

Thoughts on the first anniversary of the 2008 ICE raid at Postville, Iowa

By Jim Perdue Burke

Almost a year ago, forty-five people in Sioux City, Iowa gathered at a hastily-organized prayer service. We gathered to be in solidarity with three hundred and eighty-nine people, mostly Guatemalans, who had been rounded up by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at Postville, Iowa. Postville is about three hundred miles from Sioux City, but the shock wave from the raid reached our community pretty quickly.

Our decision was to make the most effective “demonstration” that could be made against human injustice and prejudice: to worship the God of justice and righteousness and to “remember” those who were now in danger of being forgotten. As a result, our little worship service didn’t make very good print news, and only one of four local television stations came. But that service provided one powerful religious moment for the ecumenical community gathered there out of love and concern for the lives of four hundred persons we had never met before, and now most likely never would.

Since that time, most of those arrested have been floating around “somewhere” in a network of privately operated prisons that sell their services to ICE. Being private rather than government institutions, personnel in those prisons are not bound to the same standards of fairness and restraint as government employees. So we really don’t know what is happening to them. A recent academic study of that system has called it an American gulag.

But the sixty or so moms who were left behind under house arrest also tell a story of the incredible callousness and insensitivity of our government. They wear ankle bracelets, which mean that they are literally confined to their houses. Most of their spouses are somewhere in the gulag our out of the country. Thus, it is impossible for them to work to support themselves, or to go anywhere else. As a result, they either receive local charity, or they would starve. This is particularly scary because the main income source in the small town of Postville is now gone, and the community has been in a shambles for almost a year as a result of the raid.

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The heroic work of the St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Parish, with support from various other local, state, and national churches and groups, has barely kept those Guatemalan moms and their children alive. In the process, this year-long response has become the means by which the church has cleaned up what should be described as an immigration superfund sight. Postville should be pasted like a mirror before the eyes of a nation and its churches – people and institutions that need to see the real results of their wishes somehow to punish “illegal” people, as they are called, without really knowing what they are wishing for. The suffering of these Guatemalans indicts every fiber of our nation's political and cultural being.

Back in Sioux City, we're going to do two things this year. First, we'll have another service of remembrance and ongoing support for those who continue to be locked up in a purgatory of paperwork and indecision. In our worship service, we'll light those three hundred and eighty-nine candles, one for each still-shattered life. Before God, we will express shame and guilt on behalf of a government that may have changed political parties, but that still has not expressed remorse or done penance for its actions. We'll have that worship service on the thirteenth of May, because some of us want to be in Postville on the twelfth.

I, for one, feel called to be there. I am convinced that those who still stand among the ruins of what was once a vibrant Guatemalan and white Iowan community in Postville need to see all of the kind faces that they can. They need a palpable witness of a Christian “body” with another vision for America's future, one that includes their future as well. They need just a moment in which they can proclaim their sense of dignity, and can know that others are there to walk humbly with them, or as much as they can.

I hope that others throughout The United Methodist Church and other religious and non-profit groups will take a moment to offer a prayer on May the twelfth for what we all have done together as a nation. Intentionally or not, we all gave permission for it to happen. Spiritually, we are all now damaged goods. Humanly, we all have a lot of recovering with which to still become involved.