Border Crossing
First Sunday After Christmas
Matthew 2:13–23
Isaiah 63:7–14

There has been a great deal of discussion about immigration, migrants, and refugees recently. Then again, there are always significant amounts of discussion around these issues, as they are issues the world and, specifically, America have struggled with almost as long as we have existed as a country. With the recent refugee crisis in Europe, stemming from the violence in the Middle East, we have become even more focused on the issue. That discussion is in addition to the normal discussion Americans have about immigration from Mexico and Latin America. All of these events become even more tension-filled now that Americans elected Donald Trump as President. Whether it's his comments from the election when he talked about Mexicans as "rapists," among other insults, or his attempt to ban travel from Muslim-majority countries, our ability to talk about these issues has become even more difficult.

Throughout the decades in America, what has remained constant in this discussion is the rhetoric surrounding the issue, with the only change coming in who we vilify at the time. Whether it's the Irish coming over carrying their Catholicism, which threatened to disrupt the Protestant majority, or Jews fleeing the Third Reich, but bringing their threatening clothing and odd-seeming beliefs (not to mention their propensity to keep to themselves), or Muslims with women wearing the hijab and their supposed threats of terrorism, those who wish to keep others out focus only on our differences, those parts of their lives Americans don't take the time to understand. The rhetoric is one of fear and hate.

Unfortunately, for much of American history, significant parts of the church have been at the forefront of such rhetoric, often quoting parts of the Old Testament about keeping separate from others or the threats of intermarriage as justification for why we should keep America as a

Christian (which is really code for white, evangelical, and Protestant) nation. That has begun to shift in recent years, as more and more churches become involved in refugee resettlement, but the years of accretion have laid a foundation of distrust and fear and hate, which churches must intentionally combat, as the church has been responsible for its creation.

This story about Jesus, then, comes at the right time, as Jesus fits so many of these categories. Jesus fits the definition of a migrant, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "A person who moves temporarily or seasonally from place to place." Jesus also fits the definition of a refugee: "A person who has been forced to leave his or her home and seek refuge elsewhere, esp. in a foreign country, from war, religious persecution, political troubles, the effects of a natural disaster, etc.; a displaced person." In fact, if we focus on the part of the definition that centers around religious persecution and/or political troubles, Jesus seems the quintessential refugee.

Jesus is fleeing genocide, as his appearance (and the belief that he is the long-expected Messiah, leading to the religious persecution) caused the slaughter of the innocents, as many people often refer to this passage. Joseph has to take his family to Egypt to keep them alive, then he has to go to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem, as Joseph is afraid to return his family to where they have been living for at least two years (based on the age of the children Herod kills) and possibly longer. In the author of Matthew's account, Joseph and Mary didn't come from Nazareth down to Bethlehem for the census; that only shows up in the gospel of Luke. Instead, it sounds as if Joseph and Mary have always been living in Bethlehem. Thus, Nazareth becomes the place that takes in the refugee family, as they have had to resettle there. Jesus, then, spends the first three or so years of his life being forcibly relocated from Bethlehem to Egypt, then to Nazareth where the family has to begin all over again, as refugees today do. Joseph and Mary,

though, are at least able to resettle in a place where they know the language, religion, and culture, unlike so many refugees today.

There is never any evidence that they struggle from this resettlement, but we also don't have any information about the next ten or so years of Jesus's life in any of the gospels. We do know that Joseph disappears, which would have made their life more difficult if he died or someone forcibly removed him from the family for some other reason.

The passage from Isaiah draws on God's salvation for the people of Israel when they were refugees, when they were fleeing Egypt, as well, and moving to what would become Israel. What is interesting to note, though, is what happens after they arrive. The first half of this passage talks about all that God has done for the Israelites, commenting, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely." The author of Isaiah clearly lays out the idea that people who have received such grace and salvation will never cease to appreciate such goodness in their life. The second half of the passage makes it clear that they have stopped remembering what God has done, though it ends with hope that such a view of the world will change.

