

Messages From the Heart

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UU Church Write Up

messagesfromtheheart Uncategorized March 2, 2020 13 Minutes



World Central Kitchen dining hall in Matamoros Encampment

For those who have asked for the talk I gave at the Waterville UU Church on Sunday March 1, 2020. May this help those who want to spread the truth:

Buenos Dias,

Thank you for coming out this morning. May we open our hearts to enlightenment, courage, stamina, clarity, and the determination to do the work that needs to be done.

A few years ago I was listening to our president speak about securing our borders and he used the terms “animals and infestation” to refer to those coming to our southern border. A red flag went up. We have heard these terms throughout history. Terms that precede genocides. Because in order for good people to stand by and do nothing or actively participate in the evil we need to believe that those who are being affected are not people. As we listen today let us think of that. If there is only one thing that you take away from today, it is that we are talking about people with hopes and dreams just like you and me, and they are asking for our help.

There are over 60,000 people stuck on the southern border. They are spread between California and Texas. They are in tents, shelters, are making due squatting in abandoned buildings, or renting rooms in hotels. All of them are living in fear and in extremely unsafe conditions. The cartels along this border prey on these most vulnerable people. Kidnapping them and hurting them as a means to extort money from them and their families who live in the United States. Our government knows this is happening and yet it continues.

Recently I returned from Matamoros, Mexico where over 2,000 people are living in tents. There are many others scattered throughout the city. It is extremely unsafe in Matamoros. The cartel presence and thus the Mexican National Guard presence is obvious. After fleeing incredible violence, traveling thousands of miles, they are stuck living in even more violence. The trauma and exhaustion are visible on their faces. Once you see, you cannot unsee. And that is why I am here with you today. To do my best to help you see.

In Matamoros we worked with the World Central Kitchen to serve meals. The one rule they told us as we prepared the tables inside the big dining tent was to look each person in the eye, smile, and say hola. So that is what we did. The people we served, who have been through so much smiled back. They were shy and appreciative. There were many young families. Young women with babies in fabric wraps on their bodies and little children wrapped around their legs. Extremely protective dads balancing plates for their family. Young boys, often in groups. There was one grandpa with 5 plates he was maneuvering when all of a sudden he was in absolute panic. One of the 4 little ones wasn't wrapped around his leg. Many of us have experienced something similar. We are out in public and we look up and our little one has strayed too far away and we feel panic. But this was panic on a whole new level. Thankfully the woman behind him found the little boy quickly and the line proceeded. That is the constant fear they live in. The cartels take children. Human trafficking is big business. They take women too. The migrants know this. We know this. The following day as I walked to the Resource Center in Matamoros a young boy, maybe 12ish came running up to hug me. He was our helper the night before. If you work with kids here in Maine we know that 12 year old boys don't normally run up and hug adults. But living in such desperation their appreciation for someone, anyone, to help them is so obvious. His mom stood by and watched with a big smile on her face. I again heard the word, gracias. Something else I noticed, that even living in such squalor they are clean. Their clothes are washed, the faces of their children are clean, hair clean and neatly braided. All this with minimal water that is provided via hoses and water holding tanks. They are a proud people forced to live in subhuman conditions.

While in Brownsville, I joined the Witness at the Border group and witnessed in the tent courts and at the airport where deportations occur daily. Those were excruciating to watch. In the tent courts the migrants come in for their hearings. The judge is far away and visible on a large TV. Most do not have lawyers. We heard one after another told to come back with proper paperwork months later. Back to Mexico they went. I tried to imagine the fear they all felt knowing that this powerful person on the TV screen who would never look them in the eye, had the power to determine their entire future. It was a sham. Due process was not happening at this court. We spoke with an attorney outside. She shared what her work has become. It is clear that these attorneys are nothing short of unsung heroes. During the predawn hours, while standing along the airport fence, the historic significance of what we were witnessing wasn't lost on any of us. We agreed that we were bearing witness to our country's cattle cars, the trains used in Nazi Germany. Big busses came filled with people. They had nothing but the clothing on their backs. After getting off the busses they were inspected, including looking into their mouths, the hair ribbons taken from the girls and women, and all were put in 5 point shackles. Men, women, children, and elders all shackled like criminals. They are not criminals. Seeking asylum is legal and is protected by both international and national laws. But here they were, with heads bowed, totally defeated and leaving their last chance of hope. Up the stairs into the plane they hopped. Many struggled and fell. For some it was back to the home country they fled but for many it was off to the unfamiliar and dangerous land. We have heard from Roman Catholic workers in Guatemala who greet these planes that the people who get off them don't know where they are. They are exhausted and confused. Many think they are in a different city in the United States. They have nothing, know no one, and are desperate and in yet another dangerous city. This is what the Safe Third Country policy looks like. Because separating children from their families, putting them in detention or losing them in a corrupt adoption system wasn't cruel enough. Because returning them to violent cities in Mexico wasn't cruel enough, we now put them on planes without any due process and send them to Guatemala, a violent country that does not have the infrastructure to handle this. Why would Guatemala agree to this? We bullied them by threatening to cut off funding. The same reason why many of the human rights groups are nowhere to be found. Many depend on the donations from our government so cannot betray the criminal policies and offer the aid that is so desperately needed.

