

Tumbling Walls, Opening Doors

Joshua 6: 1-5
Ephesians 2: 14-19
Luke 10: 25-37

We live today in an age of walls. Walls of greed. Walls of fear. Walls of exclusion. Inside the walls are the privileged and the powerful. Outside are the poor and the persecuted. Increasingly, vulnerable migrants and refugees knock on closed doors.

It's not so different from the days of Joshua. The Hebrews fled persecution in Egypt, only to encounter huge obstacles along their journey to the promised land. First, the Red Sea stood in their way. Then it was the Sinai desert, where food was scarce and hope faltered. A whole generation died in the desert, without ever reaching the promised land. Finally, after crossing the River Jordan, their descendents were confronted with the stern walls of Jericho. The King of Jericho saw Joshua and his companions not as refugees in need of help and hospitality, but rather as enemies – a threat from which the city must be defended at all costs.

I'm struck by the many similarities between this journey and migrant journeys today. During the four years that I worked with MCC in El Salvador, I heard many stories of economic refugees striking out in search of new opportunity in the promised lands of the North. Along their way, they faced hunger and thirst in the Mexican desert, and a dangerous river crossing in order to get into the United States. Some saw travel companions die in the desert or drown in the Rio Bravo. These economic refugees, like Joshua, are confronted with a wall at the end of their long journey. Since NAFTA was signed in 1994, the United States has built a series of border fences in an effort to keep out a growing flow of migrants impoverished by free trade. The United States sees these migrants not as economic refugees in need of help and hospitality, but rather as enemies – a threat from which the nation must be defended at all costs.

What about Canada? We don't wall out refugees – or do we? I'd like to talk to you this morning about four walls that Canada has built to keep refugees out.

The first wall is called “processing delays.” Canada has a wonderful program called the Private Sponsorship Program which allows ordinary Canadians to support refugees to come to Canada. Over the last twenty-five years, churches and other community groups have sponsored approximately 200 000 refugees who would not have been able to reach safety otherwise. Right now, however, the private sponsorship program is threatened by long processing delays. Our government is very focused on economic immigration and doesn't dedicate enough resources to processing refugee applications. As a result, refugees spend many years waiting to hear if they will be allowed to come to Canada. The New Life Centre recently welcomed an Ethiopian couple who had spent five long years in the desert of a Kenyan refugee camp, waiting to hear if their application would be accepted. They were overjoyed to be reunited with their sister in Canada, but continue to worry about another brother, whose application is still under scrutiny because the

security clearance has not come through yet. Canada, like Jericho, sees refugees as a potential threat – a motive for building walls.

The second wall is called “interdiction.” Some refugees can't wait overseas – there is no refugee camp to protect them and the danger is too great. Those with money enough to travel may try to come to Canada directly and apply here for refugee status. For these refugees, Canada has built the wall of interdiction. This wall is about stopping refugees from ever getting to Canada to make their refugee claim. For example, Canada places “migration integrity officers” in airports overseas to help stop passengers without travel visas – but never asks them if they can go back to their home country or whether they have a refugee claim. Another part of the interdiction wall is the Safe Third Country Agreement. According to the agreement, the US is a safe country for refugees and therefore refugee claimants passing through that country to make their claim at the Canadian border are sent back to make their claim in the United States. But the US is less sympathetic towards refugees and decision making can be highly political. For example, the US accepted only 45% of Colombian refugee claims in 2005. Canada accepted 81%.

