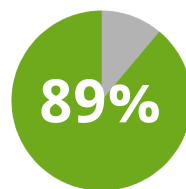


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Comfort, O Comfort My People



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SUPPORT PLEDGED



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I have just had the opportunity to meet and interview a man named Marcos from Mexico who has lived in the U.S. since he was a young child. Marcos is a dreamer, at least he refers to himself as a dreamer, but he doesn't qualify for DACA. He was brought to the U.S. by his mother, who was a legal U.S. resident, when he was just 4 years old. She had escaped several abusive relationships, and her return to the U.S. was an attempt to free herself once again from an abusive partner, Marcos's father. She ended up in more bad relationships and was soon into an alcohol addiction. Before he was 5, Marcos was in foster care. For the next thirteen years, he was cared for by a number of families; in some of these, he was also abused. Although he had legal status as a child, somewhere along the line no one continued the process, and at 18, without even knowing it, he lost his residency. During the fifteen years since his 18th birthday, he never knew he was undocumented. He has had his social security card and a driver's license since he was 16.

The shock came years later. With a U.S.-citizen wife and four U.S.-born children, as he was changing jobs, he found out through an employment check that he is not here legally. In all these years, he has been a model neighbor (dare I say, citizen), a faithful churchgoer and a great father and husband. He has never had any problems with the law. Regardless, the U.S. government has now told him he must leave in the next several months, and they are in the process of deporting him back to Mexico. He can apply for residency through his U.S.-citizen wife, but only once he is back in Mexico. The process could take years, and because he resided and worked in the U.S. for such a long time without authorization, it is likely he will be given a ten-year punishment before he can even begin the process to return legally. He will miss his children's teen years and he will not be able to help support his family. He has no family in Mexico and no knowledge of the country whatsoever.

For all of you who say, "send them all back," I wonder, is this who you want to deport? Through a number of ministries in Tijuana, I have met hundreds of men, women and children whose stories are just as compelling, and who have already been deported. More and more, our present system is choosing to no longer focus on violent and repeat criminals, and it is turning its attention to the "low hanging fruit," the honest and hard-working family members who are in the system, yet have been regularly reporting to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). More and more, as people show up for their appointments, they never return. Where ICE once focused primarily on people caught up in the criminal justice system, they are now also patrolling super markets, schools and neighborhood ball fields. The disruption to families isn't a consideration in the least.

I would hope that if you had the chance to meet Marcos, you would not want to deport him; perhaps like me you would want to welcome him and protect him. I think if you had the chance to meet the majority of the people that we are deporting, you would offer your sympathies, your comfort, your friendship. If you knew dreamers like him, you would be as anxious for them as they are for themselves to finally discover what it means to find home, to belong.

In this past year I have had a great deal of opportunities, way too many opportunities, to share with people who are also between worlds, with nowhere that they can call home. I have met with Rohingya families in their makeshift tents in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. For generations they have been stateless, as their own government of Myanmar won't recognize their rights to citizenship, freedom of movement, or speech, or anything. Earlier this year, the military began a campaign to rid the country completely of the Rohingya people. More than 600,000 have fled into Bangladesh and are huddled in camps organized by UNHCR, IOM and a number of other non-governmental relief

organizations. They can't stay long, as Bangladesh is trying to force them to leave. No other country wants to offer them refuge. A bilateral solution has been developed that would send these people into permanent fenced-in camps in Myanmar, with no freedom to leave, no education, no nothing. They yearn to have a place of their own, where they are free to worship God as they know God, to farm their own lands without interference and to live in peace. They long for a home that they have never really known.

This is the same story I have found in Jordan and Lebanon, with Syrian and Iraqi refugees that have no place to go—no way to go back to a destroyed country in the grip of destruction and warfare—and have no way to stay in countries that don't want them and will give them no rights. The Christians from Iraq particularly have been singled out, and after living in their homeland since biblical times, there is nothing left for them to go back to. Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon cannot work or own property, and they are barely able to survive. In a striking similarity to the Rohingya in Bangladesh, they have no way to pass on any nationality to their children. Neither their ancestral homelands nor their host countries will confer on any of them citizenship. The next generation, growing up in the refugee camps, will be truly people with no country. As far as the world is concerned, it seems, these people don't belong anywhere. They do not even belong on earth. It is little consolation to them that we people of faith tell them that they are indeed beloved children of God. These are empty words if we as people of faith never do anything to welcome them to a place where they can finally belong, a place they can call home.



In our world today, there are about 25 million people living as refugees, recognized as such by the UN High Commission on Refugees, but not recognized by just about anybody else. If things continue as they are, most of them will be in squalid camps for their entire lives. Already, three generations of Palestinians have only ever known life in refugee camps. There

are another 65 million internally displaced persons around the world, forced from home by violence, persecution and disaster.

My heart is aching for the people I have met. I can move into and out of their worlds easily because of the blue booklet in my hands; I can share in their stories and enjoy their hospitality, but I cannot share my privilege with them, or even offer the hospitality of a meal in my home, in the way I have broken bread with them in theirs.

I feel their yearning, their longing for home; it's palpable in every conversation. That's all they want. They flee the worst persecution, yet they don't want revenge; they don't want to fight. They just want to find home. It is the same yearning that many of our ancestors felt and that pushed them to cross continents and oceans in search of a place where they could belong. The yearning is the same everywhere I have gone.

