

# Sermons at Oak Grove

November 18, 2007

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*Luke 17:11-19*

*"We are a Pilgrim People"*

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## Scripture Readings

### **Isaiah 65:17-25**

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

## Sermon: “We are a Pilgrim People”

Next year March I will celebrate my 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of living in the United States, a country I came to appreciate as people, “immigrants”, from all over the world can, and do call it “home”. I consider myself fortunate as I had the luxury to come to the United States by choice. After completing my theological studies I wanted to work in a faith community in a culture other than my own. At the age of 27, I also came out of a sense of adventure ... that I would meet my wife in Texas was not part of how I envisioned my future, but God’s.

Last week a group of eight Oak Grovers visited Tucson, Arizona, the US/Mexico border and Mexico on a Study Seminar with *Borderlinks*, a non-profit agency who specializes in teaching people the complexity of issues surrounding the border. A bonus on this past trip was to visit with our fellow Oak Grovers who winter in Green Valley, Arizona and experience something of their ministry and lives on the border.

Last week we met so many people whose experience was so different from my own. Their life situations do not allow for the “luxury of choice”, but only leaves them with necessity. The Rev. Delle McCormick, Executive Director of *BorderLinks*, mentioned in her sermon here at Oak Grove, one very gripping piece of art in the exhibit “The Heart’s Path: Border Art and Artifacts From the Migrant Trail,” that features the work of 10 artists who were inspired by border crossers and the things they left behind. It is a little mounted wooden box framing a child’s feeding spoon asking the question; “How far would you walk to feed your child?”. This question leaves us with the reality of a group of people who leave their countries of birth, their “homelands”, due to increased poverty, unemployment, and violence which is brought about by a complexity of factors including the global economy and politics.

Those of us from Oak Grove, had a hard time comprehending the factors that will force someone to leave their family and friends, the only place that most people have ever known, to take their chances in the Sonora Desert to be hurt,

mistreated, or killed, a place where they might get caught, or worse, found by the bandits that also travel the trails in the desert.

Most of us do not know what it is like to try to cross the desert with only what you have on your back and as much water as you can carry; what it is to come to a place where you are a stranger in a strange land, where everyone might be out to get you. What we do realize is that this was not a decision that was made lightly, made out of greed or out of a sense of irresponsibility. The desert is too big, the separation from their homes too painful, the risk too great for people to risk their lives without having some really good reasons to do so.

What makes it difficult for us to have compassion with migrants or people we call “illegals” is that they are being criminalized by our culture. They are a group of people caught between the economics of job security and border security. Here in Minnesota we feel so far removed from the border, but the reality is that the border has come to our own backyard. Last December, just before Christmas federal immigration officials raided the Swift & Co. pork processing plant in Worthington, Minnesota, arresting or detaining 230 workers, separating family members from one another.

As the population in Minnesota becomes more and more diverse the need for religious communities to educate its members will become increasingly important. Here at Oak Grove, we as a Christian community want to be a leader in this regard within our city. For this reason our Session approved this trip to the US/Mexico border. We also continue our participation in dialogue with our City and the Muslim Community Centre to increase tolerance, understanding, and awareness.

The reality is that immigration is not only a US/Mexico dilemma, as the United Nations Convention on Migrants' Rights Information Kit states that one human being in 35 is an international migrant and that the number of people who have settled down in a country other than their own is estimated at 175 million worldwide. Many stories have been told about the hapless plight of these people who, in their quest for life and wholeness, instead experienced brokenness and

death. For this reason the World Council of Churches calls migrant workers “uprooted people” whose past is dim and whose future is uncertain.

It is within this context that the prophet Isaiah presents God's ultimate creative will as a world at peace and promises of the arrival of "a new heaven and a new earth." The former is simply gone. ... eliminated and replaced by the new order of health, wholeness, good work and peace, for all.

For us as Christians, these promises made so long ago, perhaps 2500 years, are meant to call us anew to commit ourselves to a life of hope, rather than despair, and the “construction” so to speak of the New Jerusalem. Today at the baptism of Simon Omot and baby Charlie we are reminded once again that “we who were baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ,” so that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.” ... everyone, everything belongs. There are no aliens; no illegals, all belong in the one family, God’s family, the human family.

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The issue of immigration asks: How do we live the reality that our migrant brothers and sisters are people who were created in the image of God, and whom God called beloved ... not people who can ever be described as "illegal" by anyone?

As a church that sees itself as a community where the hurts of the world are felt and addressed, we are called to actively campaign to uphold the human rights of all ... including migrant workers and members of their families. “The protection of the human rights of peoples, such as migrant workers, is our social responsibility and belongs to the basic core of our being a community of faith.

Migrants are persons just like any other whose basic human rights to live in safety and with dignity must be protected. They are human beings who are created in the image of God. They are the strangers whom God loves. Migrant workers, and all of us, are interwoven in the cosmic fabric. We can’t be blind to the harsh realities that people experience. Our Christian faith must find ways to contribute to the humanization of God’s people and for the realization of the reign

of God's justice and peace (Sermon preached by the Rev. Connie Semy Mella *Migrants and Their Quest for Wholeness*, Deuteronomy 10:17-19)".

So that, in the words of a prayer in memory of those who went to look for a better life, yet only encountered death (Orthon Perez, Summer of 2004 *For the right to live in peace*) "no one ever will have to look for their dream in other lands,

So that no one would ever have to go to the desert

And be consumed by loneliness.

A voice in the desert cries out...

Education for all!!

Opportunities for all!

Bread for all!

Freedom for all!

Justice for all

We are a voice that will not be lost on the desert..."

Amen