

29 January 2017

Pastoral Statement on Building Walls

The actions of our president over the last couple of days cry out for a response from us as people of faith.

Building walls is counter to the work of Jesus who came into the world to break down the dividing wall of hostility between human beings. (Ephesians 2:14) We are called to the work of reconciliation, mercy, and justice (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18, Micah 6:8). We believe the Rev. Robert Jeffress, in his sermon for the prayer service on inauguration day, engaged in egregious theological malpractice, using the story of Nehemiah—a story of rebuilding the ruins of Jerusalem following the return of formerly exiled Jewish *refugees*—as a story that encouraged building walls out of fear.

Rejecting the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee out of fear is to reject both the teachings of Christ and the person of Christ. When asked which neighbors we are to love, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), a story that teaches generosity and personal risk for the sake of the suffering—the suffering of a culturally and religiously despised “other.” And Jesus also said: “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me. I say to you, what you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” (Matthew 25:42-45) As Pope Francis says, “It’s hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of my help If I say I am Christian, but do these things, I’m a hypocrite.”

The president has intimated that Syrian Christians will have priority in seeking refugee status. The posture of a follower of Jesus is that of humility, servanthood, self-giving love, and seeing the face of God in every other human being. Putting Christians first in line is directly counter to the Gospel. Jesus teaches “The last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:16) Jesus came among us not as someone who pushed his way to the front of the line, but as one who serves (Luke 22:27). If we believe Christian lives are worth more than non-Christian lives, we need to examine our claim to be Christian.

As Jesuit priest and author James Martin says, “This is an issue of life or death. Migrants flee from profound poverty, which causes suffering and can lead to death. Refugees flee from persecution, terror and war, out of fear for their lives. Jesus himself is speaking to us from the Gospels. It is Jesus whom we turn away when we

build walls. It is Christ whom we reject when we slash quotas for refugees. It is Jesus Christ whom we are killing, by letting our neighbors die in poverty and war rather than opening our doors.”

We, your pastors, invite you to prayer and action as we take up the cause of justice and mercy.

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