The same pattern is true when we talk about how Americans have treated those who have come after us. All of us (save for those American Indians among us) came from immigrants, many as migrants and refugees, fleeing persecution. Our ancestors came here and set themselves up in new lives, working to provide for their children and grandchildren. Now that we are established, though, we turn against those who might come after us, treating them as the Other, even as others treated our ancestors. The only hope we have is to see them all as Jesus, as ourselves, and to love them accordingly. Only then will we be able to say, as the end of the passage from Isaiah does, "Thus you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name."

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

How should we as churches and as Christians help with the refugee crisis?

What can the church do to shift the immigration debate towards one of love?

Turning Over the Tables
Third Sunday in Lent
John 2:13–22

Unlike the other gospels, the author of John puts Jesus's turning over the tables in the temple at the beginning of his ministry. We've just had Jesus's first miracle, performed even before it was "his time," as he said, and now here the supposed Messiah is wrecking the temple. As in the other accounts, Jesus is upset by the commerce taking place where there should be worship. When people went to the temple, they needed to have the right sacrifice—the cattle, sheep, and doves mentioned—and it was quite difficult to transport those animals the long distances that people would travel to Jerusalem.

The fact that Roman coins had images of Caesar on them exacerbated the problem. Thus, Jews would have to exchange their money to get temple money—explaining the money changers—to buy the sacrifices they needed to meet their religious obligations. None of this setup would be a problem, save for the fact that everyone involved used this plan to make money from people who often could not afford it. The exchange rate was never in the people's favor, but always benefited those who offered what they would call a service. Everything was done in the name of keeping the religion pure, making the problem even worse.

We often feel as frustrated with the economic and religious problems in our society, as we see rampant inequality, as a vast array of companies take advantage of those who can least afford it. We see Check into Cash businesses in the poorest neighborhoods where there are also no grocery stores, only convenience stores where people pay two or three times what they should for what little food such places offer. Rent-to-own businesses require people to pay four to five times the amount of what appliances should cost because people in poverty cannot afford to pay one lump sum for such purchases, having to eke out monthly payments for years. Such an

approach locks people into low quality housing, as well, as they cannot afford to save for a down payment, just making ends meet from month to month.

Unlike Jesus, though, we don't know where to go to turn the tables over, to drive people out with a whip of cords. We feel frustrated and impotent because we don't know how to effect change. We might want to go in to one of these businesses and toss over their washers and dryers or tip over shelves of cans and boxes of processed foods, but we wonder what good even that would do. The business would receive the insurance money and be up and running within a matter of days, and there are other such businesses around every corner. We would be arrested, charged with destruction of property. Some people might even consider us a terrorist, as we would be calling capitalism into question. We don't know what to do when we are stuck in a system that perpetuates such inequalities day after day.

We feel like a group of men in a short story by Stephen Crane called "The Open Boat." Four men—a cook, correspondent, oiler, and captain—are in a lifeboat after a shipwreck, and they are trying to get to shore. The waves keep coming, though, and they feel as if nature is indifferent to their plight, a mark of Naturalism, a literary movement near the end of the 19th century through the beginning of the 20th. The narrator writes, "When it occurs to man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples." They cannot do anything about nature, so they must endure it.

We also believe we cannot do anything to solve the problems of a system that perpetuates such problems. We perform small works: give to a food bank, serve the homeless a meal, help build a house for low-income residents, send money or food to victims of natural disasters, house

the homeless in our church for a week two or three times a year. We don't know—and sometimes don't believe—that such actions do any good at all. It's easy to feel helpless in the face of such problems, problems that seem so much larger than we are.

As he so often does, though, Jesus wants to draw attention to what is truly important in religion, though he does so this time much more dramatically. He wants people to see that it isn't sacrifice that God requires, and it's certainly not meeting a list of requirements; instead, it is a heart of devotion and worship that God wants in the temple. God isn't concerned with our following a list of rules; God is concerned about our loving God and neighbor. In fact, Jesus knows that these people will be back there the next day, having set up again to cheat the people out of their money, all in the name of religion.