When I first heard about the separation policy by this administration I thought it must be a mistake. We would not take children away from their families and put them in detention camps. . But we did and we still are. And this isn't the first time in our country's history that we've done this. Our history has been brutal to people who live in areas with natural resources of high value, including the original peoples of this land. These types of actions, I learned, were the real beginning of this story. Decades ago our government intervened with the governments of Central America so multinational corporations could take the resources away from the indigenous peoples. Think United Fruit Company. Our intervention, including military intervention, has caused the instability, the poverty, the violence that push these people to flee their homes. Think about what it would take for you to grab your kids and leave your home. No one wants to leave their home. These people are no different. Our policies in their home countries have caused this and yet, when they arrive at our doors, desperate, begging for help, we turn them away and force them to live with incredible threats of violence. With a little more research I found that by turning them away, by closing every port of

entry along our southern border, we are breaking international human rights laws that were written and signed by 48 countries after WW2. We have literally fought a global world war over this. But we turn our backs on them and do it anyway. The number one thing people who support what our government is doing say, is that they came here “illegally”. Yet we have ended every legal means of asking for asylum. So we turn our heads and look away when our country implements policies designed to cause deterrence. It is important to know that the history behind our current policies of deterrence goes back to Bill Clinton. His administration was the author of the policies that we still use today. Those policies were racist and inhumane when he wrote them and used them, and they continue today. They were beefed up under the second Bush administration under the guise of 9/11 and then again under Obama. But as we know, they have been injected with steroids by this current administration. The policies of deterrence are based on cruelty in many forms. Child separations, detention camps with subhuman and abusive conditions, closing ports of entry, the wall and other barriers, they are all parts of the same plan of deterrence. And certainly the carefully crafted messages of racism for us to adopt are a part of it. The belief is to make the act of attempting to enter our country as awful as possible and they won't come. But yet they come anyway because what they are fleeing is even worse.

My first commitment began when I helped with shutting down Homestead child detention camp in southern Florida. Homestead was the largest for profit child detention camp in the country. Many people including John Kelly, who was then White House Chief of Staff for the current president and an author of the child separation policy, made millions of dollars off of this facility. Our tax money paid for it and made him and many others even more wealthy than they already were. And this is not unique for Homestead. Detention centers, jails, airtravel, busses, shackles, ankle monitors, militarized borders are all big business. As they say, follow the money. Homestead, an unlicensed facility and thus not subject to follow state child protection laws, sat near an Air Reserve base on the edge of a swamp in southern Florida. It was hot, buggy, and the most horrible place I have ever been to. While at Homestead, witnesses stood on ladders and watched children on the other side of a fence, playing soccer. Knowing that they were taken away from their families was physically and emotionally painful. Standing on the ladders, watching the kids, I of course thought of my two children and I prayed that if this had ever happened to them, someone would help them. During the 8 months Homestead was open, over 14,000 children went through their doors. The cost of each child was \$750 per day. At the height of its use there were 3,200 children even though it was designed to hold 1,200 children. The math of profit and suffering is overwhelming.

After returning home from Homestead a small group of us began to stand on the corner of Main and Temple Streets in Waterville. Around the country people do this in acts of solidarity against these policies. During the cold winter months we have taken a break but will begin again as soon as the weather is warmer. Maybe you could join us.

