

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
October 2, 2011

Jen Smyers of Church World Service
Worship Theme: A Process on Peacemaking

I'm grateful to be with you this Peacemaker's Sunday and World Communion Day – important days for reflection. Taking time to ponder the spirit of communion, and our call to follow the example of Christ the Peacemaker, have led me back to my upbringing and have directed my attention to the foundation and motivation for the work I do and the reason I'm here today. My dad became a Christian as an adult, so it was my mom who recounted Bible stories to me, but it was my dad who taught me three principles which have stuck with me and shape my every day: never look away from hurt, readily admit when I am wrong, and make wrong things right. All of us are led by Christ to help people and make wrong things right, and we do this in our own ways – sewing blankets, building houses, putting together humanitarian kits to help people in need, organizing fundraisers. My spiritual path has led me to try to help people who are hurting by changing laws and systems that cause their hurt. Certainly, we need laws – the perfect law being God's law – but sometimes man's law is imperfect. Sometimes laws don't do what they're intended to do, and sometimes they hurt people. Many laws need to be modified to stop hurting people and to better meet the needs of us all. The reason I've been asked to speak today is that I work on specific policies relating to immigration, advocating for changes that would alleviate hurt, reunite separated families, and be more consistent with biblical teachings on welcome and the love of Christ, which knows no boundaries.

How do we deal with immigration, as people, as Christians, as a country? This is an important question that's unfortunately been made political and thus some would avoid it. For me, immigration is not a *political* issue. When a family is forced to flee their home country solely because of their religious beliefs; when a mother is deported from her infant son; when a child is denied education because his parents brought him to the U.S. at the age of three; when an employer refuses to pay workers and gets away with it because of their immigration status; or when a victim of domestic violence reports her abuser only to be detained and deported herself for having an expired visa, those to me are *not* political issues - they're human issues – that we cannot avoid – we must wrestle with and be involved in finding Christ-like solutions.

Throughout the Bible we see how God responds to migrants. Nearly everyone in the Bible has a migration story –Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister rather than his wife in order to avoid trouble in a new country; Joseph welcomes his brothers, even after they've wronged him, when they enter Egypt as economic migrants; and Ruth becomes an undocumented worker when she follows Naomi to keep the only family ties she has left. Mary, Jesus and Joseph are refugees fleeing King Herod's edict to kill young boys; and all of Christ's disciples are migrants preaching the Gospel. Paul in particular is deported from nearly every city he goes and frequently re-enters illegally to finish his work, escaping at least once by his friends lowering him in a basket over the city's walls. From these stories, we know that God cares about migrants, and

repeatedly commands us to love them, welcome them, and treat them as citizens among us. In fact, “to welcome the stranger” is the most frequently cited commandment in the entire Bible. We heard some of them in today’s readings – and they’re all very clear – welcome the stranger, love your neighbor (and everyone is your neighbor), don’t mistreat the migrant, treat the migrant as the citizen among you – for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

I’d like to share with you a modern migrant’s story. Catalina and her husband grew up on the farmlands of Guatemala. Due to depleting costs of corn, she and her husband were unable to earn a living or supply food for their three young daughters. After waiting unsuccessfully for two years for a work visa to the United States, her husband crossed the border illegally, in hopes of being able to feed their three malnourished girls. Four years later, he was sending home the money he was making – roughly \$50 per week because his employer knew he could pay him such low wages due to his lack of legal status. The children could eat and they shared a small one-bedroom home with another family. But her girls hadn’t seen their dad in four years. Since her daughters were a bit older – 8, 10 and 11 – she decided they would try to join him in the U.S. With no option to even apply for a visa, they saved for more than two years to finally be able to pay a coyote to take them across the desert. On the journey of more than 1,000 miles, including more than 5 days of straight walking on foot through the Mexico / Arizona desert, her middle daughter, Helena, died of heat stroke and dehydration. Catalina buried her with her own, shaking hands, said a prayer, and continued on. Finally, she and her surviving two daughters found their way to their father. Catalina took a job cleaning rooms in a hotel, and they eked out a frugal existence. Nearly two years after arriving in the U.S., however, Catalina was apprehended in an immigration raid on her way to work. She was immediately detained, without any information provided to her family, summarily dumped across the border in Nogales, Mexico, and barred from re-entering the United States for 10 years. Catalina begged for money, found a payphone, and in tears called her husband and stubbornly directed him to stay in the U.S. and provide a better opportunity for their daughters. With no other option left, she got a job at a maquiladora – a Xerox plant in Nogales. That’s where I met her – working 16-hour days in unsanitary and unsafe conditions, sharing a one-bedroom apartment with three other women – and sending the majority of her meager earnings to her daughters so they could buy clothes for school.

Catalina’s story is unfortunately not unique. She worked at a Xerox plant, but the stories are similar for men, women, and children – from Mexico, Indonesia, Ireland, Burma, Argentina, Kenya, and the list continues - who pick tomatoes, process meat, manufacture TVs, sew clothes and sneakers, etc. Their lives are anything but peaceful – they endure poverty, trauma, family separation, exploitation, racial profiling, raids, detention, and deportation.

