the simple mandates that make life so complicated.

Just ask the Cambodians who spent a year living as simply as possible what that’s done to complicate matters. How do they define who they are now, when their social status no longer has any real meaning?

In this exchange that the author of Matthew lays out for us, Jesus reminds us that “the faithful” are not defined by how well they uphold every single one of the 600 plus rules, that the business of religious institutions is not to define who’s in and who’s out. But “the faithful” are defined by how much we love God with the same stubborn commitment with which God loves us.

And that is only defined by how much we love our neighbors.

Without love of God, there is no love of neighbor.

Without love of neighbor, there is no love of God.

The tradition we call ours, all the way back to Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Numbers, reminds us what Jesus meant by the term, “neighbor”: He meant all those we consider “other” --

immigrant, ICE official, business leader, Member of Congress all those, that if we spent a year living the life of a beggar -- like our Cambodian Buddhist brothers and sisters, like many who journey for a million other reasons, having to depend on strangers for sheer survival -- we would discover are not other, but actually the hands and feet of the very God we serve.

And so it is through this lens that I approach and reflect on these few days we've been fortunate enough to have together. In my conversations and in our small group and plenary times together, I discovered that what this group uniquely brings to a debate that, over the course of the past few years has turned vitriolic, and while it is now more optimistic, it is still hinged upon the objectification and commodification of human beings. (Is it really a narrative victory when the debate has become one of claiming an economic rationale or appeasing a current and future voter block? I would argue no. We have a long way to go.)

Nor is it a victory when we attempt to stand on the ground of claiming a moral imperative, by adding yet another rule -- and guilt people into -- to follow in the rule book of what it means to be a "real" of "good" Christian. In that regard, we are simply attending to the temptation that Jesus warned us about long ago in a conversation he had with a lawyer in Bethpage.

What we do have to bring is something that is much like the paradox of faith itself: at once uniquely Christian and incredibly universal.

Five themes stick out to me as offerings that only an ecumenical body such as this can attend to with integrity:

The first (of course I would put this first, you'll have to forgive my bias and remember that 1. I am Protestant and 2. I have spent the vast majority of my professional life working with Lutherans) the first, not surprisingly, then, is grace.

Womanist theologian, Jacquelyn Grant, can be incredibly helpful for us in the context of working across the spectrum of opinion and experience within the immigration system and in regard to the concept of grace. See, Grant bases grace within the context of her African-American experience -- as one historically invisible in theology, including black and feminist theologies.

Grant reminds us (in much the same way that Gutierrez reminds us of God's preferential option for the poor) Grant reminds us that, as ones who belong to the one holy and apostolic church, that grace cannot be a neglected tenet of our being together.

While Grace is certainly not earned, it must be attended to and accepted. When grace, through embodied gratitude, is lived out through our lives as baptized communities, no one remains invisible. But that's not easy. It takes love and attention. It takes viewing grace as a sort of spiritual discipline that merits our keen attention.

And here's what I've heard this week about grace's relationship to comprehensive immigration reform. Even as studies suggest that the church is diminishing in its formal power within the American landscape, it has an opportunity to claim the informal power that grace gives us the freedom to assume.

We heard this week and it is a recurring theme among the DREAMers in particular that the church created space for them. It is also true for the asylum seekers and the cooperative business

owners – it is the church, attending to the margins, looking to make those society would deem “invisible” visible, living out its gratitude to God for the grace bestowed upon us, that permits power to be generated in the most unsuspecting of places.

And if we take anything back with us, let us remember and live into the power of the grace received as children of God baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Parent of us all.

A second theme I heard throughout the course of the past few days is that of humanity. Humanity grounded in relationship and an understanding that God chose not to be God without us.

In the context of immigration reform, it is easy to get caught up in talking about numbers, about economic impact, about moral imperative. It is easy to divorce the debate from its human frame and dehumanize a very human tragedy. Or to simply interject an illustration that does nothing but feed the framework of economic benefit and moral imperative.

But as faith leaders, you can speak otherwise and speak from a deeply-held theological belief that, because our God is a triune God, we can only speak of God in the language of relationship.

