

*Based on Philippians 1:3-11. Paul Writes From Prison*

The story I am about to tell you is true; names and details have been changed to protect the vulnerable.

Once upon a time, I had a colleague, Pastor Gustavo, who served a small Spanish speaking congregation while also working under the table at a local restaurant in order to provide for his family. Like millions among us who live in the shadows, Pastor Gustavo was an undocumented immigrant, who made his way north under threat of death for preaching against gang violence in his own hometown. Gustavo met and married another undocumented immigrant, who was raped by powerful men in her village who threatened to murder her entire family if she did not leave.

Although Amelia, Gustavo's wife, had applied for asylum when she crossed the border, her case was backed up in years of red tape. Her first lawyer had scammed her out of all of the money her family had given her to help her escape, and she could not legally work while she waited indefinitely through the asylum process.

Gustavo had not applied for asylum when he crossed the border, having been warned of the pitfalls and believing it was more dignified to work for a living - even under the table - than to resort to begging. And for a while, this worked.

When Gustavo and Amelia met and decided to marry, they affirmed their covenant before God and their congregation, but did not file for a marriage license through the state because they feared doing so would trigger deportation proceedings for Gustavo. Then they had children - automatically U.S. citizens - which did eventually reveal Gustavo's status to immigration authorities.

By that time, though, Gustavo was considered low risk for deportation. He was respected in his community, he had formed and now pastored a congregation, he was paying far more taxes than he received in return for services. and he just was not any kind of threat to society. Gustavo did appear in immigration court every six months or so, but the court respected Gustavo as the sole breadwinner in his mixed-status family while his wife "followed the rules" in her asylum proceedings.

All of that changed with a new Presidential Administration, elected, in large part, on anti-immigrant rhetoric. All of a sudden, without any warning, at Gustavo's regular check-in with the court, the deportation order came down. Effective immediately. Gustavo was whisked away on the spot to detention. Which, to be clear, is prison. His family was left without an income, his children without a father, he had no time to prepare anyone for his departure, and he had every expectation he could be killed on the other side of his deportation.

The church rallied, as churches tend to do. His own congregation, of course, and others in town. My Pastor Discretionary Fund became a revolving door of donations to support the family and then expanded to include more and more families in similar circumstances. Some people who were less rooted in the community accepted our help in migrating further north. A new Underground Railroad began to form on the spine of the old one. We

knew not all of this was strictly legal. We did it anyway, rooted in the biblical imperative to treat the immigrant in our midst as if they were already a citizen (Leviticus 19:34).

Pastor Gustavo, for his part, refused to be a victim. His messages from detention sounded an awful lot like the Apostle Paul's. To the churches Gustavo would say, *I am so thankful for you. We are partners in the gospel of Christ.* To his family Gustavo would say *I am longing to be with you again. My memories of you keep me going.* To his own congregation Gustavo would say, *Fear not! God is using me to preach among my fellow prisoners, and even some of the guards.* To anyone who would listen, he would say, *Focus on what really matters: life, love, companionship, fidelity, peace, hope.*

Indeed Paul's Letter to the Philippians reads like other famous messages from prison: Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *The Prison Letters of Nelson Mandela*, the Facebook posts of Alexei Navalny. Like them, Paul comforts the ones left behind. Like them, Paul places his suffering in the context of a larger vision. Like them, Paul challenges those who actively undermine the vision or passively acquiesce to the status quo. Like them, Paul encourages the faithful to stay the course with hope that the final outcome they all desire *will prevail*, in spite of current evidence to the contrary. *Hope is*, in fact, as Nelson Mandela writes, *a powerful weapon even when all else is lost.*

The Philippians, by all accounts, respond as Paul requests. They provide immediate tangible resources to Paul throughout his imprisonment: of food and water, of visitation and accompaniment. They offer Paul a platform to narrate his own story, in direct contradiction to the story his imprisoners would tell about him. And they do so at great physical and emotional risk to themselves and to their own congregation in the process. This resourcing, re-narrating, and risk-taking becomes their contribution to *the harvest of righteousness* Paul describes.

Friends, if you and I are to *hold on to hope* with any kind of integrity in this Season of Advent, we must do the same for the Gustavos and Amelias in the shadows in our midst who tremble with the truth that they are targeted by the powers that are becoming. The integrity of our commitment at SPC to *justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world* will be refined in ways we can only begin to imagine.

Refining has begun in this congregation's outpouring of support for two immigrant families selected for Christmas support by our Immigrant and Refugee Support Committee. Four adults and eight children ranging in age from 8 months to 17 years, whose documentation status we do not know and did not ask, will have diapers and warm clothes and bikes and Bluey toys to ring in the new year. Every single requested item was bought and paid for by this congregation. And you did it all on the turn of a dime while yours truly was on vacation! To which I will respond in the words of the Apostle Paul: *I thank my God for every remembrance of you ... praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel.*

Resourcing the immigrant community must be accompanied by opportunities for them to narrate their own stories in direct contradiction to the story of demonization that is taking hold at the highest levels. The St. Agnes Catholic Community will offer an opportunity for us to do just that on Friday, December 20, 6:30pm. Using a Latin American festival of the Nativity as its framework, St. Agnes will host Bishop Evelio Menjivar-

Ayala to narrate his journey to the United States as an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador. I implore every one of us to attend this event and will share more information as it becomes available. To which I will respond in the words of the Apostle Paul: *we are partners in God's grace, both in imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*

Risk-taking will emerge as our Immigrant and Refugee Support Committee gains further clarity, in collaboration with the Immigration Committee at St. Agnes and other local partners. We may be asked to offer sanctuary in this building or in our homes for immigrants going through the court system. We may be asked to transport people to safer places. We may be asked to accompany people to deportation hearings. We are already asked to pray and hope and *determine what really matters* when the truth is we would all really rather be having fun with our friends through the holidays. To which I will respond in the words of the Apostle Paul: *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until that day when all has been made well, and all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well.*

In the meantime, we prepare. We wait - *actively*. We place our hope in radical solidarity with those who are most vulnerable in our midst. And we celebrate in all times and all places that Hope Is Still With Us, as we prepare for the birth of Christ.

*For more information on Paul as a political prisoner, see:*

*Tamez, Elsa, "Philippians" in Wisdom Commentary, Vol. 51: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 2017.*

*Schellenberg, Ryan S. Abject Joy: Paul Prison, and the Art of Making Do, Oxford University Press: USA, 2021.*

*For more information about the Philippians' role in "resourcing, re-narrating and risk-taking" see <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/why-was-apostle-paul-prison-so-often>*