How do we respond to this? We know that God teaches us to welcome the stranger. And we see how his plan for welcoming migrants is in conflict with what many migrants encounter today. So from there, how can we be peacemakers between God’s vision of welcome and current policies that restrict, deny, and even outlaw welcome?

How can we make wrong things right, as part of our call to follow the example Christ set as the great peacemaker? Fortunately, God has provided us tools for peacemaking – namely the Bible and the discerning process of communion. The Bible is the peacemaker’s guidebook to wrestling with controversial human issues. Christ the Peacemaker regularly brought people together and confronted complex and controversial topics like taxes, adultery, leprosy, keeping the Sabbath, and the list continues – with love, service, mercy, reconciliation, and a call for justice.

What if Catalina was a member of this church, and everything that had happened to her was caused by another individual? Perhaps one man ruined her soil so she couldn’t grow food, exploited her husband’s labor, forced her out of her home, murdered her 10 year old daughter, locked her in a cell, and dumped her in the desert? As followers of Christ the Peacemaker, we see such a situation as an obvious need for care and service to Catalina, and also for repentance and changed behavior on the part of the individual who harmed her. For Catalina and millions of migrants in the U.S., however, it’s not one individual doing the harm, but a number of systems – international trade policies that benefit wealthy nations and push poor countries further into poverty; U.S. immigration systems that keep families separated for decades; businesses that exploit undocumented migrants for their labor; and enforcement policies that detain and deport people regardless of their circumstances. As peacemakers, we’re called to address these injustices – between individuals and systems – just as much as conflict between individuals. The conflict between Catalina and various systems – in the U.S., Mexico, and internationally. The conflict between Christ’s teachings of welcome and our hesitancy to accept with open arms people who may have broken the law, and who are perceived by many as intruders, unworthy, least. We know that no one is unworthy of God’s love, and we know that we are called to transcend the law of man with the love of God, as Christ taught us.

The peace the Christ practices and preached countered fear at every turn. 2 Timothy 1:7 reassures us “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” Are our perceptions of immigrants, or our response to them, motivated by fear? If so, how can we overcome that, countering fear with peace, with understanding and love – so that we can live a life free from fearing one another, and truly in communion with one another as Christ practiced and preached throughout his ministry? How can we work together with power, love, and a sound mind to reject messages about immigrants that instill fear, and embrace our immigrant brothers and sisters to build stronger, more welcoming communities?

It’s very relevant that Peacemaker’s Sunday this year is the same day as World Communion Sunday, because communion is a sacrament of love – for God and for our fellow human beings. Communion also a time for confession and discernment about our mission to live as Christ lived. Last time I was here with you all about a year ago, I saw the confessional flags you have hanging, and was struck – it got me thinking that communion is a time for reflection not only on my personal sins, but also on communal sins that I allow others – the government, society, etc. - to continue without raising objection or working for change. When my mouth is closed in a world of injustice, that is a sin of omission. We need to have confessional flags not only in church, but in our

hearts, so we will build relationships with people who are facing injustice and commit ourselves to defending the cause of the poor and needy. That's what God instructs in today's Jeremiah reading, explaining that these actions are *what it means to know me* – what it means to be in relationship with God. Communion is our time to reflect on that, to discern the impact of our actions and inactions, and to grow closer to God through a commitment to defend the cause of the poor and needy by opening our mouths against injustice and for peace - so we don't have to sew any more future flags of confession.

Along with today's passages, Proverbs 31 serves as a model for our action: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Speak up with fairness and justice, and defend the rights of the poor and needy." Speak up in the grocery store line, at the dinner table, when talking with a neighbor, when reading an anti-immigrant article, and when discussing politics. These commandments to welcome, to make peace, to speak out - apply especially to controversial topics and situations. I remember my dad looking straight through me when I confessed that I haven't defended a girl being bullied by the most popular kids at school. If I wouldn't stand up for her when it mattered most – if I put my own comfort above her dignity, he said, then it didn't matter how nice I was to her in private – I wasn't following Christ. We're called to be voices in the wilderness. We are responsible for loving, welcoming, and standing up for people, regardless of their status or what's socially acceptable.

Each of us is called, as Christ demonstrates, to develop mutual relationships with immigrants in our communities and to speak out for more humane treatment of immigrants in our midst and changes to policies that cause hurt. Theologian Karl Barth's quote rings in my ears, that we should live with the "Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other." Truly, we are called to implement the teachings of Christ the peacemaker in our own lives, to work to change laws and systems that cause hurt, to conquer fear, and to build stronger, more welcoming communities. I challenge all of us, today, to prayerfully consider how God loves migrants, commands us to welcome the stranger, and calls us to speak out for justice, and how we can journey together to meet this call and make the peace he seeks.