However, that doesn't stop him from spending the next few years of his life healing individual people, feeding people who are hungry, treating women and outcasts as equals, loving everyone he meets. He reminds us that the dramatic actions are not what we do every day to change the world, to bring the kingdom. Richard Selzer, a doctor who writes creative nonfiction, tells the story of a doctor he learned from in medical school. That doctor, Hugh Franciscus, performed a cleft palate reconstruction on a girl who was already dead in the dark of night all to make her mother happy. Selzer reflects at the end of his essay: "I would like to have told him what I now know, that his unrealistic act was one of goodness, one of those small, persevering acts done, perhaps, to ward off madness. Like lighting a lamp, boiling water for tea, washing a shirt."

Most of us cannot change the system by throwing it over, literally or metaphorically. We can, though, perform these small, persevering acts for everyone we meet. We can love them as

Jesus loved, believing that enough such actions will bring the kingdom while everyone is looking for the dramatic action that our world so values.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

What are actions we can take to try to reduce the inequalities in our economic system?

What have other people done for you, even if small actions, to help you during difficult times?

Getting and Spending
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 12:13–21
Colossians 3:1–11

This passage from the gospel of Luke is one of Jesus's clearest passages about money and its effects on us. The person in the crowd has what sounds like a fair request to us today, as he simply wants his brother to split the inheritance with him. Since we're not given any more context, we're not completely sure why Jesus responds the way he does, but it's clear that Jesus thinks the person (probably a man, as women couldn't inherit property at all) is being unreasonable. More than likely, he is a younger son, and, under Jewish law, he would have inherited little of his father's possessions; thus, he's asking Jesus to circumvent traditional inheritance laws by encouraging his older brother to divide the inheritance.

As we have seen so many times, Jesus is willing to break rules where he believes they are harmful to people rather than helpful, but, here, he upholds the law instead. He perceives the man's motivations to be not any type of equality, which is one way we could read the question, but as a means to try to get more than his fair share. Jesus clearly believes greed is motivating the man, and Jesus talks about money and its effects more than any other subject, save for the kingdom. Thus, Jesus takes the opportunity to warn the man and the crowd about greed.

What bothers Jesus about greed here is not simply the acquisition of goods or money, as we all need to do so to live. Jesus knows the problems that greed creates, that it is not simply a problem in itself, but it leads us to behave in ways that harm relationships. The man asking the question will create strife in the family with his request, and it sounds as if there is already conflict there. His asking the question implies that he has already been arguing with his brother about the inheritance, and he is now raising their concerns in a public forum, which will only lead to more problems in the family.

In the parable, it's not relationships that cause the problem because the rich man doesn't seem to have any relationships. There is no mention of a family either when he talks about enjoying what he has stored up or when Jesus talks about what will happen after his death, as it seems no one will inherit what he has been able to accumulate. The implication is that the rich man has focused his life on acquiring property and possessions, and, thus, he has ignored cultivating relationships, which should be what sustains him during his final years.

Talking about greed—or even money, in general—makes us uncomfortable. We tend to avoid it in our churches, save for those times when we have to discuss the church budget and stewardship, though even then we try to broaden out to talk about how we can all contribute in so many ways, including our time and talents, simply implying that giving money is one way we can help the church. One of the most offensive questions we could ask one another today is how much money we make, as it would cross a social taboo more entrenched than almost any other.

One of the main problems with talking about money in the contemporary Western world is that our entire society is based around an economic philosophy that encourages us to compete with one another, to defeat one another, in some sense. We talk about capitalism, as if this idea is perfectly normal. Whenever we discuss the economy, we explain how we need more competition to lower prices, as if competition doesn't imply that someone must lose and that loss involves losing a business or a job or a livelihood. We hear about job cuts from major corporations on such a regular basis that we forget every one of those numbers is a person who will now struggle in ways many of us cannot imagine (unless we are one of those numbers). Capitalism inherently dehumanizes people, as we care more about profits than we do people.

