

The Rev. Dr Francisco Garcia

Message to the congregation at Trinity Epsicopal Church Santa Barbara

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The students at Bishop Garcia Diego High School transcribed this message from a recording posted on the Trinity YouTube Channel. They did their best to capture his important words and the message he shared.

I am the son of generations of Mexicans. First generation born here. My grandfather was a Bracero, the agricultural labor program, who worked in Texas. He crossed from Juarez into El Paso and worked in small ranches; seasonal labor like many did when the border was more porous. And he would go back and forth with no problem. My father came from Mexicali, south of the California Mexican border, and he came undocumented so called “illegal.” My mother is from Tijuana, and because of my grandfather who knew her father she was born during seasonal labor in Texas, so she had “papers.” Stories of crossing borders with bicultural, bilingual, and binational realities were always a part of me and my story and experience and that of my community.

I first came to an awareness of the injustice of immigration and treatment of immigrants when I was in high school. Some may recall proposition 187, we assume that what’s happening then hasn’t happened again. We know sadly that there are patterns of marginalization and exclusion in our history if we turn to the social reality. Prop 187 was intended to negate access to all forms of public benefits, including access to public school education for children of undocumented parents. Health care, hospitals, you name it, emergency care ; all of it was intended to be blocked. It was a real draconianian proposition that actually passed by 51% over 49% but was later held to be unconstitutional. But in the midst of all of that, there was an incredible upheaval of protests and rallying and as a student, I was part of that. I felt it in my bones and in my body; because many of my classmates who were also sons and daughters of those who were documented and some of the classmates were also undocumented. Many of our parents had different forms of status. We all grew up in mixed status families; that was the reality. And so I became “consciente” in Portuguese “made aware of this deep reality” and then I turned to my family story and wow there’s something here. So this narrative and the need for human dignity and the belief in showing up to stand with the members of our community that are most vulnerable and at risk has been with me since I was 15 years old.

And so this latest round of what's happening in our communities on the attacks on immigrant workers and families and the racial profiling that's taking place, the linguistic profiling right? The profiling by occupation where if you work in a certain type of work, you know you are most at risk of being surveilled, apprehended, detained, deported. None of this is new to me. But the very particular brand and the way it is taking place in our current life just feels different. It feels so much more hateful. So filled with a vile sense of dehumanization and it hurts at the heart. Really hurts.

So when we turn to our scriptures we seek to find good news. We seek to find a way to move forward as a people of God to find our way to live forward as a people of God. To find our way into this loving life that can be liberating. Jesus, this Christ, that walked amongst the most outcast and proclaimed the truth of love, the truth of belonging, the truth of being set free from the chain of oppression or dehumanization. The gospel today lifted up two different characters in a contrast and we have almost character traits of a very publicly righteous person in the form of the Pharisee and a publicly sinning person in the form of a tax collector. But if we pay close attention to the beginning of the gospel you see that there is a description about holding contempt for others, the issue of seeking to be righteous while also holding contempt for others. I think that this is really important part for pastors to focus on and allow us to reenter what Jesus and the scriptures might be trying to teach us today.

Who here had ever held contempt for someone. Be honest. Or thought maybe contempt is a strong word, but who has thought poorly of someone. I hope to see more hands. Right? Like that moment where you might be driving and you're in traffic and then someone cuts you off. You may be holding contempt for that person. Hard as it might be, right? But all the jokes aside, there is so much contempt going on for reasons, right? differences of political opinion, differences of socioeconomic status, religion, views on the so-called culture issues where you stand on certain issues. And we find ourselves in a situation where the attacks on certain members of our community, members of our immigrant family in particular, although it's not limited to that. We know there are also many attacks on our queer, LGBTQ community and you know, conditions around issues of mass incarceration affecting you know, black and brown members of our community persist, right, and continue. Many of these things are all happening at the same time. But the particular targeting through aggressive detention tactics and through aggressive messaging in the culture leads to dehumanization and the negation of humanity. All of these things are very palpable and in your face, and if you follow on social media, it often feels like it's happening in your own backyard.

We, as the Church, have to figure out how to respond to these very real stark injustices and these incredible forms of marginalization and dehumanization. Our response must come from a place of the Gospel, from a place of love. As hard as it is, we do not perpetuate the same forms of hatred and oppression, even against those who are causing us harm. That is hard friends. I have been in this situation directly in the form of pastoral care and in the course of our ministry of Sacred Resistance.

