

Building Bridges, Not Walls

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“We’re close to heaven.” That was the matter-of-fact reply I received from my host as I marveled over the number of stars that absolutely filled the nighttime sky. I was in awe. I had never seen a sky like that. I come from Illinois farmland where our nearest neighbor is a quarter-mile down the road, so I’ve seen some black nights and bright stars, but nothing like the sky in Cieneguilla. At the time, I giggled a bit inside over that simplistic answer, “We’re close to heaven.” But as the days went on, I began to understand the layers of the truth in those words.

Cieneguilla is a village in the state of Oaxaca in Southern Mexico. By van from the nearest city, it takes 6 ½ hours of driving on a dirt road, weaving back and forth up a steep mountain. When you finally arrive, tired, dusty and somewhere between dizzy and nauseous, it’s a surprise to see a thriving village tucked away near the top of the mountain. You can see grandmothers wearing traditional indigenous clothing beautifully woven with bright colors and some little girls wearing t-shirts with Dora the Explorer, who is my niece’s all-time-favorite cartoon character. You might hear folks talking to each other in the local indigenous language called Chatino that’s melodic, sing-song tone sounds like it might be mistaken for an Asian language if you didn’t know better. Coffee trees grow behind every house and corn cobs lay drying on roofs to make corn flour by hand the next morning for tortillas. I learned while I was there that Oaxaca is the ancient birth place of corn. When I was growing up, I thought corn only came from southern Illinois. That was one of our only two grounds for bragging rights—we had corn fields stretching as far as the eye can see and a basketball team from a “nearby” university that made it into the Sweet 16 every few years.

Corn was important to us in my small town, but in Cieneguilla, it is the center life. For us, it was livelihood—what you grow and harvest and sell to earn a living. In Cieneguilla, it’s that and much more. It’s tradition. It’s the essence of every meal. It’s the reason you wake up at 4am, walk to the house down the road with the grinder and wait in line to have yesterday’s dried corn kernels ground into corn flour. It’s the reason you and the other women in your family sit together chatting every single day while your bare hands quickly and expertly remove

the kernels from the cob. It's what you cook over a hot griddle so your children can be nourished before they walk to school. Corn is the gift of the ancestors. Without it, there is no food, there is no life.

It was Domi, short for Dominga (which means Sunday) the eldest daughter, who was my same age, watched after us while we were in Cieneguilla. She cooked wonderful foods for us and took us around the village to meet all of the family's relatives and friends. As an oldest daughter myself, I thought I understood the significant responsibility she held in her family. But as time went on, and I learned more about her life and her story, I realized I had no idea of the weight she held on her shoulders.

Fifteen years ago, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was passed loosening trade restrictions between Canada, the US and Mexico. The results have been staggering. Working people on both sides of the US-Mexico boarder have suffered. Here in North Carolina, giant buildings where prosperous textile factories once were now stand empty and abandoned. Thousands lost their jobs while companies searched for cheaper labor around the world, finding it first in Mexico, and more recently in China. Over the years, I've watched as my parents' neighbors now have to put agribusiness signs beside their corn fields and are limited by the types of seeds they can and can't plant because of the subsidies they receive. Since the mid 1990's more than 2 million corn farmers in Mexico who've gone bankrupt as a result of US corn flooding the market as a result of those subsidies and "free trade". Who wins? Not farmers, not workers, not families. And Domi's family was no exception.

While I was in Mexico, 1st Corinthians chapter 12 verse 12 developed a new meaning to me. It says, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body **(the world's people)** is not made up of one part but of many **(with different faces, in different shades, with different tongues, in different lands)** but we all form one body of **Christ**. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body." Why would we hurt one part of our body in

order to nurture another? In the same way, how can we hurt one group of people to benefit another?

Over the few days we were in Cieneguilla, Domi opened up and shared her story with us. It turns out she was just home “visiting” during the time we were there, too. It was the first time she’d been back home in the more than **EIGHT YEARS** since she had left to work in the US. It was never her dream to go there. But a time came when it cost Domi’s father more to plant his corn seeds than he could sell them for after the harvest. The coffee trees they harvested weren’t enough to support the family. Someone had to sacrifice to help the family. As the eldest, it was Domi’s responsibility.