The church's job, then, is to find ways to be counter-cultural when it comes to economics, just as we try to do with so many other ways of thinking. In Colossians, Paul lists

greed as a moral issue along with fornication, impurity, passion, and evil desire, all actions that can divide people and communities, as he understands that greed often leads to division, not the unity we're supposed to find in the church. This passage is all about ways we find to divide ourselves, and socioeconomic status is simply one more way we do.

Thus, the church must be willing to talk about money, not in a way that encourages guilt, but in a way that promotes unity. We have to find ways to cooperate, not compete, with one another, to see our economic actions in ways that create community, not division. Rather than shopping at the big box store on the edge of town that doesn't provide benefits to its employees, we can pay more to shop at the smaller, locally-owned stores that treat workers well and contribute to the community in positive ways. However, we can also not shame or create guilt in those members of our churches who cannot afford to pay more, who are barely able to pay those bills, and so they shop at places that are cheaper.

We all must continue to work for a world where all businesses treat their workers fairly, even when it does cost us more, but we also have to work for a world where everyone makes enough money to afford to shop at those places. Those of us with more money can use that money to influence decisions about how society operates; we can make our voices heard with how we spend our money. We can refuse to participate in an economic system that treats people as replaceable parts by buying less, buying only what we truly need, our daily bread, as Jesus calls it.

By doing so, we strive for where Paul ends the passage from Colossians, with communities where there are no longer any divisions, whether because of race or ethnicity or status of freedom, in Paul's list here, or because of gender, sexual orientation, ability, gender identity, age, or socioeconomic class. We can treat one another as people, not worrying about

how much money we make, save for when we can help each other financially. We can spend our time with each other, building true community based on true equality in Christ, not building bigger barns for all we have accumulated. Then we will have the community Jesus sought to create.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

How has the church traditionally talked about money? And how might we do so differently? What changes could we make in how we use our money to lead to more socioeconomic equality? What do we have to let go of to allow others to have their daily bread, and are we willing to do so?

What We've Lost
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 15:1–10
Ezekiel 34:11–24

People often overlook these two parables from the gospel of Luke or only include them when they're talking about the one that comes after them, the one we refer to as the parable of the Prodigal Son, combining all of the parables about something or some person that gets lost in some way. Even then, the focus tends to be on the more famous of the three parables. Part of that emphasis is because we're more interested in a story about a son and a father and their relationship than we are on a woman who loses a coin or even a shepherd who loses a sheep. Jesus seems more interested in the last parable, as well, as he gives much more detail in its telling than he does with the first two, the second of which is only three sentences.

However, these two parables have something to say about the nature of God, humanity, and the kingdom, as well, so they're worth our time. The parable of the lost sheep resonates more than the one about the lost coin for the same reason we focus on the parable of the Prodigal Son: we care more about a sheep than we do a coin. However, the coin seems to be more valuable to the woman than the sheep to the shepherd on a practical level. The coin is worth roughly a day's wages, which isn't much overall. For example, if one makes $50,000 a year today, the coin would be worth just under $140; we would be upset if we lost $140, but not if we make $50,000 a year. The woman, though, only has ten of the coins, which makes them more valuable to her.

The sheep, though, is one of a hundred, and it is more easily replaceable. Sheep reproduce and have other sheep, while the coins don't replace themselves nearly as easily. One could invest to try to earn interest, but that's the only option for reproducing coins. Sheep, though, are alive, and we care more about living beings than we do mere money. Or at least we say we do. If we need that money to live, we might want the money more than we want the

sheep, and this woman definitely needs money. Given that there's no mention of her having a family in this parable (she celebrates with friends and neighbors), she's either an unmarried woman or a widow, so she has no male to support her, which she would have needed in Israel. Thus, this coin is important to her in a way a sheep wouldn't be.

