

Silverio's Journey

In the midst of the debate surrounding complex immigration issues, one Covenant pastor calls us to remember the story of two cousins. **DAN JOHNSON**

Last spring Arizona passed the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, or Arizona Senate Bill 1070. Referred to as SB 1070 throughout the country, the law made it a crime for anyone in Arizona to be found without registration documentation. It also granted police license to detain anyone they suspect of being undocumented.

SB 1070 has polarized America. Some see it as a necessary recourse to the federal government's negligence. Some consider it a just response to flagrant violation of U.S. immigration law. Others see it as racist and short-sighted. Americans across the land are congregating around these differing views. They are speaking out—and not always in a civil manner. And although a U.S. district judge has issued a temporary injunction blocking key parts of the law, Arizona's SB 1070 remains at the center of a maelstrom.

With all the debate filling the airwaves my concern is that rarely anything is said about Jesus and the poor. The Bible says more about the poor than it does about prayer. A brief overview reminds us that God cares about the poor and will not forget them (Isaiah 41:17). He hears their cry (Exodus 3:7), and when we are “kind to the poor, we lend to the LORD” (Proverbs 19:17). In two vivid parables Jesus framed our thinking about the poor. In Matthew 25 he tells the story of the sheep and the goats and says, “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...as you did it to the least of me you did it to me” (vv. 35-40). In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), love is extended to a desperate person across ethnic lines.

As Christ followers we must maintain some kind of solidarity with the poor. Every Christian and every church must figure out a way to do this in the city or suburb or rural area in which they serve. There must be a hand extended to the less fortunate if we are serious about Messiah Jesus.

As the debate storms on about law enforcement, drug smuggling, language barriers, low-paying jobs, boycotts, and inept leaders, we don’t hear many stories like that of Ismail Vasquez, which is told in *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands*. Ismail and his cousin, Silverio Vail, crossed the border on July 19, 2000. They were two campesinos, or peasant farmers, from Guatemala. They farmed little plots of land in the 7,000-foot mountains of their beautiful country. Ismail could barely feed his wife and four children, so he and Silverio agreed to migrate to America, find jobs, and mail checks home to their needy families. Neither of them wanted to go. Neither wanted to leave his family. No one they knew from their village had made the trip.

They took buses most of the 2,750-mile journey from Central America to the U.S.–Mexico border.

Ismail and Silverio did not look like Mexicans because they weren’t. They were Mayan Indians and their native tongue was K’iche’ Maya. Usually such travelers are singled out and robbed and beaten—often by the police. Ismail and his companion were fortunate—for the moment—and they arrived at the border near Douglas, Arizona, without incident.

They crossed the border at 7 p.m. with a band of twenty illegals. A coyote—a hired guide—led them. Within an hour and a half, Silverio became ill. He sat down to rest—and then to rest again. The coyote left them. The band of twenty hurried on without them.

The two Guatemalans struggled through the night together. Progress was slow, even in the cool night temperatures. Then came the monsoon heat.

By noon, Silverio was spent. They did not have enough water. No

one has enough water on a 100-degree day, but Ismail and Silverio were especially lacking because the coyote had told them the trip would be only a five-mile hike to the pick-up van. When Silverio began to experience chest pains Ismail picked him up and carried him on his back—this time back toward the border, desperate to get out of the heat. Silverio begged him to stop. He now had *dolor de brazos*—pain in the arms. They stopped under the shade of a tree in a wash, and there Silverio died in the arms of his cousin.

Ismail was grief-stricken. Sick with heat exhaustion himself, he headed for the valley and found a highway. The border patrol picked him up and located Silverio’s body. The medical examiner determined the cause of death to be exposure.

Why do we not hear stories like Ismail’s in the news? Why do we tend to limit our discussion of SB 1070 to terms of profiling, economic costs, and public opinion?

If Jesus cares at all about the economy or public opinion, those concerns are secondary. Jesus cares primarily

about the poor. I know that Jesus was with Ismail and Silverio. He was there under the tree, in the wash, and when death came. Somehow we must be there also. Nine out of ten people crossing the border have no agenda but to alleviate poverty. Somehow we must be in solidarity with the poor.

One way we do this is by insisting on asking different—and deeper—questions. Why are there so many desperately poor farmers in Mexico and Central America? Does the North American Free Trade Agreement exacerbate their poverty? What impact do U.S. agricultural subsidies have on those farmers? If the root problem is economic, why are we not talking about that instead of SB 1070?

Let us be followers of Jesus. Let

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us not be misled by fear or bias or polemics. Let us be led by the living word of God. Perhaps this is the church’s hour to speak truth and compassion into a complex moral issue.

I conclude with the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was martyred on behalf of the poor in El Salvador in 1980: “The guarantee of one’s prayer is not in saying a lot of words. The guarantee of one’s petition is very easy to know: How do I treat the poor? Because that is where God is. The degree to which you approach them, and the love with which you approach them, or the scorn with which you approach them—that is how you approach your God. What you do to them, you do to God. The way you look at them is the way you look at God. If we are worth anything, it is not because we have more money, or more talent, or more human qualities. In so far as we are worth anything, it is because we are grafted onto Christ’s life, his cross, and resurrection. That is a person’s measure.” ■

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