

**TMY SERMON**

**July 28, 2019**

**Genesis 18: 20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11: 1-13**

What was your reaction when you first saw that picture? You know the one I mean - the one of Oscar Martinez Ramirez and his 2 year old daughter, Valerie. It came out in late June of this year and it showed their bodies, washed up on the shore after they had drowned in the Rio Grande River, near Matamoros, Mexico and near the bridge that crosses over from there to Brownsville, Texas.

Did you feel sadness, shock, despair, anger, frustration?

They got to that point through a horrible confluence of events, policies and positions - many of them taken by our government. Our president is fond of saying that immigrants are drug dealers, murders and rapists. He's also been known to state that our country is full - too full even for immigrants seeking asylum due to threats of violence, starvation or persecution. ICE agents are becoming increasingly aggressive, to the point of stopping and detaining U.S. citizens who they just suspect are immigrants. The policy of separating families from their children, keeping those children in cages. As a result of these and other policies and practices, we now have about 4,000 migrant kids in custody in U.S. facilities. It's estimated that they will spend all of their childhood in custody because their parents and relatives are so afraid of the newly jacked-up and menacing ICE agents that they don't want to risk appearing before them to retrieve their kids, for fear that they themselves will be detained, and the kids will remain where they are. A horrible Catch 22.

And all of it stems from the notion that we are not able or willing to share anything we have with people who have less.

Our government now has a policy called "remain in Mexico" for all immigrants, regardless of their reason for coming here. That's what caught Oscar and Valerie. They had been trying to cross legally but at the border were rebuffed. They were from El Salvador, where violent gangs now have 65,000 active members, where those gangs start recruiting boys as young as 12 to be members and where those gangs use and abuse girls and women of all ages. But our policy didn't care. So Oscar and Valerie and their family were told to wait in Mexico, in one of the horrible camps that have sprung up near Matamoros. Asylum seekers are not told how long they will need to wait, nor are they offered any help. And so, in late June, with no end in sight and no hope of sympathy or assistance, and with temperatures reaching 110 degrees, Oscar and his family opted for one final act of desperation and tried to swim across the river. That photo shows the result.

It's easy to blame all of this on the President, maybe toss in ICE and the border agents. And they are doing a lot of this. But the troubling thing is that this is not all trickling down from the top. Some of our fellow citizens within our own country are supporting these actions, are giving implicit and explicit encouragement to everyone from ICE border agents to elected officials. Saying essentially yes, we agree. Keep 'em out. Send 'em back. It's not just the government, it's also a sign of the ethos, the zeitgeist of our country, in some measure.

How does hearing all that make you feel? Again, maybe sad, frustrated, despairing. What it should NOT make you feel is powerless.

It all seems so daunting - a huge problem and a huge mess, and so many powerful and ordinary people are behind the policies and positions that have led us here, it seems like there's no way to turn that tide, to change all those opinions and get all those policies to be re-thought and revised.

And then you open the Bible and read Genesis and you see that even GOD can be dissuaded, turned aside, made to reconsider a plan. And the agent of that change is a single human being, Abraham. Abraham single handedly talks God into reconsidering God's decision to destroy all Sodom.

What, one might ask, was the sin of Sodom that got God so irked? Don't Google that question on your work computer or your browser history will spark a phone call from Human Resources. Not that I'd know about that. There are quite a few theories about the sins of Sodom, many of which can't really be discussed in polite company.

But if you cut through all the various theories on what Sodom's sin was, at its heart, everyone seems to agree that the people of Sodom were grossly inhospitable to strangers, hostile and even violent to outsiders, and unwilling to share.

Sodom was a city of lush plenty. In the lyrical poetry of the Hebrew scriptures, it was said that every path in Sodom was lined with seven rows of fruit trees. In a hostile, arid desert environment, that is a pretty inviting sounding spot. Enough water to support vegetation, and then to make it even better, that vegetation produces delicious food. So naturally, folks with less would come to Sodom looking for help. The folks in Sodom, so the urban legend goes, would give money to the immigrant beggars, but the Sodom residents would write their names on the money before giving it to the beggars. And then all the Sodom merchants would refuse to sell anything to the outsiders. So when the outsiders finally died of hunger and thirst, all the Sodom folks could go retrieve the alms that they had given. A horrible Catch-22 for the poor outsiders just looking for help.

So Sodom was essentially a country with lots of natural resources and gifts, surrounded by a more hostile, less gifted environment, and the folks in Sodom would not share and aggressively turned back visitors and outsiders. Hmm. That sounds kind of familiar but I can't quite say how. Oh, wait. That's US!

Makes me wonder if God has any plans for the U.S. And it makes me wonder if we can hire that Abraham guy as our lawyer to argue for us.

In Genesis, God ultimately changes God's plan because Abraham persuades God that true justice means that punishment of the wicked can't go forward if that punishment will also sweep up in its net innocent and righteous people. Innocent and righteous people like Oscar and Valerie.

We can take Abraham's courage and persistence and we can use it as a model.

Oh leaders of the American people, suppose 20% of immigrants trying to come into the United States are evil, but suppose 80% of them are fleeing Honduras, where 1,500 cabbies and truckers have been murdered by gangs in the past 9 years because they refused to pay shake-down money. Will you separate all immigrant children from their parents, even for the 80%? Oh, you leaders of the greatest and richest democracy in the world, far be it from you to do such a thing.

Oh American voters who elect those leaders, let me take it upon myself to speak to you, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose that 40% of the immigrants at our border are bad dudes, as the President says, and suppose that only 60% of them are fleeing Guatemala, where drought and famine triggered by global warming have wiped out so many farmers. It is now estimated that in the highlands of Guatemala, 70% of all children are suffering from starvation. Will you still support a government that says even if you are fleeing starvation, trying to feed your emancipated children, the U.S. is full? Surely your mercy will move you.

Oh neighbors and friends, please don't be angry with me if I talk politics at this cocktail party, but suppose that only 40% of all the immigrants trying to enter the U.S. are good people, fleeing the gang violence in El Salvador like Oscar and Valerie, and suppose that 60% of them are criminals. Will you still keep all of them in cages - the good 40% and the criminal 60%, and refuse all of them entry? Surely we have enough produce from our seven rows of fruit trees to share with all.

Oh fellow parishioners of COS, please don't get upset if I speak just once more. If even a mere 20% of the immigrants at our borders are people fleeing persecution and corruption in their home countries, fleeing violence and starvation, fleeing abject poverty and broken systems, will you still stand silent while those 20% are so badly mistreated on our very doorstep? Won't you speak out and act?

Sure, it's a huge problem. So many minds to change, policies to revise, positions to soften. It's a big change in direction that we're asking for here. But look at the gospel. If you want something, you've got to ask over and over again. You've got to persist. In the name of justice and mercy, WE've got to persist.