In both cases, though, it's the person who possesses the sheep and the coin that give them value. We might not value a sheep at all, but the shepherd cares enough about that sheep to leave the ninety-nine vulnerable in the wilderness while he goes to find that sheep. The woman is willing to disrupt her household at night to find that coin, a coin we might ignore, chalking up the loss or at least waiting until it's light outside.

Jesus's point here, then, comes from the context of the parables, a context we often ignore when talking about these parables, especially if we skip these two. Tax collectors and sinners (it's odd how vague this term is, as the sinners must have been clearly recognizable, but we're not told what their particular sin is) come to listen to Jesus, which leads the Pharisees and scribes to grumble about who Jesus associates with. As he often does, rather than arguing theology with the religious leaders, he tells them stories designed to illustrate how Jesus believes the world should be.

In this case, he sums up his view at the end of each parable, pointing out that God rejoices when even one person who has not been a part of the kingdom becomes a part. It is God that gives each of us value because God already loves and cares for us, whether we are tax collectors or sinners or religious leaders or disciples. God created us with value because God created us with love; it is only humanity that takes away any value by treating each other as less than human.

In Ezekiel, the author sets up this dichotomy clearly. The first half of the passage focuses on God as a shepherd who cares for the flock. As in the parables, God will look for those who have strayed away, caring for those who are injured, and giving strength to those who are weak. God will even feed the sheep with justice. This passage sounds like a description of the kingdom. From then on, though, the author talks about how some sheep want more than others and, in so doing, ruin the paradise God has given the sheep. The powerful have pushed the weak aside, wanting more than their share, scattering the animals yet again.

God, though, steps in again, pointing out how God shall give them a shepherd, as they clearly cannot take care of themselves. Even when God has given them justice, they revert to the systems they have known that favor the strong and oppress the weak. The author of Ezekiel is clearly referring to how Israel has behaved over the course of its history, how they came out of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey, but then how they took that paradise and turned it into another type of slavery. Those with power used it to oppress those below them rather than following the law that clearly protects the marginal.

God will seek out the lost sheep and feed us with justice. However, that justice only comes through the hands and feet of God, through those of us who are part of the flock opening up our communities to other people, those tax collectors and sinners whom the religious leaders would keep out. As long as we say that people of different races or ethnicities, those who are LGBTQ, people who are differently abled are not welcome, we will pollute the paradise God has given us. God has fed us justice, but we must then take what we have and share it with others. Those of us who are stronger, by whatever power or status we have in our society, must give what we have away, making ourselves less so that others can be more. When we are able to do so, we will feed others with justice, and there will be much rejoicing in heaven.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

Who are people society does not give value to, but whom the church could and should?

What are some ways those who have more (whether money or privilege or anything else) could give some away so that others might have enough?

Hearing the Margins
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 21:33–46
Isaiah 5:1–7

It's so easy to attack the religious leaders of Jesus's day; he certainly did. He pointed out their hypocrisies and how they had lost the meaning behind all of the rules and regulations they followed (and, more importantly, imposed on others). He also regularly reminded them that they were not set apart from anyone else simply because they were Jews, which often led to passages like this one from the gospel of Matthew, where he clearly states, at the end of the parable, that he is interested in actions, not heredity.

The religious leaders (like most Jews) were looking for a particular kind of Messiah, one who would restore Israel in a military and political sense, not only a spiritual one. When Jesus didn't fulfill their expectations, they attacked him and tried to trap him with complex theological questions. Jesus didn't hesitate to return those attacks, pointing out everything they had gotten wrong about the religion they were supposedly experts of, reminding them of passages from the Torah they ignored or rationalized to mean what they wanted them to mean. Given our distance from such an environment, it's quite easy then for us to attack them for all they got wrong or didn't see.

