Borders, boundaries and belonging – June 30, Riverside Church

Good morning, Church.

On the side of Interstate 25 just south of the town of Belen, New Mexico, is a large billboard that declares: Heaven has a wall and strict immigration policies. Hell has open borders.” Let me repeat that: “Heaven has a wall and strict immigration policies. Hell has open borders.” Even more ironic is the fact that “Belen” is Spanish for Bethlehem, the place where Mary and Joseph arrived and were told, “There is no room for you here”. The word Bethlehem literally translates as “House of Bread” – bread- that universally acknowledged symbol of hospitality and divine presence. How could a New Mexico town named after Bethlehem tolerate the location of a sign that shouts, “You do not belong”? Christ, the Migrant, is literally being disinvited from dwelling in their midst.

This billboard is the opposite of the banners I have often admired inside and outside Riverside Church where there has always been a message of Welcome and Inclusion and a celebration of diversity. I am grateful for the special role your church has played in our Hood River community – May this calling continue and expand in the years to come.

For in the years ahead we will all be called to respond even more generously to multiple waves of refugees that will affect our country and indeed our little cozy community of Hood River.

I love the Gospel Reading today from Mathew 25:40 – 45. What a subversive parable Jesus tells about who is included in our circle of belonging - the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, the imprisoned are identified with the Christ. Our inclusion in the kingdom is based solely on how we treat these vulnerable people. Jesus did not say : “It’s sort of like how you treat me; he said “This is the Christ”. This reminds me of an old story of a hungry beggar who knocked on the door of the priest’s house and asks for a piece of bread. The priest goes to the kitchen and returns with the bread and responds to the beggar in his usual way: “I’m not giving you this bread for my sake; I’m not giving you this bread for your sake; I’m giving you this bread for God’s sake.” And the beggar replied: “Well, for Christ’s sake, will you put some butter on it !”. Of course the meaning of the story is that the beggar is Christ and the pious priest was blind to the sacred opportunity of sharing bread with the Christ. Likewise the refugees on our southern border are knocking at our door asking us for compassion and inclusion and awareness of our common humanity and divinity.

During the past year I have had several powerful experiences that have helped me move from what I call “Homeland Spirituality” to “Border Spirituality”. Exactly one year ago today I retired as a Providence Hospice social worker, threw on a backpack, and walked the 500 mile pilgrimage path known as the Camino de Santiago or simply “The Way”. Did you know that the early name for the followers of Jesus was “The Way” as if to emphasize that we are all humble pilgrims, and spiritual growth is found not in some static arrival point but rather along the paths of our own lives, where, in silence and companionship, we all walk each other home to the sacred mystery, which is love. For over a thousand years pilgrims have walked to Santiago which was located near the furthest extent of the known world – to a kind of borderland - and then turned around and walked back home again. Santiago was not so much the destination but the “turn around” point or Border, where the pilgrim continued back into the world. A few months after I returned home, I had the honor of experiencing my “turn around” point by serving arriving refugees in the small Mexican town of Nogales. For a month I lived and served within sight of the border wall that literally splits Nogales into two separate countries. Last week I returned from a Providence Hospital sponsored service trip to McAllen, Texas where Catholic Charities is offering refuge to the hundreds and hundreds of families that have recently been released from detention and are awaiting Asylum procedures in the United States, hopefully close to relatives or friends who already live here.

All these recent experiences have formed and informed me on how to grow in what I call the spiritual path of a Border Pilgrim. I have been constantly challenged to move from a kind of “homeland spirituality” to a more vibrant “border spirituality”.

We all experience “borders” in our lives. – areas where love and suffering meet in a divine dance and where we are called to let go of our ordinary ways of navigating our world. – Attending a difficult birth, vigiling with a dying patient, intentional sacred travel or pilgrimage, learning a new language, rejection, acceptance of a child’s alternative path, loss of a job, depression, the end of a relationship – these borderlands are our teachers and our source of divine love.

 “Homeland Spirituality” is concerned with security, walls, protection, definitions, procedures, rules, etc. Homeland spirituality can easily become a defense against whatever is alien. Homeland spirituality knows “who’s in, and who’s out”. Homeland spirituality is more concerned with conserving what we have. It tends to feel that it is in possession of the whole truth which will need to be defended. There is little room for compromise, for assimilation, for adaptation, for evolution. It is like a pilgrimage in which you take a first-class flight to a famous Shrine – there is no struggle, no blisters, no comradery of broken pilgrims along the Way. The focus is on the arrival, and there is little thought of the Way that we are still walking. Perhaps the sentiment “We have arrived” best epitomizes the mindset of homeland spirituality.

 On the other hand, “Border Spirituality” is tentative and comfortable with ambiguity. It is more like a field hospital than a grand medical center. Border Spirituality celebrates the insights of those who have traveled on different paths. Other cultural and religious traditions are embraced as complementary to our own experiences and beliefs. Border Spirituality recognizes that we are all headed to the same divine mystery. In Border Spirituality authority is persuasive instead of coercive and agreement with church authority depends on whether the pastors smell like their sheep. Perhaps the sentiment that best describes those who live by Border Spirituality is: “This land was made for you and me”.