And everywhere I have gone, it seems, I have seen this vast sea of humanity stretched out before me in tent cities and tenement buildings and wondered where God is in the midst of this. "These are your people, God. What will you do for them?" I think God has put the question back on all of us who dare to ask it: "These are your people. What will you do?"

I am moved every time by the communities of faith in each and every refugee site that are sacrificing everything they have to serve the neediest in their midst. They have been a constant inspiration and example to me.

There is this wonderful passage from Isaiah 40 that has come to my mind again and again. It was God's word of compassion for a nation of forcibly displaced people, the people of Judah subjected to exile in Babylon. These too were people who longed for home.

"Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to them...."

To the exiles, it is the promise of their return home. But it is not only the promise of what God will do—it is spoken in the *imperative*, indicating what God's people must do.

"Comfort my people," God tells us. Prepare the way for them. That's what I see our Christian brothers and sisters engaged in everywhere I have visited.

The next words of the passage speak to the impossible task of preparing a way home for the exiles. Between Babylon and Israel is a vast desert, impossible to cross on foot. It is the same path the Iraqi refugees living in Jordan and Lebanon had to cross to reach safety over the last several years, which was possible for them only by modern vehicle. Yet that is exactly the expanse that the remnant of Israel had to cross to reach home again.

In their understanding, at the time Isaiah was speaking, breaking the bindings of captivity and crossing the impenetrable desert was an impossible feat. There were high mountains to cross, and low valleys, there were extremes of terrain and temperature. There were hundreds of miles to traverse without sources of water. Yet God led the people to do exactly that; in fact, God commanded them to make it possible.

"In the desert, **prepare** the way! **Make** a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain need be made low, the uneven ground made level and the great rocky expanses be made into a plain. And God's glory will be revealed." (Isaiah 40:3-5)

I want to challenge you to see this passage as I have begun to see it, as an imperative for us to rise to do the impossible. The world has no place, it seems, for millions of God's children, equal heirs to God's promises and creation. Few countries have opened up any room for them, and only a few thousand of the most deserving will be offered refuge this year. As long as nations continue to look at this from the human vantage point of limited resources, a desire to carve out and each protect their own space, the problem remains impossible. The mountains are too high, and the valleys are too low. But we have another understanding of this earth, and who it ultimately belongs to. We have a vision of God's abundance in as much as we can learn to lift our eyes above our own scarcity.

I want to ask us to prepare the way, first in our own hearts, to see how God will call us to welcome the stranger in ways we haven't yet imagined. Obviously, it is not up to one nation to do everything, and it is not up to people of faith who live within this nation to impose this vision on a secular country. However, we do have the opportunity to model God's vision of radical hospitality for our nation, and our nation has the opportunity to take up once again the mantle of moral leadership in leading the world in welcoming refugees, as it has in years past. We can do more, and in so doing, challenge other countries to make the same sacrifices we are willing to make.

Perhaps the highest mountain, or the lowest valley, which needs to be navigated is in changing the attitudes within the U.S. that have seemed to congeal around the idea that we must deport every undocumented person, remove the protections we had offered dreamers and block almost entirely the path to a new home we had offered refugees. I have had conversations around the country on this issue and it seems we are ever more hardening our hearts and closing our doors to the sojourner and stranger. The mountains seem high, and they are getting higher. The valleys are low and are growing deeper every new day. It seems impossible, far beyond our means.

But I also have renewed faith. My faith has been renewed by the richness of churches in the Middle East, Latin America and Asia that are giving in faith far more than it seems possible. My faith is renewed by having the opportunity to share with so many people different from me. The richness of the tapestry that God has given us in the human family is amazing and a source of new life and hope for those who will embrace it. This is where I choose to start.

For dreamers and immigrants, for refugees and displaced persons, the way home seems out of reach. The barriers are mounting and the chasms are deep. But we are many, and I know that we can find ways together to prepare the way home. There are bridges we can build here in the U.S., just as I have seen communities of faith moving mountains to serve the strangers who have come to their communities.

One of the greatest transformative initiatives I have seen so far is a program called Bread and Salt, sponsored by the Arab Baptist Seminary in Lebanon. It provides dozens of youth from a wide variety of faith backgrounds the opportunity to get to know the people that they have heard so much about, and probably have learned to hate. It includes orthodox, evangelicals, Catholics, Sunni, Shia, Druze and Jews. They spend a lot of time together over several months sharing a meal and conversation each week, hosted in each other's homes and in each of their traditions. Once you have shared bread and salt, it is said, you are committed to one another's well being and friendship. The idea is to break down barriers and forge new relationships that challenge our fears and teach us a greater truth about each other.

I am looking for opportunities to do this in my community, intentionally reaching beyond my comfort zones and relating to people and communities of faith that will further enrich my life and understanding. In the midst of my travel schedule, I am trying to forge the connections to make a group like this possible. I would love to share this idea and encourage you to do such things in your communities and congregations.

I would also love to hear from each of you reading this to learn of other transformative initiatives that are helping you break down barriers and build up your expressions of radical hospitality.

I am looking for opportunities to learn from your ministries and experiences in reaching out to the strangers in your community, I know that our churches are doing phenomenal things, and would love to have the opportunity to see them firsthand. Please let me know if you have something you would like to share with me, and perhaps I could help with a little exposure and whatever resources I could find. I would also love to have the opportunity to share with you the lessons I am learning from the travel and experiences I have had in the last months. If you or your church would like to join with me in this endeavor, please let me know and I will do all I can to come and see you!

May God bless you, and bless the world through your expression of the Good News of God's love and grace to all you reach.

Peace and Grace,

Ray

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