"Holiness in the Stranger": A Reflection

By Jinhee "Sophia" Kang, Ph.D.

Over 30 years ago, I came to the United States as a graduate student. Despite my academic preparation, I was still unprepared for the experience of being immersed in a new language and culture.

Soon after arriving, I took on the seemingly simple task of grocery shopping. I made it all the way through the checkout line when the cashier looked me in the eye and asked, “Paper or plastic?”

What were these words? My heart raced as I tried to figure out what she meant. She repeated the question, again and again, while I stood there, unable to respond. “Paperplastic.” The words seemed to run together into one unfamiliar expression. The line behind me grew longer as I stood frozen, completely at a loss. Eventually, the frustrated cashier bagged my groceries, and I went home in tears.

Such is the experience of an immigrant.

Although I have also experienced being othered and have occasionally encountered unwelcoming and unkind responses, I want to emphasize that many people from all walks of life have helped me along my journey as an immigrant in this country. Today, I am an American. Yet I will never forget what it felt like to be new to a country, to struggle with a language, or to feel different in some way.

Perhaps this is what explains my deep connection with sexual minorities, many of whom know the pain of rejection, exclusion, and isolation. This is why my friends from the Korean congregation and I have marched in the Pride Parade over the past several years.
Still, nothing prepared me for the pain of witnessing the cruel treatment of so many migrants in this country over the past two years. I have found myself in tears while reading newspaper accounts and watching videos. I cannot comprehend how one human being can treat another with such a lack of humanity.

On Saturday, October 24, I attended a gathering of concerned members of the Episcopal Church, together with our Korean Lay Minister, Gaius Lee. I want to share this experience with mixed emotions.

It was deeply validating to witness the compassion of the Episcopal Church and its desire to help those in the immigrant community who have experienced violence and trauma. I felt a profound sense of fellowship and solidarity among those gathered. At the same time, hearing the stories was heartbreaking, and I found myself unable to hold back my tears. How can one human being inflict such pain on another?

Afterward, we shared these experiences with the Korean congregation and raised an important question: What can WE do to extend a helping hand to our fellow Latino migrant community members, who have been profiled and targeted?

As a Korean congregation, we continue to wrestle with this question. We may not yet have all the answers, but we believe that even small acts of compassion and solidarity can make a difference.

With this in mind, we would like to extend an invitation to the entire St. John's community. If you feel moved to join us, we welcome you to be part of our efforts as we explore small, concrete ways to reach out to and stand alongside our Latino migrant neighbors.

Sometimes, all it takes is a willingness to reach across the boundaries that separate us and to recognize one another's humanity.