



Part I: El Camino del Immigrante:
Translated: the Journey, the Way, the Path, of the Immigrant

As I sat down at my local Peet's Coffee with my medium nonfat latte in hand, I began to panic as I faced the enormous task of reflecting on the Camino del Immigrante; a 10-day, 150 mile walk from the border of Mexico to the city of Los Angeles.

How do I paint a picture of us gathered on the first day in [Friendship Park](#), said to be the "most heartbreaking place in America"? This space opens up two times a week for several hours so people across the border can see one another. We watched as mothers and children finally caught a glimpse of each other through an imposing wrought iron fence after waiting for hours, bruising their hands in the attempt to brush fingertips, and weeping to communicate their ineffable joy and grief. How do they explain that one-third of them received a text saying that a father, mother, brother, sister, or child had died on our crossing? What about how my now dear friend from Guatemala walked behind me in silence that entire day in memorium of the two people he had to leave behind as they were dying in the desert, about how he waited for me every time I needed to rest? He told me later, "I never wanted to leave anyone behind again". For 10 miles I walked in an eerie silence. It was a funeral dirge, our corporeal requiem. It was part of his elegy, lament, and healing. How do I communicate the palpable fear we felt while driving past a massive

border checkpoint with an undocumented friend who had been in America since he was a child? There is no way to do justice to these stories and the many more that will go untold here.

Yesterday I returned from walking this 150 mile Camino from Friendship Park to “the city of angels.” Over those 10 days, anywhere from 50 to over 100 people walked to highlight the need for comprehensive immigration reform and to walk in solidarity with immigrants. We wanted our steps to declare, “You are not alone.”

I arrived on August 20, barely awake from my 4am flight and knowing no one. I did not know that amongst our motley crew of saints there was a 79-year-old Holocaust survivor who was placed in a camp because of her undocumented Russian status. There was a man who illegally crossed from El Salvador only to dedicate his life to charity work in Compton. There was a Quaker, a Navajo culinary artist, pacifist Mennonites, professors, a policeman, at least one Republican (!), an immigration policy ghost writer for politicians, and an undocumented man who advocates for unaccompanied minors alongside grueling hours as a cook. I spoke to a pastor who marched with Dr. King and remarked that we were doing the same work that he did with King. I even met a homeless woman who woke me up with a (frankly terrifying) whisper, “These are for you,” gently placing mismatched socks and a stained baby’s bib on my stomach. Here I am, a recent grad, and soon to be labor and delivery nurse, enthusiastically absorbing everyone’s stories like a sponge. I had stumbled in a 4am daze upon the Church, who have dedicated their lives to the slow, aching, and sometimes seemingly futile process of ushering the Kingdom of God onto earth.

The walk itself was grueling. We were plagued with heat exhaustion, tendonitis, fainting, and several were forced to stop walking entirely. As a newly decorated RN I became the resident blister expert as I had 14 myself (by day six I said “screw it” and stopped paying attention to my needy feet). On day three I wrote, “I am not ready to face the day ahead, my body resisted waking up, and my feet are pounding before I have set any weight on them. I don’t know how I am going to finish this Camino.” Yes, day three.

We readily recognized that our suffering was minuscule in comparison to those who have actually crossed the border. I was carrying an REI backpack with everything I could want in it. We stayed at welcoming churches, we did not fear deportation (although there were some close calls), and perhaps most notably we were not walking through the unrelenting desert that has claimed countless lives. Every night we would attend a session or panel on different aspects of immigration (household workers, farm laborers, veterans, detention centers, Hispanic and African American relations, etc.). I was inundated with knowledge, facts, and statistics from people who spent their lives working towards fixing an aspect of our broken immigration system and re-envisioning the way we treat them in society.

More importantly, I became proximal to immigrants who were daily suffocated by the realities we discussed each evening. In our proximity we walked together; we experienced pain together. In heat delirium we laughed and in moments of facing harsh reality we cried.

Because of our exhaustion, we could no longer rely on the walls we build to cope with our daily existence. For the first time numerous people finally processed deaths, deportations, and other suffered tragedies.

The road and the people we meet on that road change us. On the road, the Holocaust survivor chose to speak about those experiences for the first time in her life; this Camino was to be a time of grappling with a traumatic past and so the beginning of her healing. On the road a stranger named Colin heard our story and swam alongside us in the sea in solidarity with Mediterranean refugees. On the road my friend from Guatemala experienced new grace and began to forgive himself for leaving two men to die in the desert. Our footsteps were our prayers. Our feet painfully screamed, "Thy Kingdom come" in an imploration of hope and desperation. By being physically broken and walking with the broken, the road became a sacred space. This Camino was a pilgrimage, a reorienting of our minds and hearts through our bodies.

Part II: For the Love of Immigrants

"So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27).

"Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would an Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34). *Thousands of children refugees coming to America are not given a lawyer and must defend themselves. Human Rights Watch declared this to be a, "violation of their basic rights under international law."* ([Children face deportation without lawyers.](#))

"Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages" (Jeremiah 22:13). *In the county of Los Angeles, low-wage workers experience wage theft of up to 26.2 million dollars a week.* ([End wage theft.](#))

"Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). *Xenophilia is the word for hospitality in Greek. It is the opposite of Xenophobia, and literally means love of the stranger.*

Conveniently, Adam and Eve are the first biblical instance of immigrants, exiles, and refugees seeking a place to live and raise their family once they have been exiled from the garden. The theme of liberation in the freeing of the Israelites who sought refuge from their captors is interwoven throughout the entirety of the Old Testament. The lowest of the low are repeatedly understood as blessings from God sent to overturn the social order. Jesus himself was an illegal immigrant whose parents sought refuge from the mass genocide of children. While there are notable exceptions, strangers are repeatedly understood as those who engender blessings on God's hardhearted people; "I was a stranger and you welcomed

me” (Matt 25:38). We are all strangers in a foreign land, and we are its caretakers, instructed not to exploit those in it for our own gain, but to labor towards collective flourishing.

Far too many churches take the self-declared “high road” of political moderates, determined not to choose a side in petty political games. Michelle Warren, organizer of the Camino, recognizes in her upcoming book *The Power of Proximity* (2017) that this is an incredibly privileged vantage point. However, this “noble” position of apathetic moderate results in delegitimizing the suffering of those we are called to love. Refusing to engage tangibly with immigration in our churches because of the high risk of engaging in “politics” is classist and dehumanizing. People argue. (Hell, I used to argue.)

“Jesus chose not to come as a King for a reason! Politics are irrelevant to spreading the gospel and loving people!”

When refusing to engage in politics makes us apathetic and wary of a group of people for fear of lost congregation members, this is hate. This is hate disguised as “spreading the gospel to as many as possible and so not disenfranchising members.” By caring more about acting as noble moderates we are disenfranchising the very people Jesus spent his life advocating for. Jesus’s life and reign has immense political implications. Politicians killed him because they knew the social/political ramifications of his work. The religious leaders were those with massive political power. Jesus continuously spat in their face and literally flipped the tables of those exploiting the poor. We are now the Pharisees if we so legalistically adhere to, do not question, do not work to update outdated and exploitative laws.

“But they knowingly entered our country illegally! There must be consequences!”

The Church is the ultimate Pharisee when it builds its Tower of Babel, trying to reach or appease God through meekly obeying the letter of our poorly written and antiquated immigration laws. The Church is the Church when it recognizes that we have a moral imperative to use politics as a vehicle for justice when the law is the very thing that oppresses and dehumanizes.

The Church has the theological tools and social influence to fight against injustice, to usher in the kingdom of God on earth. Some churches are doing this work, and it is God’s work. Still, we have over 100 detention centers today where people are denied due process and held indefinitely (some cases up to nine years). These centers are legally bound to imprison 34,000 people a day in large part because many of these facilities are for-profit. Thanks to the Department of Justice’s 2016 ruling on private prisons we have an idea of the atrocious conditions of these places. Certain faith-based groups have been collecting the heart-wrenching testimonies of people in those places like CIVIC’s endisolatation.org, where reflections are recorded in their “storytelling projects.”

Detention centers brainwash their detainees into believing, “You are alone, no one will help you, no one loves you.” It is the church’s responsibility to counteract those lies by being present and saying, “You are not alone. Here we are. You are loved beyond your imagination.” Faith is expressed through love; “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:15-16). There is much of God’s work to be done beyond detention centers, and the church is morally obligated to be present.

On the Camino there were numerous pastors who had conservative donors aiding their community development projects (health centers, legal aid, job training etc.). Once donors saw these pastors walking with and for immigrants, a number of them pulled financial support. It was both heartbreaking and inspiring to watch these pastors grapple with the possibility of losing what they have worked years to achieve in their community. It was with profound confusion and by immense faith they let their largest donors go.

We are in the midst of xenophobic political rhetoric when 74% of Evangelicals are voting for a presidential candidate whose immigration policy is deportation and who waffles on allowing Syrian, or Muslim, refugees into our country. We are in the midst of a presidential cycle that appears increasingly like the TV show *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. We are more interested in the next Crooked Hillary or Terrifying Trump scandal than in policies affecting the plight and suffering of the poor, of immigrants, of refugees. It is easy to forget, amidst a media-inspired fear of the many “woes” immigrants bring upon society, that these are gross caricatures of dignified humans who God desires to flourish. We forget Genesis 1’s proclamation of the Imago Dei, the image of God, which is placed in everyone. In 21st century America, a human’s value is reduced to a piece of paper.

In America we treat immigrants and refugees as commodities; we exploit their bodies, refuse to pay them fair wages, eat the berries their children pick in North Carolina, resent them for being in our country, and scapegoat them for our problems. This is not a new narrative. We have always done this to people unfamiliar to our tribe. We must reorient our vision to seeing these sisters and brothers as human because they are, and because they are imbibed with the image of God. For no other reason than that, the church must throw off the veil of privilege, take the side of justice, and join God’s work already being done, even if this work includes political action.

I did not know any person who was undocumented before I intentionally sought them out through going on the Camino. When faces and relationships move to overshadow the relentlessly numbing onslaught of statistics and tragic news articles, humanization begins. “Imago Dei” humanization can inspire a cultural shift that will rework the way the Church welcomes immigrants.

Almighty God, who created us in your own image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help

us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and ever. Amen.

(Collect from the [Book of Common Prayer](#).)