

El Paso / Juarez

I had the opportunity to go on a mission trip to the border with a group of people from my church. It wasn't really a mission trip though. Some people referred to it as an emersion trip. We were immersed in the situation at the border between El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico. All of us agreed that we really wanted to go on this trip to actually "see" for ourselves what it was really like and what was going on.

So how was your trip? What did you see?

We flew into Phoenix and drove over to El Paso with rental cars. I volunteered to start out driving one of the rental cars. Too much automation for me. It was like the car was possessed or something. It would shut off when you stopped and then restart when you took your foot off the brake. It would slow down when I wanted to keep up with traffic. And if you got too close to a line it would beep at you or worse yet, try to move you back over which resulted in a feeling like sliding on ice while you were trying to drive. So I relinquished my driving duties to Pastor Paul when we stopped for our Dairy Queen break. A must on any trip when the opportunity is available.

As we continued our trip east across the desert I took the opportunity to take a little nap to catch up from the 4:00 am start to the day. When I awoke I thought, "Wow! I must not have been asleep very long. Everything still looks the same. Nothing's changed." But then I realized that probably depends on your attitude. I could look out the window and see a whole lot of nothing, but sand, shrubs and rocks. I couldn't help but think about what possessed someone coming across this region on the back of a horse or the seat of wagon and deciding you could make a living and have a good life out here. But then I realized I could change my attitude and I could look out the window and see a whole lot of potential. Just like those early settlers did. I asked God to give me a positive attitude for the week so I could observe everything with an open mind and be able to recount what I saw, hopefully with potential from His point of view and not my own. He didn't disappoint.

It's impossible to find a single word that would adequately describe the trip. During our reflections we would throw out a lot of ideas: inspiring, reflective, life-changing, life-altering, spiritual, soul-searching, motivational, eye-opening, emotional, frustrating, and the list goes on. I found the best word for me to be "revealing".

Pictures just don't seem to do it justice. That's probably why I didn't take a lot of pictures. It's like going to the Rocky Mountains and taking a picture with the camera on your phone or any camera for that matter. You can look at that picture and you can share it with friends, but every time you look at that picture you have that nagging thought in your head that the picture just doesn't do it justice. That picture just never quite captures the essence or the magnitude of the moment. It's one of those experiences in life where you just had to be there.

As I've told people when we were holding meetings before the trip and they would ask me why I was going on this trip I said, "I'll be honest, I'm going for the food." And the food was great. But we're still debating whether they were crickets or grasshoppers that Pastor Paul shared with some of us brave enough to try while dining in Juarez. I wasn't able to convince too many people that they really weren't bad at all. But at least a couple of us thought they were tasty. Needless to say that by the end of the week we were all ready for something besides Mexican cuisine. But even with the great food, I found something more. I found food for the soul. I saw faith, hope and love. In my lovely wife's terms, I saw God. Unfortunately I also saw fear, greed and ignorance. In my terms, I saw man. I have to say I liked seeing God a lot better than seeing man.

There's a lot of fear on both sides of immigration and it's not just on the border. Whether it's good or bad I think is up to each individual. I guess it just depends on how you react to fear. But part of me keeps going back to what Jesus said, "Fear not, for I am with you always."

There's fear right here in Minnesota. Fear about what might be coming. Fear of change. Fear of what it might cost. I saw fear before we even left on the trip. People here were genuinely concerned about our safety. "You're going where?" "Is it safe?" "Be careful!" "I hope you make it back safely!" Oddly enough I never felt threatened. The most unsafe I felt was trying to keep up with traffic while driving back to Phoenix and looking down to realize I was going 90 miles an hour in a rental car that was possessed.

I talked to someone who had come down with another group and was very scared to cross the border because of what they had heard. Yet I saw thousands of people crossing the border every day between El Paso and Juarez. I saw residents of Juarez singing, dancing and eating in the marketplace on Sunday afternoon. Some going to Mass at the church. No special occasion or holiday. Just a nice Sunday afternoon with good weather. Faith in God and each other. Hope that they can make the future better. And love for God, their families and their

community. Love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

We had a Mexican immigrant who drove us around on Sunday morning who had come to the United States through Florida as a child. After coming to El Paso for college he stayed. He found something he liked. He loved the community and felt very safe there. And El Paso does have a very strong community bond. The same community bond we experience here in Minnesota. He took us to a mural at the border in downtown El Paso. The mural does a wonderful job of depicting life in El Paso and life in Juarez with two children meeting over the Rio Grande to illustrate how the two communities live and work together. I thought of the Minnesota Twins logo with the baseball players from Minneapolis and St. Paul shaking hands over the Mississippi River. What if someone tried to build a wall between Minneapolis and St. Paul? How would we feel about that? He told us if he ever decided to get married and have a family he would do it in El Paso because of the strong community feeling there and how people take care of each other. Just like we do in Minnesota.

We heard from a life-long resident of El Paso, who manages three missions in El Paso as well as doing work across the border in Juarez, who told us the people of El Paso and Juarez, Mexico, didn't ask for the wall. They don't really want or need the wall. The wall came to El Paso and Juarez because of our fear. This isn't something they are doing down there for or to us. This is something we are doing to them. The wall is being built because millions of people in the United States live in fear because they have been told and are convinced that all their problems are being created by the "criminals" coming across the border. Is that true? No. Not based on what I saw. Not based what I have read. Crime rates among immigrants, documented or undocumented, is no different than the crime rates among our existing citizens. Has the construction of the wall changed anything for me or made me more secure? Not from my point of view. Mass shootings still continue on a regular basis. St. Paul set a record for homicides last year and both Minneapolis and St. Paul seem to be off to good starts again this year. Crime continues on the evening news every night. So the wall doesn't seem to making me any safer. But ignorance generates fear. Fear sells. Fear makes it easy to spend billions of dollars on a wall, on detention centers, on more border patrols, on more courts and legal expenses, just so we can have a higher false sense of security.

