

Awareness:
Thoughts about Illegal Migration
Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Matthew 25:31-46

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

I don't do this often. I am fully aware that the topic of my sermon for today is controversial. Some of my colleagues and I wrote a letter to the editor of our Huntsville *Times* earlier this year calling for compassion and justice for the migrants who have made their way to our area. If you read the newspaper, you know that we were soundly reprimanded in subsequent letters to the editor. I received hostile phone calls at home and at church. None of those calls or letters came from you. You have always been willing to hear me, even when you don't agree. I am very grateful for that. We call that a free pulpit, and any preacher who has one is grateful because not many do. Baptist clergy are wise to use discretion with their free pulpit, though, because we also believe in free pews. Your voice is as important as mine. So we will continue this discussion Wednesday night after dinner in a forum that will give everyone an opportunity to share their thoughts.

As most of you know, I recently accompanied a group of people from our church and city on a trip to the U.S.-Mexico border. We went to gather information about why so many people from Mexico and Central America are migrating illegally into the United States. While in Arizona and Mexico, we met with academics at the University of Arizona, the medical examiner in Pima County, Arizona, border patrol, social service providers, and religious leaders. I must confess that I have been deeply troubled by what I learned and experienced. When you are a disciple of Jesus Christ and you become aware, that awareness makes a demand of you. You may have lived 30, 50, 70, or 49 years unaware, and then an epiphany occurs and you suddenly are aware, perhaps to your shame, maybe even to your horror.

That gives you a sense of how I feel. And now I struggle with what to do about what I've learned and experienced. Do I resign my comfortable pastorate and give my energies to an urgent, desperate issue? Do I give my financial resources? I honestly don't know the full impact awareness is going

to have on me. This much I do know. I must speak with you about it—honestly, humbly, from my personal experience. And so today I ask you for a hearing.

Illegal migration from the south is an issue with extremes. On one extreme are ruthless opportunists. They traffic in illegal drugs, smuggling tons upon tons of marijuana and other illegal drugs into the United States. Some traffic in human beings, smuggling unsuspecting women and children who will become part of a vicious, dehumanizing sex industry. Yet other opportunists traffic in a variety of other illicit practices. On one extreme of the migration issue are these ruthless opportunists.

On the other extreme are the desperate poor. Economic forces beyond their control have ravaged Mexico and Central America since the mid-1990s. An estimated 1.5 million peasant farmers have lost their land. Once able to subsist, just barely make a living, they cannot do even that now. There are no jobs, month after month, year after year. They watch their children live in squalor with no education, without proper nutrition or medical care, and with no hope that it will ever get better. Then there is a crisis: their father, who eked out a subsistence living, is diagnosed with cancer. Or their wife or child falls ill. What do you do then? To provide for your sick father? Your wife or children? What do you do if you are one of the desperate poor? That's the other extreme.

While discussions about migration are often passionate and even heated, this much we all can agree upon—no one wants the ruthless opportunists to bring their evil into our neighborhoods and onto our streets. No one wants those trafficking in drugs and human slavery and other illicit practices. Let me be perfectly clear when I say this. I don't want the ruthless opportunists legally or illegally to bring their destructive ways into our country. They're not the ones I'm speaking about this morning. I'm talking about the desperate poor, those who believe that their only hope is a dangerous walk across the Sonora desert.

For the typical migrant from southern Mexico or Central America, the perilous journey north begins on top of a freight train. They jump onto moving, northbound trains, where women and children are routinely raped, robbed and beaten. The women begin taking birth control months before

they leave, aware of the danger that awaits them on the trains. They have to jump off the trains before they enter a city in order to avoid Mexican police. Many have lost limbs or their life getting on or off the trains. They then walk to the north side of the city and jump onto the next northbound train. There they will deal with another set of dangerous thugs. The train rides can take from a week to several months.

The trains take them to one of several staging cities, where they might form a group and begin to plan their walk through the desert. In the city of Altar, they might stay in a “guesthouse” for a fee of \$3 to \$4 a night, more if you want a blanket. The guesthouse we visited in Altar was absolutely filthy. It was a dark room with a concrete floor, cinderblock walls, and a row of handmade bunk beds. A bed was a sheet of plywood—no padding, no pillow. Like I said a blanket is extra. A migrant might stay there a few days or weeks or until their money runs out. Then they can find food and a bed at a Catholic shelter where we had dinner one evening and slept on the floor.

When their courage is sufficient or their desperation intolerable, they will go to the plaza in Altar. It is a large open park. There they will engage the services of a “coyote,” their nickname for the guide whom they will pay between \$1,500 and \$3,000 to lead them through the desert. Someone in our group asked one of the migrants at the guesthouse if there are any good coyotes. He hesitated for a moment, looked around to see if anyone else was listening, and said, “The coyotes are all bad.” They are often connected to the ruthless opportunists—the drug lords and those trafficking in human beings. They often rob the migrants and rape the women and children. If border patrol detects their group, the coyotes abandon the group, and run for safety. Anyone abandoned by their coyote and not caught by border patrol then has to negotiate the desert alone. Most of these become one of the 500 who die in the desert each year.

