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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Mark 4:35-41

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Bearing Witness: How to Speak Love in a Storm

Walking into a detention center is a surreal experience. You hand in your driver's license, sign paperwork, lock your belongings in a locker and pass through a metal detector with your shoes off.

No cell phone, no identification, no wallet.

My heart beat fast as we were escorted through the locked metal doors and waited to be let onto the unit where we would meet with the detainees one at a time in a small airless room.

The names, faces and stories of the people we met over the course of several days- 10 people in all- are deeply etched into my heart.

This was a rare opportunity to accompany an immigration lawyer and his team as we visited two centers, one in Massachusetts and RI. We saw first-hand what conditions are like and listened to the stories of those suffering in detention.

As ministers, Steve, Carleen and I will have the chance to do future visits with some regularity. We hope to assist the legal teams and provide a pastoral presence.

As you can imagine, a detention center is a haunting place devoid of warmth and humanity.

It seems to me it is the loneliest place in the world. It opened my eyes to just how terrible the reality of what the Administration's policies and practices have led to...innocent people being locked away.

Families destroyed.

Human rights trampled.

Trauma inflicted over and over again.

The "Industrial Detention Complex" is in effect a harsh landscape of prison "camps" that house hundreds of people -most of them people of color -locked away in buildings wrapped in fencing and barbed wire up to the sky. While the two places we saw were clean enough, the structures are cold and sterile looking, made of cement blocks, filled with harsh lighting that is on 24/7, few windows, endless hallways and heavy, locked doors.

The clanging of keys and the shutting of iron gates is the sound that remains with me.

I found out that the people we met with who are held for days or months are granted no privileges-unlike other prisoners who can take classes, etc. Folks are held in their cells-which are cages really for 23 hours a day. Maybe they get outside briefly, probably they don't. There are no programs or classes or activities for them.

One man we met mentioned his idea of starting a group teaching others how to speak English. Our lawyer was encouraging him to do that... this activity would give him something meaningful to do and help others...

Health care, we learned, is abominable or largely non-existent. Receiving medication takes a lawyer's advocacy and it might be weeks before one can get any lifesaving medicine for diabetes or HIV or blood pressure.

I remember sitting next to one person named Jose (not his real name) as he told his story and added that detainees aren't allowed to receive any mail. Oftentimes the internet is down or the phones aren't working. Jose missed his family; his kids and he started to cry when he saw the sticky note the paralegal had written after visiting his wife the week before. Even though it wasn't his wife's handwriting, the man held it like it was a piece of gold. It said, "*We miss you; we love you.*"

Before the meeting ended, I gave Jose a blank piece of paper so he could write a quick note to his wife. He'd drawn hearts all over it.

During these meetings, we did our best to bring some humanity in with us. Smiling to guards, saying thank you, introducing ourselves, learning their names. The guards seemed friendly enough.

Our lawyer asked questions about the person's story, their early life, how they came to this country, what they did for work now, who was in their family and considerations for possible strategies for attaining bond and release.

Everyone's stories were complicated. Of the 10 people we met, all of them were men, fathers, partners- most had fled dangerous conditions in their home countries, crossed the border, asked for asylum, had painful family fractures and hardships. Some had been in this country for decades or just a few years.

One was still a teenager; another was a grandfather. Still another, a DACA recipient.

I tried to be as present as possible. To offer whatever small kindness I could and to listen with care to the person in front of me as we gathered around a small table and sat in plastic chairs. Sometimes, after the interview with the lawyer, I was able to offer a kind word or a prayer. Or to put a gentle hand on a shoulder when the sobs came.

While our paralegal translated, I prayed,

Dear God, Dios Mio,

May this person be safe, May this person be released soon. May this person know how beloved they are of you and their family. Oh God. Help us! Gracias, Amen.

My meager gestures felt woefully inadequate (compared to the enormity of the fear and uncertainty of what each person was facing every minute of every day.)

One man, when presented with the reality of imminent deportation to a country he'd never been to before, hung his head in his hands and cried, "How can I go there? I don't know anyone there?"

Often, without notice, detainees can be whisked out of New England to detention somewhere down South sent even farther away from family and connection. Where are the women? I asked.

Apparently, they are sent "elsewhere" perhaps to Louisiana or Texas. If they don't have legal counsel, locating them can be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

When our time with each person drew to a close, we shook hands, sometimes hugged and a guard escorted them down the hallway. Before returning to their cells, a further humiliation awaited them—a strip search behind a makeshift curtain.