This parable is one of Jesus's most direct attacks, coming shortly before they will arrest him and turn him over to the Romans for crucifixion. This passage either leads to that arrest or comes from Jesus's knowledge that his remaining time is short. In the parable, Jesus clearly lays out what the religious establishment has done to the inheritance they had; rather than embrace the prophets and their calls to reform, religious and political leaders throughout Israel's history condemned those prophets, sometimes even putting them to death. Jesus knows that the same fate waits for him, that only the crowds are keeping the religious leaders at bay for a bit longer.

While it's easy to criticize these leaders from our different time and culture, we also have to remember that this parable applies to us as much as to them. We are the religious leaders now, whether we are ministers or elders or simply profess to be Christian at some level. Despite Americans' professions of faith, fewer and fewer of people are actively involved in any formal religious practices. Though most Americans say they believe in God, more people profess that they are "spiritual, not religious" than can state what they actually believe in any theological sense. Even within churches in America today, most people talk more about what attendance gives them or helps them feel than what that faith demands of them.

The question, then, becomes what we religious leaders are missing today. In the same way that the Pharisees and chief priests could not see that Jesus was speaking the truth they needed to hear, we are surely not hearing or speaking some truth the world needs today. We're human, just as they were human, so we need to continually remind ourselves that we, too, have our limitations, and we must seek them out in places and from people where we would not expect to find them. As Wendell Berry once wrote, "If change is to come, it will come from the margins . . . It was the desert, not the temple, that gave us the prophets."

The church's history of listening to those on the margins is not strong. We ignored the voices calling for us to stop the practice of slavery, as the church often defended the practice, relegating many people to subhuman status. We refused to hear women and their supporters calling for equality, and we used the Bible to support vile actions, including domestic abuse, against women. We stood on the sidelines of the civil rights movement, watching our brothers and sisters as people attacked and even killed them, even using our pulpits to support segregation. Even now, we refuse to act on behalf of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers who seek equality in the legal and political realm, but also in churches, where they wish to worship. We

especially struggle with supporting people with sexual identities some of us don't understand, such as transgender, intersexual, or asexual people, as those of us who are straight, cisgendered individuals struggle to comprehend those differences.

As the passage from Isaiah reminds us, we are a vineyard God has tended with loving care. For those of us with privilege, we know society and culture have given us so much, but, as with Israel's history, we have often squandered that privilege. We have either wallowed in guilt, never moving to action, or used our status to segregate ourselves from those who were different than we are.

Throughout the church's history, we have been two steps behind whatever civil rights changes were going on in America, often admitting decades later where we were wrong and asking for forgiveness. Like those who began following Jesus only after his death and resurrection (Paul, for example), we support people long after their fight has begun, sometimes as it has changed into less visible battles that don't require us to sacrifice our reputations. Rather than leading such movements, reminding the world of the radical inclusivity of God's kingdom, we have ignored the cries of prophets we didn't recognize.

While there is still much work we need to do for true equality in America for those of different races, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities, genders, ethnicities, we must also work to hear those on the margins who are trying to tell us where we should go in the future. While we work for those who have struggled for decades or centuries, we must also search for those who are just beginning their struggle, so that we might find ways to amplify their voices, to walk with them and support them in whatever way we can. We must be, as Jesus says, "a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom," rather than waiting for decades, only to apologize after others have fought for equality.

It is time for the church to be a shaper of culture, not one more institution that reacts to it long after the serious work of beginning a movement has happened. Jesus reshaped the world through love and compassion and acceptance, and we must do the same, even when—especially when—it is unpopular to do so. We don't know where the next voices will come from, but we must listen to the margins, the desert, then bring those voices into our churches, where we can welcome them and tell them we and God love them.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

Where are the voices on the margins we might listen to today? And how can those of us with privilege help amplify those voices?

What social justice issues could the church get involved in now that we have been ignoring? How can those of us with privilege use it for good?