

Five and a half years ago, I met Paola Ramirez and her family. Back then, her husband got picked up by ICE while out getting medicine for the kids and was deported. That left Paola as the only parent to four kids, two of them American citizens. Paola was an undocumented immigrant when she got to the US, but ICE gave her permission to stay as long as she registered with them, which she did. When the pandemic hit, St. Thomas' made sure they had internet access so the kids could do their schoolwork. When one of 'em needed dental work, we helped pay the bill. When immigration came knocking again, we paid for a lawyer. Some of our people helped with babysitting, taught English, gave Paola a shoulder to cry on. Latina college students helped with translation. Becca and I offered sanctuary in the Rectory. The people of Hamilton donated time, energy, expertise, and money. That initial arrest led to community meetings with the Hamilton Police Department and the Sheriff. Paola even found time to keep me in a steady supply of tamales.

After her husband was deported, Paola and the kids moved around New York. She did what she was supposed to do, followed the ICE agreement that let her be here so that her kids could have a future free from the violence she feared back home. But last week, in spite of all the community support and in spite of following the rules ICE set for her, she and her kids got deported. The heavily tarnished silver lining is that she was deported to her country of origin rather than a concentration camp on foreign soil. Now, I want to reiterate that she was allowed to be here. But the previous agreement doesn't matter anymore. She did everything she was supposed to do, but ICE gave her an impossible choice: either self-deport with all four kids including the two citizens, or let ICE decide who goes where. Paola opted to self-deport to keep everyone together. I'd imagined that self-deporting was kinda like anyone else buying a one-way ticket on Delta or something. I was wrong. Self-deportation means she turned herself and her kids in, and ICE sent them to a detention center in Texas. They were held there until the detention center collected enough self-deportees to fill a plane, and then they were all deported at once. Thankfully, someone met her and the kids at the airport on the other side and provided a safe place to stay for the time being.

Way back when that first interaction with ICE happened, I wrote a pair of sermons. I went back and read them and found some things I was surprised to see. First, it was 2020 when I learned that ICE didn't always deport people to their country of origin, and they didn't always do it with the person being deported in mind. We knew in 2020, and we didn't change the system. Second, those ICE agents had lines they would not cross. Standing outside Paola's house, one agent said, "I'd love to talk to the woman inside, but she's got kids with her. They don't need to see us. That'd be awful." And another said, "I love my job. I feel like I'm really a part of something important, but I don't want to break up a family. I've got kids. I can't imagine going through that." Did you catch the humanity there? Tearing a family apart wasn't an option. But families were being torn apart by ICE elsewhere, and those same agents had just torn that family apart when they took Paola's husband. And last week, instead of drawing a line at tearing families apart, ICE used the threat of tearing that family apart as leverage. We saw it in 2020. We knew it was happening, we didn't change the system. And third, I took solace in the way the agents were dressed. They looked like normal guys, which at the time was almost comforting. ICE didn't show up at that mother's house in riot gear. They showed up in regular clothes and mismatched baseball hats. One of 'em had a babyface, another a goatee, all of 'em looked like they were standing around a grill critiquing each other's burger flipping technique. Maybe the banality of evil should've been apparent then, but I didn't see it for what it was. Or maybe I did, I just couldn't understand what hindsight lets me see now.

In 2020, I said I needed to repent because of my misconceptions of ICE as "a bunch of faceless bullies stripped of their humanity." The following week I said, "Lord help us all, when [seeing] the sacred in another

person isn't even an option. And Lord help us still, when it's their humanity that cannot be seen." The normal guy-ness of ICE back then seems quaint, but it was a sign we should've paid attention to. We all just kinda let ICE do their jobs looking like regular dudes, and now I see a direct line from the regularness of their attire back then to the plainclothes raids happening every day now. Their regularness evolved to include face coverings, no markers of identity, and the incongruous combination of regular-guy clothes with bulletproof vests and automatic weapons. We cannot see them face-to-face 'cause they remove their faces, strip away their own humanity, and ignore or deny the sacred humanity of the people they abuse. We saw the beginnings in 2020, but we didn't change the system. Rereading those sermons, I got mad, mostly at myself. I saw what I saw and learned what I learned about the direction my country was headed and I didn't change it. You could argue that it was bigger than me, but every revolutionary change starts because one person refuses to accept what everyone else does. But while I helped and spun my wheels and patted myself on the back, I worked within the system. We all did.

Now, I don't say that to make us feel guilty, though maybe if we do, that guilt can motivate us to do better; that's what repentance is. What I'm trying to do is remind you what happened and is happening and still could. The things we allow today, will change and grow and evolve to fit the furthest edge of what we will allow. And we have to stop it. Or it will push what we allow further into the unconscionable. Maybe it's not our fault for failing to see the future, but it very well could be our fault for refusing to let the past show us where we were headed. Every historical indicator showed us, and we either ignored them or brushed off history as alarmist and hyperbolic. And here we are. But where we are now is not the end. We can stop this, we can fix this now. Unidentified ICE agents in plainclothes and unmarked cars arresting and manipulating law-abiding citizens is not the end. This situation we're in right now is a step toward something, either something worse or something better. If we do nothing, it will get worse. And if it gets worse, it gets worse for everyone.

This is our chance, people. Whatever you're feeling, take that energy, pray, and let that prayer guide you. Do not wait for a sermon five years from now lamenting what we didn't do now. Repentance is all about turning from what has been done to what must be done. And whatever it is that must be done, must be done now. I used to think Jesus was kinda heartless when he said "let the dead bury their dead," but I'm beginning to get it. It's not heartless, it's immediate. The world needs change so badly and so soon that there's no time to derail momentum. Jesus is saying, "Get to Jerusalem, save the world." Get to work right now, fix it right now, don't look back, don't waver, don't wait.

Now, I'm not giving up on her, but Paola and her family are gone from our sight, but many people with similar stories still live here. I'm gonna work to build a stronger bridge to them. I'd love you to build with me. That might mean we'll see unfamiliar faces in the pews, might mean we hear other languages in our halls, might mean we get coffee hour with horchata and tamales. If we do it right, that might mean we look and sound more like Pentecost, look and sound more like the Kingdom of Heaven. But to make that real, I need your help. Put your hand to the plow. Learn from Paola and her family. Put your hand to the plow. Change these systems now. Put your hand to the plow. It only takes a spark, St. Thomas', but we're working with the whole fire of the Holy Spirit, may we burn for justice, change the system, and maybe, just maybe, melt the ICE.