That same presenter also pointed out that we have millions of drug users throughout the United States who pay billions of dollars each year for illegal drugs. Greed dictates that those drugs have to come across the border because there is money to be made. We are trying to wage a “war on drugs” by criminalizing it. The presenter pointed out how we are trying to deal with the drug problem on a criminal basis, instead of as a social issue. Just one of the reasons the United States has the highest incarceration rates of any nation. We had a similar discussion with our immigrant bus driver, who pointed out that as long as we wage the war on drugs and only attack the source of drugs, we will never be successful. It’s a war we can’t win. We can arrest a drug user and put them in prison, but that doesn’t help them. It just forces them to find a new source for their drugs through the prison system. We can build a wall, but the drug suppliers are driving big shipments directly through ports of entry. New tunnels are still being discovered and dug on an on-going basis. There was actually another tunnel discovered the day we left El Paso. Drugs are being flown over the border wall with drones and other aircraft, while boats bring shipments around the wall. So although the war on drugs may be making it more difficult to get the drugs into this country and driving up the price, it has, in fact, destabilized the cartels. But that has not been a good thing for Mexico or the border. As the cartels destabilize, factions within the cartels start wars to create their own cartels in the hopes of making more money. As a result the number of cartels in Mexico has grown from 4 major cartels forty years ago to something over 24 cartels today. And these on-going wars and expansion have created more violence, more fear, and an increased number of individuals wanting to cross the border to escape the situation. So we have created a situation that actually adds to the number of border crossings. Legal or illegal. I have to take a lesson from St. Francis, look in the mirror and say that we are our own problem.

I did see fear across the border when we visited Juarez. They are us. We are them. We are more alike than we are different. We visited with one lady whose fear kept her from crossing the border to the United States. Fear of the unknown. Fear of leaving her family behind and not being able to get back to see them again. But her fear of the cartels and violence in her own country did not stop her from working to make the colonia outside Juarez a better place. Faith that God will provide. Faith to build a library and mission with support from churches and donors in the Kansas City and St. Louis areas. Hope that tomorrow will be better for future generations and her community. And love for God, her family and her community.

For the refugees and undocumented immigrants we talked to on the United States side, I felt that fear was more of a motivator than a deterrent or blockade. The fear scale has tipped for one reason or another. These people's fear of staying where they were was much greater than the fear of crossing the border.

Whether that fear was caused by threats from one of the cartels, threats from an abusive relationship or just being separated from a loved one and family on the United States side, it doesn't matter. The reasons are many, but the fear scale has tipped. The fear motivates them to leave and cross the border, seeking a better life. And they will keep trying to cross the border. A wall is not going to stop or intimidate them.

These people, immigrants and refugees, are modern day pioneers. They are no different than our ancestors who came here to flee oppression and build a better life. They work to purchase a lot in a colonia, or colony. It's just a bare piece of land. Certainly no bigger than a quarter of an acre. There's no water, no sewer, no electricity, no real roads. Just a bare piece of land like the Sooners of Oklahoma or homesteaders in Minnesota. Only their piece of land is considerably smaller and they don't get it for free. They have to purchase it. But they keep working. They come to this country looking for an opportunity to build a better future. And they are very future focused. They do not have a "me first" attitude. They are looking to future generations. Despite the conditions that they live in and the constant fear of deportation, whenever I asked an undocumented immigrant that we talked to what they needed, they all said they were OK. They were more concerned about the future for those future generations coming behind them. They all have a kind of comfort just hoping that it will be better for future generations. It's something that created a huge conflict of emotions for me when I realized that this is the same attitude that my family immigrants brought to this country and it is the same attitude that can make this country great if only they didn't have to live in the fear of being deported.

We went to the Chamizal National Memorial on Monday. When the border between the United States and Mexico was first established, they had teams of surveyors who mapped out the border and placed six foot tall cement markers all along the border and in the middle of the Rio Grande River. If the river changed course, the border would remain the same. Well of course flooding changed the course of the river creating a tract of land on the north side of the Rio Grande that technically belonged to Mexico based on the border markers. This became a point of conflict between the United State and Mexico.

Irony of ironies, during prohibition the Mexicans actually tried building a wall to keep the Americans out. In 1963, President Kennedy negotiated a new settlement with Mexico and they constructed a cement ditch that cut the disputed segment in half and created a permanent channel for the river. So today, the Rio Grande running through El Paso is basically a big cement ditch. Although the Rio Grande is more of a creek in El Paso than a river. And crossing the Rio Grande in Arizona where it's within the United States, it was actually just a dry river bed at this time of year. So why do I bring this up?

The cement river channel cuts through the park so part of the park is on the US side and part of the park is on the Mexico side. There is a border crossing right beside the park. The park used to be used for a place for families from both sides of the border to get together on weekends to spend time together. Now there is a wall on the United States side of the channel. So this is a spot where you can get a good view of the wall. Although you can't get too close as we found out. As we walked across the park someone from our group started taking pictures. The border patrol definitely took interest and Pastor Rose told us not to take pictures. The border patrol doesn't like that. When we had our reflections that night, several people commented on feeling uncomfortable at the border that day being watched. I don't think it was actually fear. I was just uncomfortable being watched by my own country. I had the fortune of touring in St. Petersburg, Russia, for two days while on a Baltic Scandinavian cruise a few years ago. I never felt watched like that while I was in Russia. I found myself asking questions. Were the Russians really watching me at all while I was there as some people told me they would? Are the Russians just better at watching people than we are? Why did I feel violated and uncomfortable being watched in my own country?