Once they engage a coyote, thirty people are loaded into a fifteen-passenger van and driven to the town of Sasabe. Here the migrants have to pay \$100 each to the Mexican mafia, the drug lords who rule the land like it is the wild, wild West of olden days.

From Sasabe the treacherous journey by foot begins. It cuts through the Tohono O’Odham Indian Reservation. The temperatures may soar to

125 degrees in the summer and plunge to zero in the winter. Scorpions, rattlesnakes, and black widow spiders are a threat. Bandits also are a threat, knowing that migrants have enough money to pay their coyote. The greatest danger in the desert, though, is from above—the sun. Most of the 500 who die in the desert each year die from dehydration. They are men. They are women, sometimes pregnant. They are children. They are young and old. Sometimes their coyote tells them that it will take a day to walk to Tucson, and so they take a day's worth of water. When it takes six days, they are unprepared. The group might bury them; they might not. If not the scavengers of the desert will take care of the corpse. Within two week there will be no evidence that a death ever occurred there.

The walk to Tucson typically takes five days. If you have family or friends to pick you up, it may be shorter. If you get lost, you may wander for eight to ten days or longer. Some get disoriented and follow the sun, which takes them further into the desert and toward certain death. Some are caught by border patrol. Sometimes they are simply deported and told to never cross the border illegally again. Sometimes they go through the court system and are repatriated. Some who make it to Tucson will ask someone on the street for directions to New York or Florida, thinking they can walk there.

It is very expensive for a poor migrant to cross the desert. Thousands of dollars to the coyote. Money to the drug lords. They are robbed. And so I wondered where poor subsistence farmers get the money. I was told that they sell the family tractor, sometimes the entire farm, or whatever they have of value. Then if they are caught and deported, they return empty-handed to nothing but the sad faces of their family. Some are broken emotionally. They failed. Their family was counting on them. They sold the farm to make it possible, and now they have nothing. Some who fail commit suicide. Others are determined to try again. They told us that they do it for their family. A man about my age sat across the table from me at dinner one night. His wife and four children, who are U.S. citizens, live in California. I think he said that he returned to Mexico to bury his father. He was planning to begin his journey through the desert back to California in the next few days. He told me, "I would rather die trying to get a better life for my family than not try."

Those are the desperate poor. They are not ruthless opportunists, though the ruthless opportunists do exist. And we don't want them. But these others are decent, honest, hardworking human beings. I have come to believe that today they are the ones about whom Jesus spoke in Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me.... Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family," Jesus said, "you did it to me."

I'm no politician. I don't think politically. I'm a pastor, and I try to think theologically. "What Would Jesus Do?" is more than a bracelet for me. It is how I try to think about issues. What would Jesus do in this situation? I'm not presumptuous enough to tell you that I know exactly what Jesus would do. I can tell you only what David Freeman must do based on my understanding of Jesus' teaching. Much of this is still formulating in my mind and heart. These few things I can share with you.

- First, I must not participate in stereotyping a people group. The migrant population includes ruthless opportunists and decent, honest, hardworking men and women.
- Second, I must not use racist language or derogatory labels.
- Third, I must be open to all information.
- And lastly, I can no longer criminalize the desperately poor. I will no longer call them illegal immigrants. I will call them unauthorized migrants and advocate for compassionate reformation of our immigration laws.

Awareness demands at least that much of me. Thank you for hearing me. I want to close with this poem. It is printed outside the Catholic shelter in Altar. It is titled "To Those Who Have Died in the Desert."

In memory of those who went to look for a better life, yet only encountered death...

In memory of those who risked everything and lost everything...

Of those who went with hope in their eyes and challenge in their souls...

The sun burned them and the desert devoured them

And the dust erased their names and faces.

In memory of those who never returned...

We offer these flowers and say with the deepest respect...

Your thirst is our thirst,

Your hunger is our hunger,

Your pain is our pain,

Your anguish, bitterness, and agony

Are also ours.

We are a cry for justice that no one would ever have to leave their land, their beliefs,

their dead,

their children,

their parents,

their family,

their roots,

their culture,

their identity.

From out of the silence comes a voice that speaks...

So that no one will ever 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!

Opportunity for all!

Jobs for all!

Bread for all!

Freedom for all!

Justice for all!

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

That insists that the nation give equal opportunity to a dignified and fruitful life to all its children.

(Orthon Perez: Summer of 2004)

Closing Prayer

Lord, remind us that we see you every day: in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. May we be counted among those who reach out with compassion to the least of these. Amen.