

Matthew 25:35 reads, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

There are some things you should know about me before we move forward. I’m a young, married mom of two little boys. I love my job and teaching, I am a homeowner, and I’m proud of the life that my husband and I have worked hard to build here. I love to bake and cook and spend time with my family. I am blessed to live in a community where I feel safe.

This past summer, my colleague Mr. Dipre and I traveled alongside 8 wonderful Walsh Jesuit students to Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Mexico in the state of Sonora, just a few miles across the border. We were there with the Kino Border Initiative, a binational organization founded by Jesuits, whose goal is to “help make humane, just, workable migration between the U.S. and Mexico a reality. Its mission is to promote US/Mexico border and immigration policies that affirm the dignity of the human person and a spirit of bi-national solidarity.” We did many things during our time with KBI; on several days we spent time in the *comedor*, the Spanish word for dining room, where we served meals alongside KBI to migrants who had either been recently deported, were awaiting their asylum hearing in the U.S., or were stopping on their way to another destination.

We met many wonderful people while we were working in the *comedor* in Nogales – Destiny, Gercon, Alejandro, Reina. But out of all the people we met, there is one family that remains at the forefront of my memory. While I was in the *comedor*, I noticed a young family walk in; a mom, a dad, and two small boys, one of them just a few months old. The tables at the *comedor* are crowded – you don’t have a lot of elbow room to move, let alone to eat. As any parent will know, trying to eat with a small child on your lap is virtually impossible – you end up with food all over the place. I walked up to the woman after she had sat down and received her food and offered to hold her infant son for her while she ate. She seemed relieved and was very grateful, a sentiment I know I would have felt, too. I walked around with her son, speaking to him in Spanish, showing him the brightly colored paper and lights that were hanging from the ceiling, murmuring colors and singing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” – things I would have done and do with my own children.

When they were done eating, the family came over to talk to me and Mr. Dipre. I served as informal interpreter as her story was revealed to us. The woman, Cristian, and her husband, whose name I unfortunately don’t remember, were a young couple living in Guerrero, Mexico. They are both teachers, she a teacher at a private bi-lingual primary school and he a high school biology teacher. They have two little boys, one seven years old and the other, my new buddy, just seven months old. I asked them why they were in Nogales – they had been staying there for the past two months while they were waiting for their asylum hearing in the United States. What had led them to leave their home and seek asylum?

If you follow the news, you’ll know that within the past several months, there have been multiple killings of American citizens and journalists, as well as countless Mexican and Central American nationals, in the state of Guerrero. Gangs and drug cartels control the streets and are in constant battles with police and other militia groups. Unfortunately, if you’re someone like Cristián, well-educated and with money to your name, you become an immediate target for the

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gangs. They want your money, your loyalty, and if you don't give them what they demand, they want your life, and they'll take it. This became all too real for Cristián when one of her colleagues, a music teacher at the school, and his entire family were killed by the gangs for not giving what they were now asking of Cristián and her family. She played video for us on her phone of gunfire right outside her home – gang violence in its most real sense. Proof of what was awaiting her family. So they decided to flee. Because they are more economically advantaged than some of their fellow Mexican citizens and migrants, they were able to fly from Guerrero to Nogales, where the United States government is now forcing them to stay while they wait out their asylum hearing, a policy known as Remain in Mexico. Mr. Dipre and I, both being parents, didn't need any more explanation for their departure from Guerrero – we would do anything for our children, as Cristian and her husband did. Cristian started to cry, as did we, when she told us she didn't want to leave Guerrero – she was proud of being a homeowner, of being a teacher, of building a life for herself and her family in Guerrero. She likes to bake and cook and spend time with her family. Sound familiar? She said one of the hardest parts of the process is feeling less than human – that people in the United States view her and her family not as another human being and child of God, but rather as an issue, an invader, a gang member, a criminal, someone invading our “way of life”, an “other”. I saw none of those things, but rather, I saw myself in Cristián. To me, she is not the “other” – she's someone who is just like me in so many ways.

The issue of immigration is multi-faceted and complex. And if there was one thing I learned during my time in Nogales, it's that there is not one single solution – deportation, family separation, current immigration laws, the wall – none of these things will bring about a change or fully fix the problem. What I do believe would make a radical difference for everyone, especially those who oppose immigration into our country, is for a transformation of perception. Instead of seeing them as “the other”, as “invaders”, as “criminals”, try seeing them as fellow human beings, as brothers and sisters in Christ. If we could all sit down and spend just a few minutes with one another, getting to know each other's families and stories, we would realize that there's more that we have in common than what we don't. That we love our families, are proud of our hard work and the roots we've put down, that we would do anything to keep those that we love safe from harm, that we are children of God. As Pope John Paul II wrote, “Justice will never be fully attained unless people see in the poor person, who is asking for help in order to survive, not an annoyance or a burden, but an opportunity for showing kindness and a chance for greater enrichment.”

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