As we found out in our presentation from the border patrol and actually experienced on the way back to Phoenix from El Paso, the border patrol has check points on every major highway leading out of El Paso because it is a major port of entry. They can stop you at random, search you and your vehicle, and ask for identification ("papers"). I thought back to my history class and the police state that existed in Nazi Germany before and during World War II. We live in what we call a free country. We're proud to be Americans where at least we know we're free. But are we free? Has our fear driven us to implement policy and procedures that take away our freedom? We think we're building a wall to keep bad things out, but are we really imprisoning ourselves in the name of fear to create a false sense of security? Have we become our own enemies? We profess to be a

Christian nation. Yet Jesus Christ never told any of his disciples or followers to stay at home and build fortresses to feel secure. He gave them a clear direction to “Go”. Go to places unknown. Go to places you may fear. Go spread the good news. I guess that’s the big difference between Jesus’ faith, hope and love, and man’s fear, greed and ignorance.

On Tuesday we got to meet with someone from the Border Patrol. She was from Puerto Rico and shared a lot of good information from the border patrol perspective. Immigration or customs officers are responsible for the ports of entry and wear blue uniforms. Border patrol officers are responsible for the border between the ports and wear green uniforms. The air and marine officers are responsible for the air space over the border and water borders and wear tan uniforms. Based on the letter of the law, any entry over the border between ports is illegal, regardless of whether you are a citizen or have papers or not. Although there are always exceptions as we found out and heard about open gates in the wall that allow farmers to cross over and back who work land on both sides of the border. They see a wide variety of reasons why people try to cross the border illegally. Some are criminal. Most people are fleeing fear, seeking a better life or trying to reunite with family.

Training is very rigorous and intense. You have to know Spanish or learn it very quickly. Training includes a mini law degree to deal with the complexities of immigration law. Physical training to deal with the climate and terrain on the border. Fire arms and equipment usage. Tracking techniques for tracking trails in the desert. They actually do a lot of work with horses when tracking on land as horses have better senses than humans. Paramedic training to deal with injuries and other medical emergencies while miles from any facilities. And behavioral science used in questioning and evaluating people they come in contact with. That’s a lot to cram into a six month training period.

Despite some of the horror stories we heard about abuses within the Immigration and Homeland Security System, there are also stories of rescue and compassion within the border patrol. The cement canal that was built around El Paso to channel the Rio Grande may look like a creek, but when it is flowing it was designed to create under currents to flush out the canal. So negotiating the 45 degree angle cement on one side and trying to cross a river with under tow currents that take your feet out from underneath you and then trying to climb a 45 degree angle cement on the other side while wet is extremely dangerous. People trying to cross the border in the desert are not typically equipped for the

journey and don't have the proper clothing or enough water to make the trip. So they have to deal with a lot of hypothermia and dehydration, as well as nature encounters with rattlesnakes, bears and other creatures in the region. When you combine that with the fear of not knowing whether this is just a person crossing the border illegally who you need to rescue or a criminal who might be armed and dangerous, you end up with a very high stress situation.

It takes a very special person to be a border patrol officer and balance the compassion of an emergency responder with the dangers of law enforcement. Their issues have also been compounded with more families coming across the border from countries other than Mexico. As governments have been destabilized and violence is increasing in Venezuela, Brazil, and other Central America countries, the issues of how to handle these people and where to place or return them has increased significantly.

I saw a humanitarian crisis in El Paso. That usually takes a natural disaster like a hurricane in New Orleans or Houston, or a tornado in the Midwest, or an earthquake in California. When we have a natural disaster from something beyond our control, I have found that religion seems to disappear. It suddenly doesn't matter what faith you are. It doesn't matter if you're a Christian, a Jew, a Hindu, a Muslim or even an agnostic. We all jump in and help each other out, just as Jesus Christ asked us to do. Unfortunately it takes a natural disaster to get us to do that.

But the humanitarian issues on the border are real, even if it's not a natural disaster beyond our control. Maybe we don't want to see it because it is something we have created or allowed to happen. But the people there have seen it. I have to say some of the stories are very hard to hear. People being contained with barbwire under the bridges. People being put in a holding facility with just a toilet in the middle of the room and a glass wall so the ICE agents on the other side can keep an eye on them. No chairs. No beds. When someone had to go to the bathroom the other detainees would form a human wall around the toilet so they could go to the bathroom in some degree of privacy. When one lady asked for some water to drink, she was told she could drink from the toilet. Some immigrants/refugees being dropped at the mission were so dehydrated their eyes were starting to bulge and their lips were split open. One baby at the annunciation mission had to go to the hospital for two weeks. Not that it needed any medication. They just fed it for two weeks because it was dying from malnutrition.

Children were forcibly separated from their parents with limited or no records kept. By the time that practice made it through the court system and one family was able to come back to try and find their child, their child had already been adopted out and they were told they couldn't get their child back. Pastor Rose told us of immigrants that came to Cristo Rey that smelled so bad because they hadn't showered or bathed for weeks. They would let them take showers and try to wash their clothes for them, but eventually just threw the clothes out and offered them donated clothes because they were in such bad shape. Some people and kids didn't even have shoes when they showed up. Pastor Rose shared a pair of shoes with us that she was given by a seven year old girl. This little girl just wanted to say "thank you" for all they did for her and her family at Cristo Rey, but she didn't have anything to give. So she left her shoes that she walked across Mexico wearing. You couldn't hold those shoes and not be moved. For me it conjured up memories of the holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. That's the only thing I have to compare it to. But I can't tell you how depressing it is for me to think we went to war because of the way Hitler and the Nazi's treated the Jews and then we turn around and treat people the way we do who want to come into our country to make a better life for themselves. But I know it is a humanitarian crisis because I saw our fellow Lutherans at Cristo Rey working with the Catholic Church and missions, the Mormons, the Jewish community and even a donation from an agnostic. Just like a natural disaster. So I have to believe that even if an agnostic can look at that situation and tell that this isn't the right way to treat people, there has to be hope for the rest of us.