The third wall is called “no appeal.” Those refugees who do make their way to Canada and file a refugee claim have their fate decided by a single decision maker, with no right to appeal a negative decision. The 2001 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act included provisions for a Refugee Appeal Division. However, this part of the law has never been implemented. As a result, many refused refugee claimants come to the New Life Centre seeking assistance with their only remaining option - making a Humanitarian and Compassionate application. I think of Anabel (name has been changed), a Mexican mother who took her children and fled after her husband tried to kill her. She came to Canada in search of a new life. Here, however, her refugee claim was rejected because she had not gone to the Mexican police to ask for protection. To the adjudicator, it didn't matter that the police do not provide effective protection in Mexico. Anabel's case was rejected. Now Anabel is making a Humanitarian and Compassionate application. She knows that the acceptance rate for this type of application is very low and that you can still be deported while the application is in process. “It's such a cold system,” she said to me in my office at the New Life Centre, fighting back tears. Like Anabel, many women are denied compassion by our refugee system because there is no appeal and their experience of suffering does not seem to fit the narrow definition of what it means to be a refugee. Definitions wall in the heart and the hospitality of our country.

The fourth wall that I want to talk about today is falsely named “Canadian security.” Sometimes, even if you make it to Canada, even if you fit the refugee definition, you still are not safe because Canada decides that you are the enemy. In 2001, Algerian refugee Benamar Benatta was illegally turned over to the United States by Canadian authorities. In the US, Benatta was treated as a suspect in the 9-11 attacks. He was imprisoned and held under conditions that the United Nations found could be considered as torture. Despite being cleared by the FBI in November 2001 of any connection to terrorism, he spent nearly five years in detention. Now, Mr Benamar is back in Canada and calling on the government to conduct a public review of his case in order to stop the scapegoating of refugees in the name of security.

The walls are high. The fortress is strong. What are we to think? What are we to do? In our Old Testament reading today, Joshua took up the challenge of confronting the walls which threatened to keep him out of the promised land. With God as their guide, the people marched around and around the walls of the city for seven days. On the last day, all the people gave a loud shout and the walls came tumbling down.

For me, this story is a good metaphor for advocacy work. If we want to make change, then we need to confront walls of exclusion wherever they exist. We need to get on our feet, we need to take action and we need to be persistent. If that wall doesn't fall down on the first day, we need to keep on walking. Most importantly, we need to rally together, to mobilize the strength of the whole community in order to shout a loud shout. When I was working with KAIROS, we met with a group of politicians in Ottawa to urge them to take action to protect the rights of migrant workers. They advised us to think about the impact of public opinion on political decision making. Politicians follow the wind, they said. If you want to change politics, change the wind.

You are the wind. A fresh breeze blowing in a new direction. You know that peace is not built on walls that exclude, but rather on communities that include. We read this morning in Ephesians: "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near... Consequently you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household."

You are the wind. A warm chinook thawing the ice of conflict and division. You know that God's household is big enough for everyone and that we can find our neighbour in unexpected places. In our reading from Luke, the Good Samaritan reached beyond the boundaries of his community to offer care to a man in need, regardless of historical tensions between Jews and Samaritans. With this story, Jesus teaches us to expand our sense of community, our circle of our compassion. We are not to divide our world into us and them, friend and enemy. All are neighbours, fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.

You are the wind. A mighty wind of change and transformation. You have the power to make a difference:

- Make friends with newcomers. Listen to their stories.
- Share what you learn – expand circles of knowledge and friendship.
- Contest media messages that describe refugees and migrants as a threat to Canada.
- Make noise – write letters to the editor, letters to local politicians.
- Organize a group from your church to visit your local MP.
- Ask decision makers to tear down the four walls of processing delays, interdiction, no appeal and false security. The Mennonite New Life Centre has written advocacy letters on each of these issues. Pick up copies of these letters from the table at the back, make them your own, and send your message to decision makers.

- Consider an ongoing advocacy partnership between Danforth Mennonite and the Mennonite New Life Centre. We would be happy to regularly share advocacy letters and request your help in communicating refugee concerns to decision makers. Government is very preoccupied right now with economic immigration and finds it easy to dismiss refugee organizations like us as a special interest group. It is more difficult for them to ignore the voices of ordinary Canadians.

Together, let's march round the walls that divide us. Let's lift up our voices in a great shout. And let's see those walls go tumbling down.