Were they being penalized for seeing their lawyer? It sure looked that way!

Believe it or not, immigration I learned is a civil matter not a criminal one. Let me say that again: **immigration is a civil matter not a criminal one.** The thousands who have been imprisoned and deported have been convicted of no crime. And even those who have entered illegally, the law classifies this as a civil matter, a "misdemeanor."

Journalist Jamelle Bouie wrote recently, "Immigration detention is not a criminal procedure. And yet the Trump administration is treating it as a criminal punishment. It is using detention to inflict pain on anyone — immigrant or citizen — caught in its grasp. It is subjecting detainees to horrific conditions of deprivation and abuse, meant to pressure people into leaving the country, even if they have valid asylum claims or even legal status. And the administration is trying to expand its system of internment camps, purchasing warehouses across the country meant to hold tens of thousands of people"¹

At the end of one very long day of visits, having been inside for 5 hours, we walked out the doors to the fading sky at twilight. The pink horizon softening my ragged heart and I filled my lungs with deep breaths of air.

It hit me, the relief and the privilege of being free. Right across the street from the Detention Center was a Home Depot, a Panera and new apartment buildings. I wondered if all of those people sitting in their cars in traffic had any idea what inhumanity was taking place behind those front gates?

On the long drive home, I recalled how all of the people we met were Black or Brown folks. People of color who on this particular day were from Central America, Mexico and Haiti.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/14/opinion/columnists/trump-immigrant-detention.html>

It was easy to see how the “caste system” described by author Isabel Wilkerson remains very much fixed in place in our country now.

Having recently re-read Isabel Wilkerson’s book, *Caste*, one paragraph jumped out at me: “*A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside of the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable.*”²

That’s exactly what is happening.

The storm of inhumane and racist practices and policies are reaching epic proportions.

All of this brought to mind a poem I’ve carried with me this week by a Liverpool poet, Stewart Henderson’s:

“How To Speak Love in a Storm?”

How to speak love in a storm?
depends on the substance of the voice,
as the trees rage and roof tiles smash,
where seagulls are grounded and there is only chaos.

How to speak love in a storm? is to put up a signpost for the lost…”

In this season of Lent, we’ve entered the spiritual wilderness and maybe like me you are searching for signposts of hope through the storm. One holy question to ask ourselves is how are we resisting the dangerous, false narratives of immigrants that have been presented to us and instead see and uplift the humanity and rights of individuals?

Might this be our spiritual practice and clarion call for these days –to turn towards love in the storm. Jesus, in our scripture for today, does just that.

In the reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus urged the disciples “to go over to the other side.” (5:35) They end up in the middle of a frightening storm. Jesus speaks love to those in the boat. The raging storm quiets within and around them. Rather than be capsized or drowned as the feared, their boat is righted. The churning waters calmed.

They find their way with one another, are awakened and anchored across the waters by the power of love, faith and community.

Jesus is with them especially as they risk going to the other side to accompany those whom Jesus often sought out –the disinherited, the tormented, the lost.

² Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020).

Jesus is with us, too, and offers us a word of love and strength as we journey with one another through these days.

This gospel wisdom is for **us** today. Even as a blizzard approaches.

It is comforting to know that we as a church community are trying everything we can to support those caught up in the midst of this Super Storm of Inhumanity. That we are learning from what communities in Minneapolis have done to support those most vulnerable.

We are in the right place as we meet this moment together!

Bearing witness to one another's stories and lives,

Being part of immigration teams and visiting, grocery shopping, and offering family support as we are able to...

Bearing witness to the truth of the injustices our neighbors are facing by standing up in the public square in the pouring rain as some of us did in Hartford this past Ash Wednesday...

How have you borne witness to the life of another? What might Love say to each of us as we try to find our way through the stormy wilderness?

In the final pages of *Caste*, Wilkerson imagines a world without caste, which amounts to imagining a world without detention centers. Without malice. It is the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus imagined...

“In a world without caste, instead of a false swagger over our own tribe or family or ascribed community, we would look upon all of humanity with wonderment: the lithe beauty of an Ethiopian runner,

the bravery of a Swedish girl determined to save the planet, the physics-defying aerobatics of an African-American Olympian,

the brilliance of a composer of Puerto Rican descent who can rap the history of the founding of America at 144 words a minute—

all of these feats (and wonderment) should fill us with astonishment at what the species is capable of and show gratitude to be alive for this.”³

Let us keep going over to the other side, my friends.

Love shall prevail and keep us afloat.

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager

³ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020).