Throughout the week I kept asking myself, as did everyone in the group, "What can we do about this?" "How can we change this?" Unfortunately the pessimist came out in me at that point. I don't think anything is going to change anytime soon. You just have to follow the money. There's way too much money being made off the immigration issue and these poor people. The cartels in Mexico are expanding their product lines from drugs to human trafficking. They can intercept immigrants and refugees and sell them into slavery and prostitution. The coyotes make a fortune supposedly helping these people get across the border illegally. Many times only to turn them in at the border for the bounty. Contractors are making millions building a wall that hasn't accomplished much except making the people of El Paso and Juarez miserable. Private investors are building detention centers to make money off the government for housing people. And politicians are getting millions of dollars in donations and millions of votes by assuring their scared electorate that they are going to secure the border and make them safe.

The sad news is that all that money being made doesn't go to the people who really need it. And the border really isn't any safer than it ever has been. At some point we have to face the fact that there is no such thing as secure.

One proposal was that we just need to enforce the laws that we have. Unfortunately there are a number of issues with that. When we write these laws we assume that everyone else has what we have. That's not always true. Here in America you are probably born in a hospital and delivered by a doctor. Even if you're born at home, a doctor will sign the birth certificate form that then gets filed with the state. So even if you lose your birth certificate you can always contact the state office and get a certified copy of your birth certificate. Unfortunately, a large percentage of these people don't have birth certificates. They're born in small villages that don't have a hospital or a doctor. They are born at home with only family members and maybe a midwife to help deliver the baby. There are no forms. There are no papers. They can't even qualify for medical coverage in Mexico without a birth certificate. If they want to try and obtain a birth certificate, family cannot vouch for them. It has to be a third party. So by the time they realize what they need, they're usually out of luck. I know I don't remember who was present when I was born. I can't say as I remember that event at all. Plus you have some people coming through Mexico from other countries who run into the cartels and the cartels will burn their papers so they can't get across the border. Some have abusive family members who burn their papers to try and keep them from leaving. So for a variety of reasons we are asking them for something that they just don't have available. They want to follow the law, but they can't.

Additionally the laws or rules are always changing. For instance, if you're one of the lucky ones that has papers and you walked across the border to the checkpoint and asked for asylum, they have to let you in because you're on American soil. The current administration moved the checkpoints to the middle of the bridge (the actual border) so when people came up to ask for asylum they could tell them we were full and turn them away because they weren't on American soil. The number of immigrants or refugees that we allow in each year is also set by the administration. So each administration can increase or lower that number creating additional delays. For most of us, the more we learned about immigration law, the more confused we got. The attorneys told us immigration law is every bit as confusing as tax law if that helps you put things into perspective.

Unfortunately our laws are also open to interpretation. Which means that they are not consistently applied or enforced. Two sisters came to the border together with the exact same situation and they both had their papers. One border agent let one sister in so she could go with her sponsor and wait for her notice to appear. The other border agent told the other sister she could not come in to her sponsor and had to go back to the detention center in Mexico and wait for her notice to appear. Why?

The district court we went to in Las Cruces, New Mexico, allows attorneys to visit clients in the detention centers, go over their options and get everything done ahead of time so they don't waste a lot of time in court. I was very impressed with the district court in Las Cruces. This district has developed procedures to deal with the situation and the numbers they have as best they can while maintaining due representation and treating everyone with respect. We were told another district in Texas just puts detainees in a big room and tells the attorneys they have 10 minutes, so they take much longer to process individuals who may or may not have access to due representation. If it's a simple illegal border crossing, the Las Cruces district court basically sentences defendants to time served and moves on, while another district in Texas sentences defendants to 6 months in jail which just adds more taxpayer costs to the situation and money in someone's pocket.

We can say we want zero tolerance. We can say we have to enforce our laws. But then we don't follow them ourselves or expect that they don't apply to us. The law clearly states that if you leave the United States and go to any other country, Mexico and Canada included, you have to have a passport to get back in. We had a member of our group that didn't have a passport. Only a driver's license. We went into Mexico twice. Twice that person was allowed to re-enter the United States with only a driver's license. They broke the law by re-entering the United States without proper "papers". Is that person a criminal? No, I don't think so. But when we pray the Lord's Prayer as Jesus taught us, we ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Is it right for us to expect forgiveness for breaking the law and not pass on that same forgiveness to others? Are the laws and rules enforced consistently and fairly? No, not at all.

We discovered that even if you follow the rules and have all the correct paperwork, the average wait time for procuring your Lawful Permanent Residence (LPR) status if coming through Mexico is approximately 20 years right now. You

can't get a job because you can't get a work permit without your LPR or "green card". So what are you supposed to do for 20 years? Once you get your "green card" you have to wait another 4 years before you can apply for citizenship. And the citizenship process can take up to 6 years. That adds up to 30 years to get into this country and gain citizenship. Needless to say, I'd probably be dead before I made citizenship if I was immigrating across the border today. But the sad news is, if you have a million dollars you can basically walk right in. You can probably have your LPR status in months, not years. You might be a cartel member from Mexico with all that money or you might just be a professional athlete. But you're welcomed with open arms if you have enough money. Who says money doesn't talk? Who thinks money doesn't buy privilege?

If we are indeed a democracy, government of the people, by the people and for the people, we should have the power to change these rules. But it's not going to be easy. We're going to have to overcome a significant amount of fear. We're going to have to educate people to overcome the ignorance that drives that fear. And we're going to have to overcome a significant amount of greed that doesn't want to allow change for the fear of losing money and control. But I think we can make a difference if we choose to make a difference. The people of El Paso are certainly trying to make a difference.

