

EMPTY YOUR HANDS

by Pastor Sam Pendergrast

On Wednesday we had our weekly Frontera de Cristo staff meeting. As usual, we read a psalm, sang some songs, and then read the gospel text for the week. After we read the gospel we had a time of quiet for reflection. Then everyone was invited to share their thoughts on the text.

The connection between the text and US border policy and the border wall seemed simple and clear. The text was from Matthew, chapter 16, verses 21-28. The central idea was verses 24-26. "Jesus then said to his disciples, 'Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must renounce self; they must take up their cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. What will anyone gain by winning the whole world at the cost of their life?'"

The message of Jesus is clear and simple, yet frightening. Sometimes I'm afraid when I consider it. The path of Jesus, the path towards maturity in the spiritual life is a process of transformation. I am called to leave behind everything that separates me from others. I am called to leave behind the things I cling to that in earthly terms will give me security. I am called to give up my own, individual, isolated life in exchange for being part of the new community called the Body of Christ. Jesus invites me to give up my attempts at control and safety and follow the command to love. I am called to empty my hands so I am able to take the hand of another.

To build a wall on the border is to cling to a false security. It is to reject the message of Jesus. Building a wall is an attempt to "save my life." It's tempting to think I could do that. But protecting what I have, clinging to it, and keeping it behind a wall is the opposite of what Jesus said. In doing that, I lose my life. Salvation doesn't come from being protected by a wall. On the contrary, Jesus invites us to leave that kind of false safety and become vulnerable. How difficult it is to accept the paradox that in losing our life, our safety, and our power over others we will find true life.

People who are crossing the border are not dangerous. They are looking for work, looking for family, fleeing violence. In the stories in the Bible, it is almost always the case that strangers bring messages from God and unexpected blessings. As the writer of Hebrews said, "Don't forget to welcome strangers, for in so doing some have welcomed angels without knowing it." Sure, there are people who cross the border who are criminals, just as there are plenty of criminals in our cities and towns. But everyone belongs to the greater whole. Everyone is included in the invitation. Jesus also said, "Those who are well don't need a doctor. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

The implications of what Jesus said are not just about a wall on the border. That's just the biggest and most visible example. It's about all the walls we put up. It's about finding a life that is much, much more than anything we can find behind those walls.

One last thought: I'm grateful every day that we live here in Agua Prieta, Sonora, and not on the US side. It's bad enough that the wall divides this community. But I am glad I live here where we work, in this part of the community where Frontera de Cristo is present. I'm glad I don't go back behind a wall when I go to sleep at night.