

Just As You Did...

Matthew 25: 31-46

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Lent III

Leslie A. Klingensmith

“When?” When did we do that? When did we NOT do that? I can hear the puzzlement, maybe even the outrage, in the voices of those who listened to Jesus so long ago. “When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you nothing to drink?” When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?” OR, “When did we see you naked and not give you clothing?” “When were you sick and in prison and we failed to visit you?” What are you talking about. Come on, Jesus. You’re not making any sense.

And then Jesus responds “Just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. And to the people he has cast out of his circle: “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” Wow. That’s clear. That’s unambiguous. What does it say to us about the choices we make and the way we treat each other?

If you listen to podcasts, I have one to recommend this morning. I’ve started listening to it for this sermon series on “Welcoming the Stranger.” It’s called *Immigration Matters*, and is hosted by attorneys Andrea Martinez and Megan Galicia. This is a new podcast – there are only maybe four or five episodes available to listen to right now, but if you listen to even one you will find yourself even more concerned about how people who are trying to immigrate to the United States are being treated. I know that there are different opinions on how many immigrants should be allowed into our country, how we deal with people who are trying to enter illegally (or have already done so), and how we decide fairly which countries should be allowed to send people here for economic and educational opportunity. Those are legitimate concerns and I don’t mean to minimize them. I hope, though, that we would all agree that, regardless of our beliefs about immigration law and practice, there are basic standards of human decency with which everyone should be treated. There’s no reason why human beings should be treated like cattle. They should not be sheltered in substandard facilities that are freezing cold and unsanitary, families should not be separated from one another, and children should not be put in cages. Surely we could agree that our society must clear at least that low bar.

On their podcast, Andrea Martinez and Megan Galicia delve deeply into issues of immigration law, the circumstances that lead people to seek asylum here in the United States, and stories of people who have immigrated successfully (as well as people who have been unable to do so). They also educate us about points like the difference between immigration and asylum and how the evil of human trafficking fits into all of this.

In one interview I listened to last week, Martinez and Galicia spoke with a leader in the field of immigration law named Sara Molina. Molina’s practice is based in Missouri, but she has

made several trips to the US/Mexico border to volunteer and provide pro bono help for people stranded in the process for one reason or another. Up until hearing that conversation, I didn't really grasp how the process of applying for asylum takes over a person's life. Of course I've seen the footage on the news of chain link fences and warehouses where people sleep on concrete floors with sleeping bags. That's bad enough, but I learned some things about what people go through before they even get to that part of the process. I'm here to say, it's heartbreaking.

For starters, to apply for asylum, people have to have reason to believe their lives are in danger if they stay in their home country. By definition, it's an urgent situation. The attorney Sarah Molina was describing how, before ever coming here, asylees have to file their request with the Mexican government, and they process the requests on that side of the border. There are lots of circumstances that lead people to apply for asylum – gang violence, domestic abuse, drug cartels, etc. Not all asylees are fleeing their government – but if they are, having the government in charge of their paperwork and their movement through the process probably isn't a great idea.

Once a potential immigrant or family files their request, they are assigned a number. Their number usually doesn't come up for at least a month, sometimes as much as two months. Impromptu tent cities have sprung up where people just hang out and wait for their number to be called. If the person or family has come from far away, they often have already given up their jobs, so there is little to do and no money coming in. A few months ago, the Mexican government evicted the largest tent city that had developed close to the immigration office, so now it is located much further away. People spend hours each day walking to the immigration center, hoping that their number will be called, and often all that effort is for nothing.

Sarah Molina talked about two scenarios that she witnessed on one of her border trips that continue to haunt her. One was a small boy – I think she said he was five years old – and his family's number had just been called. Molina poignantly described the glee that the child displayed: "Mama! Mama!" he cried happily. "It's our turn! We get to go to America!" The sadness for Molina was knowing that, in spite of the kid's jubilation, his life was not going to be better or safer anytime soon. Things were going to get worse before they got better, because once he crossed the border he would be turned over to our immigration system. At best, he and his family would languish in a frigid warehouse for weeks or months, undernourished and afraid. And the worst case scenario of course is that the child could end up separated from his parents.

The second piece that was unbelievably hard for Sarah Molina was hearing the stories of people's trauma, the reasons why they had made the difficult decision to try to start new lives here, leaving everything familiar to them. One day. Just by coincidence, Sarah Molina had back to back appointments with young women who had been gang raped. As Sarah described sitting with them, holding their hands, and hearing what they had been through, I felt like crying myself.

I don't know what the answers are for complicated questions related to jobs and health care and education. But I do know that people are people, and we belong to each other just as

surely as we each belong to God. The least we can do is not add to people's trauma. Surely we can do better than we are now.

Which brings me to some of Jesus' more troubling words. This is a seriously sobering passage that we find here in Matthew...no one wants to imagine themselves in the position of being the goats when the last judgement rolls around. There's no doubt that these are harsh words. If I believed in eternal punishment they would really scare me, but fortunately I think grace overrides damnation. I think, and I hope, that Jesus spoke so harshly to get our attention, to make us aware of what is truly important if we wish to follow and serve him. Some of the other things that get so much attention from the morality police might not actually be as significant as they would have us think. Jesus has a lot to say about how we are to treat each other...and points out that how we treat those whom our culture would tell us are "the least" – the least deserving, the least powerful, the least sophisticated, the least able to navigate life without help – how we treat "the least" – whatever that means to us...that is the way we are treating Christ himself. I think about how I have behaved in some of my worst moments, and feel compelled to ask Jesus for forgiveness. Again.

So, there are many, many things I do not know. I don't know if it would be better for the international economy to try to build schools and create jobs in other countries so people have opportunity there and don't feel like they have no choice but to uproot themselves and move elsewhere seeking better fortunes. I don't know if busting the drug cartels will make certain places safer, or if it can even be done. I don't know precisely how to steer young people away from gangs and into lifestyles and vocations that are legal and life-giving – although I do believe that can be done. So much to consider, so much about which we must engage in prayerful discernment. Even when we don't know the whole process, though, or how things will resolve, we can each do the "next right thing" in whatever situation we find ourselves. And Jesus is clear here about what the next right thing is. Just as you did...Just as you did NOT do. May God show us mercy, and may God show us the way to do better.

Amen.