And about a month and a half ago there was a raid at the local home depot not far from where I live. And I'm on, you know many rapid response lists and text messages threads which some of you may be on. And I got the message that the raid had taken place at this Home Depot and several day laborers had been taken. No, no other details yet. Um and so I got there as quickly as I could. Of course, these things are now happening incredibly quickly, right? The term that the current director of the California border patrol, Greg Bovino, is using is the term "turn and burn." this is the term he is saying. Like its our tactics to go in and to be done in 5 minutes or less cuz we are going to turn and burn. Collect as many bodies as possible. Don't ask many questions. Don't have any warrants. Boom. We are done. We are in and out before protesters or rapid responders or any witnesses can be there. The better, right?

And so rapid responders got their first line of defense and started connections with the day laborers that were able to scatter and avoid, you know, getting picked up that day. I got there maybe ten minutes after and started checking in. And that's another important part of the work that we don't realize is that in the midst of all of these situations, the aftercare is something really important. And that's an incredibly important role that people of faith lay and ordained play, right? Showing up when an incident occurs and offering just a loving presence to folks who were maybe the first witnesses to something that happened. Checking in on the families, you know, we had to find one of the day laborers that was picked up, his truck was right there. And so, it's just this stark reality to see the truck and the man who's gone. What happens to this truck? Who knows? His family is going to get it. Is it going to get towed? You know all these things that we don't think about at the moment but that matter. Within 10 minutes of being there and checking in with the day laborers and other volunteers, we receive the tragic message that one of the day laborers that fled from the incident out of fear was tragically killed. His name was Carlos Roberto.

Carlo Roberto, a man from Guatemala, who was showing up to seek his daily bread in search of work. He sent most of his money to his family in Guatemala, taking care of kids, grandkids, and even putting his oldest daughter through law school. You can

imagine access to any kind of school can be a challenge. Going to law school in Guatemala is an incredible, amazing thing, he was paying for it. All of a sudden, this father, this husband, this grandfather is gone. Tragically we found out that his fight or flight gears kicked in when he saw masked armed men in the parking lot of this Home Depot where he went every morning in search of work, and he fled. He ran across the street, across an off ramp onto the freeway and was struck quickly by a vehicle. Imagine the trauma of all the people that were impacted by that entire incident, the tragedy of Carlos Roberto of course in addition to that, the paramedics that responded to the scene, the driver, right, that was not expecting, you know, someone to run across right in front of their way, with very little opportunity to react. Everything, all of it. The other drivers, the other day laborers that lost their comrade. All of this we hold, this terrible tragedy, the cause of our current political moment. A moment of incredible dehumanization, negation of humanity, of a group of people because of the color of their skin, because of their occupation, because of language, vocabulario en español. And the gospel calls us to respond. It calls us to be present in that suffering. To be witnesses to the suffering, the grief, the trauma, the injustice and the insanity of all of this.

But how does it call us to show up and in today's gospel can help us understand that a little bit because when we hold people in contempt, even that ICE agent, we fill ourselves with hatred and we run the risk of perpetuating the same injustices that we are trying to fight.

We have to learn the lessons of past movement leaders like Dr King, like Gandhi, like the Reverend Lawson and view their work with this ethic of nonviolence that is rooted in the love of Jesus. Dr King taught that nonviolence is like agape love - that this is love that gives without expecting anything in return. The hardest kind of love. And he described it like this, at the point at which your enemy or your opponent or your perceived enemy is on the ground and you are about to achieve some kind of victory over them. You can defeat them in whatever way that means you can finish them. You refuse to do that and instead reach out your hand and you pick them up. That's the ethic of Jesus's love.

That is the ethic of a fierce non violent resistance that is needed in this moment to raise above this culture of domination, hatred, exclusion, separation, polarization, all of them. And believe me, I want to be shouting four letter words at ICE. Believe me, and there is a certain part of energy you have, right? you feel so angry, yes, screw them all, But that is not the ethic of Jesus friends. That is not the revolutionary love that we are called to. If we are the church or we are to be the church, and we are to proclaim the witness of

the life giving god that liberates us all. It truly needs to mean all. And then we can understand the tragedy of Carlos Roberto in a different light. so that no one else should have to experience what he experienced. So that his death is truly not in vain, and that we can recover some sense of our beloved community. We cannot hold contempt for other human beings. We can hold contempt for actions, for ugliness, for behaviors, for the unjust systems that perpetuate, for the power that they yield, mercilessly.

God's mercy extends. So as we follow Jesus as we seek to proclaim light in the darkness, may we lift up Carlos Roberto, we stand for him and all others who are in fear at this moment. May we look at those who are perpetuating harm, directly in the eye, and say, "I refuse to engage." And humanity will win. Love will win. Love and justice together will triumph with God's help. May we do this together. Amen.