Despite it all, I would have to agree with Brian. Brian was the only person in our group who really speaks Spanish, having lived in South America for six months and visited a number of countries in Central and South America. Brian kept saying, "I love these people." "I love this culture." And I have to say we met some wonderful people. Despite having no earthly wealth and being taken advantage of, I found that they have a certain happiness, joy and contentment that a lot of people here at home really want, but can't figure out how to obtain it. It's not something you can just buy at the market. It's like St. Francis of Assisi. He gave up all his earthly wealth to live with the poor and disadvantaged and found great comfort, joy and happiness. These people don't have anything to really give up. They're already poor. But they have that happiness, contentment and joy in relationships that many of us only wish we had. It's that "Minnesota nice" that we keep hearing about, but aren't always able to put into action on a consistent basis because of our fear, greed or ignorance. But I did find Minnesota nice alive and well in El Paso.

The first undocumented immigrant that we visited with on Sunday afternoon is an electrician. He's lives from job to job because he doesn't have "papers". Like other undocumented immigrants, people will take advantage of him because they know he's undocumented. But he is has become very street smart and figured out how to survive. He has found that if you take responsibility and treat people with respect, you can stay out of a lot of trouble. He found it very rewarding just to help other people like himself.

The first lady we visited with on Monday at the Aqua Dolce (Sweet Water) colonia broke my heart. She and her husband came over on a crossing visa so she could take care of her mother, who was a US citizen, and lived in the colonia. She and her husband worked to purchase a lot in the colonia and an old trailer with a rotten floor that they had to fix up just to make it inhabitable. Her husband got caught going back to Mexico to see his sick and dying mother. He tried to cross back in illegally a couple of times, but got injured and can no longer try to make it across the border. So he remains in Juarez while she is in the United States by herself. Her mother, who was a US citizen, petitioned for her immigration in 2000. Her immigration hearing was scheduled for some time in 2018. An 18 year wait. Unfortunately her mother passed away in 2014, so her immigration status is still up in the air and she remains without "papers". She does not get a lot of family support from her sons. Her daughter helps her out a little. She makes money by baking and selling cookies and selling crafts that she makes within the community. She is a very loving and caring person who is extremely lonely, living alone with the constant fear of deportation. She even signed up for classes at the local community center, even though she doesn't know the language, just so she could be around people. She is starting to lose her eyesight due to cataracts. Her church, along with Cristo Rey and other community members held benefits and raised enough money to get her eye surgery so she can see out of one eye now. They are still working to raise enough money to get the other eye done.

She thought she had nothing to give. But I found in the story of her life the living word of God. The conversations and prayers she had with God. The faith and hope that keeps this woman going and always looking to the future. The love that this woman shared with us through her story and the only thing she had to give, cookies. You'll have to ask Patti to see the handbag that she purchased. Another work of love. A number of individuals from our group and the group that was with us that day came up to purchase bags of cookies from her before we left. I watched as they would give her a ten or a twenty dollar bill. She would

insist on getting them change, but they would tell her to keep it. I couldn't help but see the despair in that woman's eyes. There was a look of extreme gratitude for coming down there from Minnesota and giving her money, but at the same time there was a look of helplessness that I will never forget as this woman realized this really wasn't solving her problem. This is a woman without a country. She has no roots in Mexico and she has no "papers" in the United States. She just wants to be recognized as a real person so she can get a real job and provide for herself without the fear of deportation. I wanted so desperately to give her such a paper, but realized that I was the one with nothing to give.

The other lady we visited with on Monday afternoon has been an undocumented immigrant for 16 years and a member at Cristo Rey. She has been able to overcome her fear of the border patrol by actually working with them on issues. Respect and open dialog have worked for her as well. They have created The Border Network For Human Rights which was able to set up something they call "Hugs, Not Walls" where a group of people can come to the border and have three minutes to talk a person on the other side. She noted how regulations, conditions and discrimination have increased under the current administration. But she also pointed out that we are not going to be able to resolve the issues by focusing on Red and Blue. In her eyes this is a humanitarian crisis that politics has created, but we need to focus on human beings to solve it. The major challenge for immigrants, and everyone else involved for that matter, is education so we can truly understand the situation and find solutions.

On Tuesday we got to visit with another undocumented woman in the Hueco Tanks colonia. I refer to her as the miracle. She and her husband had come to the United States with their infant children to escape the violence of the Cartel and seek a better life. Unfortunately her husband got picked up and sent back to Mexico. He did not disclose any information about his family. But this first offense meant that he couldn't apply for a crossing visa for 5 years. So she worked to make money by selling tamales. She basically developed her own test kitchen and went around the neighborhood with tamales, changing the recipe until she had something people would buy. And like the woman from the day before, she gave us the only thing she had, her story and her tamales. And the tamales were excellent. So her husband got a job at the factory in Mexico and she would send him money she made from the tamales to try and get enough money to pay the coyotes to get him back across the border. When he got caught trying to cross the border, the second offense meant he couldn't apply for a

crossing visa for 10 years. But they kept trying. When he got caught trying to cross the border a second time, the third offense meant that he couldn't apply for a crossing visa for 20 years and if he did come across the border they said they would put him in jail for 3 years. So he told his wife to stop sending money and he would just work for a while and they would see what happened.

Prayers do get answered. This couple hadn't seen each other for years. But they were able to get her to a Hugs Not Walls event. Members of her church surrounded her to keep her from the attention of the border patrol. But she couldn't go up to the fence to talk to her husband for fear of being discovered. At the end of the event when they formed the big prayer circle, with half of the circle on the American side and half on the Mexico side, they positioned her next to the wall so she could touch fingertips with her husband through the wall.

Prayers do get answered. A coyote actually contacted him sometime later and said he could get him across the border for \$200.00. He told the coyote he didn't have that much money. The coyote said he could get him across for \$100.00. But again he said he had no money. The coyote dropped the price to \$50.00. He still didn't have \$50.00, but his fellow employees took up a collection to raise the \$50.00 for him. The coyote actually got him and another woman across the border where they were picked up on the US side by someone who was supposed to take them to a safe house. They later found out that the woman would typically just take them back to the border and turn them in for the bounty. But as they visited, she thought he looked familiar and they found out they were from the same village in Mexico. So she took them to a pay phone in town where he could call to find out where his wife was. She was actually talking at church that day. As she stood up in the front of the church that day, the back doors opened to reveal her soaking wet husband.