During that time she was in the US, on her salary that was often well below minimum wage, she’d been able to save enough money to send home so her father could buy a grinder. Her 13 hour work days at least six days a week enabled her family’s house to become the place where the women came at 4am to have what little corn they were still able to grow for their families ground into corn flour. The adobe home where Domi spent her childhood became the “house for the machine” and her father was able to build a cinder block house with concrete floors to live in. Because of Domi’s work, her youngest sister got to travel to Oaxaca city, eight hours down the mountain to go to the nearest high school. She’d become a member of the chorus and won voice competitions across the region. Also, Domi had a son, Jose Manuel. She’d been forced to leave with her family in Mexico when she left for the US. Of course, over the course of that time, Domi’s son had grown. When she last saw him, he was seven years old. Now he was fifteen. Domi wasn’t there the first time he lost a tooth. She wasn’t there on his first day of school or to comfort him when he had bad dreams at night. She didn’t get to watch her child grow up into the adolescent boy he’d become. She didn’t get to see the talented artist emerging in him. Instead, Domi was in Iowa and North Carolina, working in the fields from sunup to sundown. She was helping to harvest someone else’s crops, in someone else’s land. Alone. Without her family there to support and comfort her. She left her indigenous clothing, her native tongue, and everything that was familiar to her because she was told they needed workers in the fields in the US. And we still do. Last year, fruit rotted on the trees for lack of laborers to pick them off in time. Each year, only five thousand “unskilled” immigrants are granted a residency visa to live in the US. That’s 5,000 in total, from all over the world. There

are more than 200,000 farm workers in North Carolina alone. It is a myth to think that any person can't go to the post office like we can, pay \$100 at the post office and have a passport to the world mailed to them within 3-4 weeks. As Americans, that is our reality alone.

Domi, like most had little choice. She came without papers. Every day Domi comes into contact with people, rude to her at the grocery store because her English is broken. She hears the comments people make as they judge her for her brown skin and dark eyes. She lives in fear that she might wake up to a raid by ICE agents and be put in prison. For what? What is the crime in working in backbreaking labor every day, in an honest job that pays her sub-poverty wages. In living in housing conditions few of us could even imagine; in supporting her family so her siblings can go to school and her parents can come up with new types of work since farming isn't an option anymore. When did survival become a crime?

Our cry in the US about the invasion of immigrants has been long and loud.

"Few of their children in the country learn English...The signs in our streets have inscriptions in both languages ... Unless the stream of the importation could be turned they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious."

I didn't take those words from a recent newspaper article. No, those were the words of our forefather Ben Franklin, deploring the wave of Germans (my ancestors) pouring into the colony of Pennsylvania in the 1750s. Anti-immigrant sentiments are older than the United States itself, and they've flared up periodically throughout our history, targeting the Irish, French, Italians, Chinese, and others.

These sentiments of anger and hate are nothing new. But as people of faith, we know a different mantra. We know love. If we read a little further in 1st Corinthians, we are told that love is patient and kind, it rejoices in the truth and of the three, faith, hope and love, it is love that is the greatest. We must reach beyond the simple answers blasting away from our televisions every day. Its hard work sometimes to look at the world with love; to understand that the body (the world) is a unit, though it is made up of many parts and many people; and

though all its parts are many, they form one body. That we are all part of the body of Christ, regardless of the borders we've built between ourselves.

The day our delegation group left Mexico to come home, was coincidentally the day, Domi left Cieneguilla to go back to the US. Members of our group understandably grumbled at the airport process: the screening...customs...the long lines. We were less patient, as we waited on the runway for two hours on our connecting flight in Dallas, only to learn we'd have to change planes due to mechanical issues. When we arrived back in Raleigh at midnight, tired, sore, more than three hours late, I thought of Domi.

She'd loaded us with gifts as we left Cieneguilla. Newly ground coffee, fresh from the backyard, earthenware mugs, hand stitched cloth and other things. Our bags were overflowing. She'd also sent some of her son Jose Manuel's artwork with us to keep for her, knowing they couldn't take it across the border. This time, she and her husband were bringing Jose Manuel with them, but she couldn't pack a bag for him or themselves. They could only take a change of clothes and water for the long, treacherous walk across desert. She wouldn't talk much about the trip. Through her smile and jokes about "see you on the other side" I thought I could understand the fear in her eyes. She knew what she was about to face to get back to the US. I've heard stories about the heat, the lack of water, the constant fear of so many dangers one faces, especially women.

This past Friday has been 4 weeks. I haven't yet heard from Domi. We'd arranged to be in contact and exchange Jose Manuel's artwork and other things we'd brought back for her. Over the past 29 days I've wondered where they are in the long, long journey back. I wonder if they had enough to drink as they crossed the desert. I wonder if they're safe.

Being in Cieneguilla was one of the best experiences of my life. It is a magical place for me where I experienced so much love and joy. I had the privilege to become Domi's friend. I've often thought of the passing comment about the night sky being so bright because it's just "Close to heaven." Now, I understand how right they were.

In the face of every migrant, refugee and immigrant that you come into contact with, I hope that you will see the face of God. The suffering of Jesus bearing the cross is suffering of those who are parched, dehydrated drained crossing the boarder in search of a better life for their families.