Back in October I visited another border city, Juarez, the sister city of El Paso, TX. While there I worked with two young women who make the daily trip to cross over into Juarez. They go with clothing and supplies. They spoke about this dual city community and what it was like before the wall and the militarization of it. Families crossed back and forth freely. They went for school,

shopping, out to dinner, for family celebrations. Now it's different. There are fully weaponized military police everywhere, concerta wire, the wall, long long lines to stand through. It was sad to hear how their way of life has been changed because of racist policies. In Juarez people are spread around the city in shelters, most run by religious organizations. At one shelter we helped prepare simple burritos for lunch. While standing with women from the mountains of Guatemala we talked and laughed. The woman who brought us did the interpreting. As we ended, the tiny woman next to me said, "Thank you for not forgetting us." I promised her we would not forget her and her family. While in that shelter I learned about something called the Icebox. They were terrified of it. What I learned is that they all went through an icebox. It was the detention cell they were put in right after they presented themselves for asylum. They are put into these cells with many others. They are given thin milar blankets and if they are given food it is of poor quality and sometimes still frozen. They do not have beds. Their medical needs are not met. They stay there waiting to be processed. Sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for days. One woman brought her son over to us. He looked to be about 10. She showed us the frostbite on his left cheek from being in the icebox. It was then I realized that it wasn't just a cold cell, it was a freezing cold cell. She told us if someone complained about how cold it was, they would make it colder. Remember the policies of deterrence? This was such a policy in action. I never felt so ashamed to be a United States citizen as I did at that moment. We also learned that almost everything they come across with is taken from them including medicines, rosary beads, shoe laces, stuffed animals, clothing, even documents they need for their asylum hearings. One way the cartels know who they are is that they do not have shoe laces in their shoes.

In Maine we have a new head of Border Patrol. He was trained in El Paso and was a member of a very racist border patrol Facebook group that has since been taken down. He has stated that too many are trying to cross our border. Since he has arrived, ICE has ramped up it's actions. Recently a migrant farm worker was arrested in Waterville's Walmart, many others have been arrested around the state. The chance for deportation is high. We have a new ICE office and detention cell in downtown Portland in One City Center. We have a new ICE detention center being built in Scarborough. But because of swift and strong public outrage, Concord and Greyhound buses will no longer allow ICE to search their buses without warrants.

It has become painfully clear to me that we have a deep moral and spiritual problem in our country and thus a deep moral and spiritual obligation to correct it. It will take the work of every single one of us. No one gets to sit this one out.

It is easy to get swallowed up by the evil and the grief. But it is important to know that there are many good people working as hard as they can to stop this. It gives me hope. So how can you help? You can join us on the corner on Fridays at noon. I promise we will help educate you. Follow me on Facebook, donate to any of the organizations on the sheet of paper you will be provided, talk to your neighbors and family members about this. Most do not know or are ill informed. Become educated. Write Letters to the Editor. Our voices are desperately needed to drown out the ignorance and hatred that is often expressed on those pages. If you can, go to the border. Team Brownsville is a great place to start. Please call our city counselors, state representatives, US Senators and Members of Congress. Do the city counselors of Waterville know this is happening in our city? Do our state representatives

know that ICE detention facilities are being built in our state? Do our Senators and Members of Congress know what is happening in our state, in our country, and along our border? Ask them what they plan to do to stop it. Reaching out to them is critically important. Calls are the most effective but postcards, letters, or even online submissions help too. Our United States Senators and Congressional House Representatives all need to go to the border to see for themselves, first hand, the effects of Remain in Mexico and Safe Third Country policies. Two will tell you that they've gone. That was before both these policies began. Tell them they need to go back again. They tell me that no one calls. Please call. Only then will they begin to raise their voices against what we are doing. Remind them that their silence and actions are being recorded. This is happening on their watch. And in all fairness, it's happening on ours too. Our voices or silence are also being recorded. We each need to get involved however we feel comfortable.... No, comfort has no place in any of this. We all need to break out of our comfort zones and do the work that this requires of us. If we wondered what we would do during the Holocaust, we already know by what we are doing now.

Please vow today to not look away. We have the opportunity to participate in the work to end what I am sure will be known as a historic ethnic cleansing that is occurring by our government.

Let's end with something that was written 80 years ago by a German Lutheran minister as he struggled with what was happening during the rise of Nazi Germany:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist.

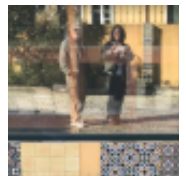
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.

In solidarity, thank you for listening and not looking away. Never again is now.

Published by [messagesfromtheheart](#)



A wife, mother, activist, gardener, knitter, retired educator using writing to makes sense of my heart and our world. [View all posts by messagesfromtheheart](#)

One thought on “UU Church Write Up”

Vielka says:

March 2, 2020 at 11:08 pm

Perfect. Perfectly said Amiga mia. 🙌👊💕💕

Reply

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