But the miracle didn't end there either. One of the first people she called was Pastor Rose. Pastor Rose opened up to us at that point and said she was going to file for divorce. But after hearing how this couple had worked for years to be reunited and all the miracle of things that had occurred to make that happen, she went home and talked to her family to tell them they were doing it all wrong. They had to change. But her marriage was saved as a result.

We also got to visit with her daughter, who would be defined as a dreamer under our current regulations. She does not have "papers" so she is also undocumented. She was brought over as an infant, so the United States is the only country she has ever known.

Being young while her father was in Mexico she had some anger issues which showed up in her school work. She said her mother got to know her teachers very well when she was younger. As she got older and was able to comprehend the situation, she started helping her mother make and sell tamales. She was too embarrassed to tell any of her friends at school about her situation. She just worked hard to get good grades and stay out of trouble so she would not draw attention to herself or her family. One day in high school they called her to the office over the intercom. The counselor had noticed how well she was doing at school, but also noted that she hadn't applied to any colleges. She had to confess that she was undocumented, and as a result of not having "papers" couldn't qualify or get into college. She thought she would be done after high school. But the counselor worked to find a college that accepted dreamers. She was able to write an essay and qualify for a scholarship and is now attending college in the criminal justice arena. She is, however, still undocumented. No "papers". She has no idea at this point whether she will be able to get a job when she graduates. But she goes on with the faith and hope that something will work out by the time she graduates.

On Thursday we went back across the border to visit a couple of ladies in Anabra outside of Juarez. It was a different country, but much the same as the colonias outside El Paso. They start with a little plot of land. No streets. No electricity. No water. Buses would show up every hour, but no schools. They basically start with what they can find, building houses out of pellets and blankets. Then make improvements as they are able. Their philosophy is to do it yourself instead of waiting for the government to do something.

The first lady had actually spent twelve years in California before moving back to Juarez and then Anabra. She would complain to God about her situation. Then she met the missionary at the mission. She started translating at the mission and attending bible studies. To her amazement, the bible studies had everything to do with her. Then she learned to pray for what you need. Not for what you want.

She runs the little mission library in Anabra that was funded by generous donors from Kansas City. She thought they were crazy for wanting to build a library. She said at first even the flies wouldn't come in. But as they push for education and have offered some incentives the library is starting to get busy on the weekends. Not so much during the week when everyone is working.

She now has five children who she is trying to get educated. School is not a real opportunity in Mexico. Buildings and teachers are the only thing the government provides. They have to pay tuition to cover utilities and all other expenses. Parents are responsible for purchasing the uniforms. So she always makes sure the tuition and uniforms are paid first.

I thought of our own country where politicians have continually cut funding for education. Class sizes getting larger. Teachers having to purchase their own supplies. Parents having to fund sports, music and art classes outside the normal curriculum. Tuition increasing and students finishing college with massive amounts of debt. I hope we don't end up where school is not a real opportunity in this country as well.

The other lady we visited with moved from Juarez to Anabra 28 years ago. She had been living with her mother-in-law which was not a good situation with too many adults, drinking and smoking. So she started like everyone else with a pellet house and no services, but woke up happy each day. It took the kids 45 minutes to an hour to get to school each day.

She found the mission church in Anabra and became part of the catechism. When her house burned down she was not going back to her mother-in-law's place so she would make excuses to keep the kids busy and cooked outside. The church worked to rebuild her house with floors, electricity and a water tank. They became part of a group with the church. Her children get to go to school through the mission and she now has two college graduates. She thought her best decision was to move to Anabra even if she has to get up at 5:00 to start cooking. But she can't cook without singing and dancing.

So the country changed, but the people didn't. These were the same people I saw in El Paso who thought they had nothing to give. But they still shared their stories and fed us a wonderful brunch of gorditas, guacamole and fruit. They had the same passion for obtaining an education for their children and securing a better future. They wanted to help the seniors who have to rely on their children to keep warm for the winter and for healthcare. The only difference was that they didn't have the fear of deportation and the fear from the cartels wasn't significant enough to make them uncomfortable at this point. These people have so little that the cartels don't show them much interest. I don't know if that will change as they continue to improve their situation. I hope not. But just like the people in El Paso despite the fact that they have so little doesn't diminish the joy, happiness and contentment these people have or their desire to help others.

Later in the day we had the great pleasure of meeting Dr. Mendoza. She was one of the lucky ones who was able to get an education and became a doctor at a hospital in Juarez. The mission kept asking her to come out to Anabra to see people. She eventually saw her calling and left the hospital to establish a clinic in Anabra not far from the library we had visited earlier in the day. We all equated her to Mother Teresa.

You can't qualify for health care in Mexico without a birth certificate. So needless to say there are a lot of people whose only access to healthcare is what they can afford. As a result, there are a lot of people who don't go to the doctor or don't have access to medical care. She related a couple of stories about a young woman who came in having "female" issues. It turns out she was pregnant and didn't know it. She had not had any prenatal care and the fetus had died causing her symptoms. Unfortunately they had to do a complete hysterectomy because of the damage and resulting infection. Another man came in and said he had to see her because his feet smelled. She said, "What do you mean?" He said, "My feet stink." When she asked him to show her, he took off his shoes and she discovered gangrene so bad that they had to amputate both feet.

