

“What about detaining a nursing mother and removing a child from his or her mother seems like a good idea?” This was a question posed by one of the presenters from Asylum Seekers Advocacy Project at a panel discussion last night sponsored by Building One Community. It was in response to a question about trying to understand and engage with those who oppose immigration, asylum, and refugee status for individuals. The question cuts to the heart of the debate on immigration in general and certainly regarding asylum and refugee status in particular. We may disagree on exactly what is necessary for immigration reform. We may hold differing views on how many asylum seekers and refugees should be allowed into the country. We can debate the best ways to encourage sensible and meaningful change. Hopefully, however, we can all agree that locking up a nursing mother seeking asylum and keeping her from her child are not one of the things that we should be doing.

The question, in its obviousness, was all the more painful to hear when one recognizes how it does not compute for some. If the basic human decency of another--regardless of the fact that they are fleeing another country because of violence and oppression--and the most vulnerable in our midst--an infant--is not enough to cause one to pause and consider a better way, it is hard to imagine what will. Thus, the difficulty of meaningful, substantive, and productive conversation and action on the issue of asylum and refugee status plus immigration in general is placed in stark relief. Where do you begin when the basic understanding of decency and humaneness that are no threat to security or safety are so completely denied?

It is a hard question. And it is tragically sad. It reveals that we live in a world where we have become so afraid of the other that we can no longer act with basic human civility. Furthermore, we have become so inured to indecency that it becomes our default, and we fail to recognize how far we have veered off the course of what is rational. Such a situation is hard to stomach, for it raises the reality that we live in a world where we have vastly differing views of reality itself. If only it were as innocent as the glass is half full or half empty competing perspectives. It seems that we live in a time where some will view a situation and say that it is night. Others will view the same situation and say that it is day. Again, how do you bridge such a divide?

I hope that one way to try and do such bridging is to sit with similar data and work to reflect on a common text from which we can certainly glean differing perspectives, but, nevertheless, we are rooted in something that does not allow us to veer wildly off the course of reason. Ironically, the texts that we hear from week to week in worship offer some of that bridging foundation. We may be more left of center or more right leaning in our views. That is fine. Hopefully, our engagement with the world is, however, informed by the textual canvas upon which our liturgy, our prayer, and our theology is based. Such engagement should prod us to tweak our viewpoints of life and faith throughout our earthly journey regardless of where we come down on the political continuum.

Furthermore, the desire for a common textual grounding from which to discuss has moved me to place the recent Ta-Nehisi Coates article from *The Atlantic--The First White President*--in the *For Further Reflection* section of this e-news. Coates may be controversial among some, but he provides a critical lens on the issue of race in the United States that we all need to wrestle with and incorporate into our understanding of the historical and current social, economic, and political fabric of our country. Much of what he has to say is difficult to read. Yet, it is this difficult material that offers us a chance at a more honest rendering of our reality. I don't believe that we will all begin to believe the same things. I do hope, however, that we begin to acknowledge a common heritage while we discuss and debate how to best engage this moment in time that we have been given as individuals, a community, a nation, and a world.

If nothing else, a modest proposal for our work together and as a society: may we at least be sensitized to respond to the difficult questions of our day--and to the humans who are impacted--with decency and humaneness.