Another lens through which to view this “border spirituality” is through the insights of Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology emphasizes that the Gospel message is not really accessible to those who live a life of power, privilege and intolerance. The only way one can truly HEAR the subversive message of the Gospel is through solidarity with the poor and vulnerable. A preferential option for the poor calls us to analyze our country’s policies, laws, and economic systems based on how they will impact the poor. Indeed, Pope Francis correctly placed the ethical considerations regarding Climate Change on how it will primarily impact those who are most vulnerable.

Perhaps the first way to start to embrace this “border spirituality” is to examine how we name our reality. Words are powerful and help define our compassionate response. References to recently arriving immigrants as “illegal”, “alien”, “rapists”, criminals and “murderers” call up a completely different response than referring to them as Refugees, unaccompanied children, dreamers, undocumented workers, mother, father, child, Jose, Maria, Jesus. I love the way our neighbors to the North refer to their immigrants as “new Canadians”. This linguistic shift allows us to look at a new reality, and we all know that we tend to see what we are looking for.

What I saw on the U.S./Mexican border, on both sides, were countless examples of compassion and solidarity on the part of both the refugees and those who accompany them. I saw expressions of gratitude for the simple gift of shoelaces or a belt (All the refugees in McAllen left detention without these basic items), I saw young dads crying while holding their sick child in their arms, I saw some of the toughest looking migrants grab a mop and start mopping floors after meals, I saw donations pouring in daily and I wish I could have taken a picture of some of the refugees when they finally got a change of clothes; I saw the delight in the eyes of a young mom and her child when she finally was accompanied by one of our team members to the bus station to board a bus for a 30 hour ride to be re-united with family. I saw volunteers hand out donated teddy bears to accompany the younger children on this final journey. I saw children jump rope as if they didn’t have a care in the world. I saw older siblings care for their younger brothers and sisters with a maturity way beyond their years. I saw parents forgo a hot meal so that they could wait in a 6 hour registration line to start the difficult process of petitioning for asylum.

So what can we do when faced with this reality that we choose to name, with all its pain and all its compassion? How can we respond in a meaningful way? How can we “hear” and “live” the Gospel once we know the truth? I know that there is a place for big responses and mobilization of our national resources. But there is also a place for the wisdom of St. Teresa of Kalkuta who wisely stated: “we may not all be able to do great things, but we can do little things with great love”.

Going on pilgrimage or serving on the Border can be a great teacher that takes us out of our comfort zone and makes us willing to “try something new”. Perhaps we will discover that our old ways are no longer feeding our soul, and the adaptations we learn on the journey are more productive approaches that truly awaken us to the divine mystery that can surely be encountered on both sides of any border.

At the highest point on the Camino de Santiago there is a simple iron cross, the Cruz de Ferro, where pilgrims traditionally leave a small stone from their homeland, releasing themselves of any burdens or loss they have been carrying along the way. On my walk up to the Cruz de Ferro in the early morning darkness, I had a flash of insight. I suddenly realized that my Camino task was not to come up with some great master plan for this new retirement stage in my life. Rather I felt the Camino was asking me to reflect more, not on what I wanted to “do”, but rather on who I needed to “be”. I felt the Camino calling me to reflect on the core qualities I want to embody during this stage – more compassionate and kind; less judgmental or arrogant; more curious and less of a “know-it-all”, more willing to express my feelings and share time with others, and less stoic or disengaged, willing to take time with those who are hurting and wounded, less disconnected from the pain that is around me.

 The word “sanctuary” somehow came to me during this reflection on my walk up that hill. I have worked in the local Community College with students who were undocumented and had no recourse to student aid or services. These brave students struggled and won the campaign to declare our college a “sanctuary campus”. This was a great success, but I never really applied the word “sanctuary” to myself. How can I be a sanctuary, especially during my elder years, for those around me? How can I embody that safe space that welcomes others in, and where they can feel cherished and loved unconditionally? This requires a level of trust and vulnerability that Border Spirituality seems to be asking me to make room for in my life. To “be” sanctuary is a lot more demanding than to merely advocate for sanctuary campuses and cities. May this word – sanctuary - given to me in a special way on the Camino, be a guiding arrow as I strive to embody sanctuary into my border spirituality.

I’d like to join others to explore this call to Border Spirituality as a valid spiritual path that puts us in solidarity with those of other religions and with all those who migrate in search of sanctuary.

So, will we choose to live by a stifling “homeland spirituality”, protective of our own tribe and our borders, or will we , like Christ, have the courage to cross borders that separate us from our fellow human beings and truly cherish our dear humanness.

Perhaps another word for Border Spirituality is simply “compassion”, and I love the description of Hernri Nouwen regarding what Compassion means:

“Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.”

In many ways Henri Nouwen’s description of “compassion” is kind of a paraphrase of today’s gospel reading: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do unto me.” Let’s “put the butter on the bread” - for the sake of the Christ who is in you and me and in all those who are on both sides of our borders, as we all seek to walk each other home to a sanctuary that is already within our own hearts.