The biggest problem she sees in her clinic is diabetes. She now tests everyone who comes into her clinic for diabetes. Fortunately the high price of insulin in this country hasn't infiltrated Mexico. But a lot of what she sees from complications with diabetes goes back to the lack of education and teaching people what and how to eat. So she deals with the resulting issues. Fortunately, just like Mother Teresa, Dr. Mendoza is very tenacious. She is very gifted at removing road blocks. If she has someone who needs to see a specialist, she will contact that doctor based on her previous hospital experience to get people in. She said how some specialists don't want to see these people because they smell. So she tells them they will give them a bath before they bring them in. Well then they say they don't want these people in their office because others might see them. So she says they can bring them in at the end of the day when everyone else is gone. Well then they say someone might still see them at the office. So she will make arrangements to bring them in on the weekend when no one else is around. She just doesn't know how to take "no" for an answer. She is currently working with a set of twins who are up for adoption because they can't see. She says there is an operation available that would correct that, but she is still working to get the proper specialist to do it. Based on what I saw I have every faith that this woman will indeed get it done.

She is also very street smart and knows how to stay under the radar. She helped one family who wanted to return the favor and come in and tile the floor of her clinic. She declined. She knew if the cartel say tile on the floor, they would think she was making too much money and would want some in return. So they stick with the cement floor that meets their needs and use the money for supplies instead.

I can't say enough about the people at Cristo Rey. Pastor Rose who was actually born in Bolivia. Pastor Juan who is also an immigrant and just completing his seminary work, starting his internship at Cristo Rey in February. The ladies who came in and cooked meals for us and helped us with the dinner we served at Casa Romero (the annunciation house refugee shelter). And the congregation who put on the lunch and visited with us on Sunday after church. Just like the pot-luck dinners we have after church here in Minnesota except they speak Spanish, instead of Norwegian. Which is not a problem that we can't overcome. But not a tater-tot hot dish in sight. Other than that, they are no different than us. We are no different than them.

These people, and the people they introduced us to, taught me more about faith, hope and love than I could have ever imagined. It was like a living bible. If you want to "see" the bible, get your ass to El Paso. God's message is simple. But the actions and the implementation of that message is more powerful than you know. Cristo Rey took in 200 immigrant/refugees in 2016. They took in 800 in 2017 and 600 in 2018, while other churches worried about the potential liability. Last year they fed 8,000 immigrants. To put that in perspective, Vang would have to do our annual lutefisk dinner about every other month to reach that level. And they raise enough money to help a woman in the colonia get eye surgery so she can see, as well as helping other members.

You can go to church and hear the word of God. You can open the bible and read the word of God. You can attend a bible study and study the word of God. But you have to get out into the real world to live and experience the word of God without all the weight of religion. I now know why Jesus spent his whole life among less fortunate people like this. They know how to live with God, rather than just talk about Him. I'm reminded of a statement I once heard that "most people want to serve God, but only as an advisor."

I've referred to "papers" throughout this document. During the course of the week, I kept hearing about "papers". "Papers" to prove your birth date and place. "Papers" to get into this country. "Papers" to get a job. "Papers" to go to school. I kept asking myself, "Why do we put so much faith in papers?" "Do papers really accomplish anything?" I saw a news article when I got home about Drew Kerry's ex-fiancé in which yet another person was allegedly killed by someone whom she had a restraining order against. Again, another "paper" that we think is supposed to keep people safe, but doesn't stop them from killing you. I have to say the best news that I found throughout this whole experience, the best news I have to report, came complements of a story about a young boy who was a member at Christo Rey and whose father had been deported and couldn't get back across the border because he didn't have "papers":

God doesn't require papers! Amen!

El Paso / Juarez (Part 2)

I recently returned from a mission trip to El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico. I wrote a whole other document on the details of the trip. I tried to cover the activities, the stories and the emotions that we all experienced on the trip. A few of us met after church one Sunday to discuss how to present our trip to the congregation and others. We constantly got off track as we started re-experiencing the events of the week and talking about what an impact the trip had on our lives.

We all agreed that we should probably try to keep our presentation to one hour. Certainly no more than an hour and fifteen minutes. If we went any longer than that people would lose interest and lose focus on what we had to report. But looking at the list of what we had experienced during the week, and witnessing how quickly we got off track just amongst ourselves in recounting just a few of those experiences, I quickly determined that it would be impossible to condense our experiences from that week into an hour. I was glad I had written my previous report to share with anyone interested. Someone said we had to limit our comments or presentation to five minutes. For some people five minutes is a lifetime to get up in front of people. For me, I couldn't see how a whole morning or afternoon with the people we had met could be condensed to five minutes and do it justice.

Pastor Paul made an interesting observation as we discussed the trip. Everyone he had talked to who had been on the trip had a profound effect from the trip, but they were all different. It was like we all experienced the same thing, but we all interpreted it differently, or it had a different effect on each one of us. That reminded me of the conversations I used to have with my neighbor while sitting in my hot tub. My neighbor's brother had been a minister and he was always relating the stories of the apostles and how they each wrote differently about their experiences with Jesus. Some of that was driven by the professions that they were in before taking up with Jesus, resulting in different levels of detail. Some of that was driven by who they were writing to and trying to influence. But it occurred to me that the apostles were human beings, just like us. Why wouldn't they each have a different reaction or response to what they had experienced with Jesus, just like all of us had a different response to our trip to the border?

I thought back to the presentation on Thursday by Reuben Garcia. I had to go back and review my notes again. Reuben was a native of El Paso, Texas, who had worked for the Annunciation House, which currently has three facilities in El Paso, for 42 years. I was glad we hadn't heard from Reuben before Thursday. It was a fitting ending towards the end of the trip to try and put everything we had experienced into perspective. And Reuben did a great job of trying to get you to look at things from a different perspective.

He flipped the tables on how a lot of people look at the border situation. He pointed out that the world hasn't changed because of what has happened on the border. As I thought about that I couldn't think of any major changes I had experienced in Minnesota or throughout the Midwest as I had traveled through numerous states over the last few years because of what was happening at the border. But he pointed out that we had it backwards. The things that have been happening to the people on the border are because of us, not for us. Because of our fears and drug use throughout the United States, I had witnessed a lot of things during the week that had affected the citizens of El Paso and Juarez. Reuben pointed out that if you were down here inspecting what you are doing to us, you are successful. "We are miserable."