Recalling Martin Buber's work has been helpful this week. He lovingly cautions us not to speak about God directly, but only about relationships to God, namely through the relationships we have with others. This is certainly something we can lift up as we speak about the need to reform. We can dismantle terms like system, like comprehensive, and replace them with stories, with lived relationships, with flesh and blood.

Another theme I heard in our time together was that of acceptance. We live in a social arrangement that accommodates -- and even incentivizes -- racial and cultural differences. No immigration reform package will eradicate that arrangement. Or all of the “-isms” that America is plagued with.

And so, we leave with the task of helping those we lead see a different sort of future -- one of inclusion and embrace. To paraphrase one of my favorite theologians, Miroslav Volf: our future depends on how we deal with the issues of identity and difference. This is urgent. Every part of the world testifies to the urgency of this issue – ghettos, inner-cities, suburbs, even mountain-tops.

Our task is one of offering God's kin-dom vision to a broken world, one that embraces identity and otherness and lives into reconciliation.

Whatever we have to say about immigration reform, as Christians, we understand that the work is fundamentally about acceptance.

And with acceptance comes forgiveness, the next theme I heard this week.

I'm talking about the kind of forgiveness that L. Gregory Jones attends to in his theological work. Forgiveness as a practice, as a habit that reconciles and renews relationships when harmed and broken by sin and evil.

Forgiveness as love in spite of, in a world of anger, rage, revenge and narcissism is where our collective Christian traditions direct us to stand.

Forgiveness as a disciplined activity through which humans take responsibility, again and again and again, for one's self and one another.

It's the kind of forgiveness that has a moral ambiguity that our culture is not accustomed to and our discourse does not accommodate.

But in our traditions, the Gospel speaks to both the victim and the offender alike and proposes transformation for all.

That's another unique part of this immigration reform work that only the church can bring. In what other sphere of life in America do we take forgiveness seriously and attend to it with the sort of diligence that precedes transformation? In our current popular culture, forgiveness is either glibly assessed and too easy to attain or far too difficult for anyone to take seriously; and is thus virtually ignored in our life together.

Which brings me to the last theme I heard this week: a strong theme of community. It is here is where I believe our Orthodox family members can be so helpful to those of us who stand in a less liturgical tradition. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann reminds us that the world itself is a sacrament. The world is God's creation, both manifesting God's presence and creation itself is how God is in fellowship with us.

In this liturgical theology, then, the church is a sacrament to the world. And it is through the church that God manifests God's presence to humanity and has fellowship with creation.

There is simply no other space in our culture for such fellowship to occur. Sociologists, like Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, warn us of the impact that our rather community-less existence has on us as individual spiritual beings and as communities. We have constructed whole areas of suburbs and exurbs with no sidewalks, no front porches, no practical front doors. We no longer entertain others in our homes, so isolated have we become.

Post-immigration reform America will only be different if we take seriously the role of the church as sacrament to the world and its role of creating community. And it will only be different if we take seriously the message of the Lord's Table, at which Christ is both host and guest and at which we see how we are called to be – a communion/community of mutuality, one of egalitarian construct in which we give and take to equal degrees.

It is, perhaps, the theme of community that we see most explicitly our need for immigrants. In an era when we've forgotten how to be community with one another, we need others to resurrect our community past, to re-teach us how to be with one another. Immigrants who come from cultures in which community is vibrant, no longer a lost art form, can teach us community, re-ignite our connection to those beyond the confines of our homes, and, thereby, revive our churches and our very communities themselves.

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This is likely not the reflection you had in mind. Certainly wasn't what I had anticipated. I had thought about using it as a bit of a bully pulpit, as a way of plugging the good work of my organization, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and to further implore you to rally

your churches and congregants for the tough work ahead. But the Spirit, as it often does, had a different notion of our time together this morning.

If Jesus were here, I would be one of the first in the room to encourage him to simply change the rules. To sweep in reform today. And, in so doing, make life much simpler.

In response, I'd venture to say that he would sigh, hopefully smile, and say:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

After this, he would probably hand me a bright orange robe and my beggar's bowl, bidding me safe journey for the year ahead.