As much as he tried to get people to think outside the box, or at least look at things from a different perspective, he also pointed out that each one of us needs to stop trying to convince other people to change to your way of seeing things. That doesn't work. You have to focus on you. You have to focus on who you want to be. You have to live your life based on your value system. I thought of the Michael Jackson song about change. If you want to change the world you have to look in the mirror. Reuben was saying the same thing. You have to put the focus on you. You have to lead by example.

He talked about the history of the United States. How the founding fathers documented in the Declaration of Independence that "All men are created equal." Unfortunately we are still fighting to define what we mean by "men" today to include everyone. The founding fathers simply meant white men. That is all who were present at the writing and signing of the Declaration of Independence. There were no minorities and certainly no women who signed the Declaration. It wasn't until the 1860's that we fought the bloodiest war in United States history so we could include African Americans in that definition. Even though they were given the right to vote in 1870, several states enacted legislation that still made it hard for them to participate for another one hundred

years. Women didn't get the right to vote until 1920. The civil rights movements of the 1950's and 1960's eventually forced desegregation and made it possible for African Americans to participate, but they are still fighting an uphill battle today. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1972 stated that you cannot discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. But we are still fighting today to try and get everyone to follow that rule. Maybe it would have been better to just say, Thou shall not discriminate period, instead of trying to define all the possibilities. It is interesting and disappointing for me to realize that it is, in fact, organized religion that is currently trying to persuade the Supreme Court of the United States that their freedom of religion should allow them to discriminate under the law. Somehow I don't think that is what Jesus had in mind. But then I have to remember that it was, in fact, organized religion who went to Pontius Pilot and had Jesus crucified.

We say that we are a great country or that we live in a great country. Some say they want to make this country great again. But when I look in the mirror I struggle to find what that means. Reuben said he gets asked a lot if he only had one wish, what would that wish be. He said he would wish for all the other countries of the world to stop doing business with the United States. Just for one year, so we could actually see and experience how much we depend on each other for our very existence. None of us can do it alone. We all depend on each other.

As Reuben pointed out, it was actually the United States who created asylum. After World War II there were people who were afraid to go back to their country because of the assistance they gave the allies during the war. The United States created the concept of asylum so those people who were in danger and feared for their lives could come to this country or one of the other allies and ask for asylum. Now we are trying to eliminate it. We are treating refugees and asylum seekers so badly in the hopes it will dissuade them from wanting to come to this country. We keep reducing the number of people we will let into this country each year so the wait period is unbearably long. Reuben pointed out that there is one judge in Texas who has never granted a single request for asylum ever. And he's proud of that. I don't think that defines a great country.

We think we are a country that can go it alone and do it better than anyone else. But we are not self-sufficient. We could not be where we are today and cannot exist without the help of other countries. Reuben related one exercise he does with college groups. He has everyone stand in a circle and then read the clothing

tag of the person to their right to see where their clothes were made. China, Vietnam, Honduras, etc. He then asks them to play a game. Take off all your clothes that aren't made in the United States and place them in the center of the room. No one wants to play.

Reuben related another comparison. Workers in Juarez get \$0.50 an hour to make Mr. Coffee machines that cost \$25.00 in the United States. That means that worker would have to work fifty hours in order to purchase the Mr. Coffee machine that they are making. If someone in the United States making a minimum wage of \$15.00 an hour had to work fifty hours to afford a Mr. Coffee machine, it would cost \$750.00. If someone with a college degree earning \$25.00 an hour had to work fifty hours to afford a Mr. Coffee machine, it would cost \$1,250.00. We want things cheap in this country so we can build up our wealth. We take advantage of poverty level wages in other countries in order to achieve that. Does that define us as a great country?

We, the United States, go into other countries and destabilize their governments. There were some discussions concerning what happened in El Salvador and Honduras. Economic sanctions against Cuba would be another example. Then we turn around and blame people wanting to flee those countries and come to our country for all our problems. They're not the problem. We are the problem.

I looked at my notes and saw how we caused the destabilization and huge increase in the number of cartels in Mexico. That resulted in a huge increase in violence and increased the number of individuals and families wanting to flee to this country for safety. Reuben related how the cartels have infiltrated the government in Mexico. Mexico actually extradited the head of national security, (that would be comparable to the head of Homeland Security in the United States), for paying \$100 million to the President of Mexico. I found myself asking why we don't have problems with cartels in the United States. Of do we?

Maybe we just call them something else. We have small, sometimes violent cartels we refer to as gangs who take over neighborhoods in the city and are responsible for most of the illegal drug distribution. They exist in every major city and are working their way out to smaller communities. But I don't think they are alone. I thought of the large pharmaceutical companies in this country. They develop drugs like the cartels, but they don't fight with guns and violence. They fight quietly with money. They develop drugs like opioids that create addiction and may kill a few people, but allows them to make billions of dollars. They infiltrate the government with money through lobbyists to get what they need.

FDA approval for more drugs. Patents to protect their products. Better tax breaks so they can make more money. Their objectives seem to be the same as the cartels. They just don't have to use violence. They use money and infiltrate the government to make it legal so they don't have to worry about that.

In visiting with some of my relatives, and listening to a lot of other people talking about the border situation the other thing I always hear is, "Why don't they learn English?" I think I found the answer to that. They don't have the opportunity. Some of the undocumented individuals we talked to commented on how the language barrier was an issue with not knowing the language. They would actually like to learn the language. That would make it easier for them. But schools in Mexico aren't free. When you live in poverty you are working all the time so you can pay to get your children through school. You don't have time for yourself. If you're an undocumented immigrant in the United States, you're still working just to make ends meet. Plus you're undocumented, so you can't register for school for fear of being discovered and deported. As I looked in the mirror and thought about change I realized I have the time. I have the resources. Why don't I get off my lazy butt and learn Spanish. Then maybe I could help teach people English.

Anyone want to join me?