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“Give Us Light”

I recently attended the annual Earl Lectures at my alma madder Pacific School of Religion, in Berkeley. The theme was Lectures was “Borders and Identity.”

The topic was timely, important and most impressive, chosen and announced months before the presidential election. I asked the president of PSR, David Vasquez Leavy, about this fortuitous choice and he said issues of nationality, race, culture, sexuality, gender and religion would have been hot topics regardless of who won the presidency, but the lecture theme for this year ended up being more relevant than anyone could have imagined.

“Boarders and identity.”

I knew I wanted to share with you what I had learned at this conference and I also knew the text for today was about the man born blind receiving his sight, so I listened to the keynoters and the lectures I attended with this text in mind. I seemed clear that the message Jesus was offering though his interaction with the man born blind was one and the same as the message being offered more than 2000 years later at the annual Earl Lectures.

Opening night of the lectures was held at Zatuna College, the only accredited four year Muslim college in the US, the keynoter was an appropriately edgy choice.

Jose Antonio Vargas a young, gay Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, filmmaker, and immigration activist, whose work centers on the changing American identity. ¹

In June 2011, the *New York Times Magazine* published his groundbreaking essay in which Vargas revealed and chronicled his life in America as an undocumented immigrant.

¹ [Define American](#), a non-profit media and culture organization that seeks to elevate the conversation around immigration and citizenship in America; and the founder of [#EmergingUS](#), a media start-up that lives at the intersection of race, immigration, and identity in a multicultural America. #EmergingUS is the first-ever media property owned by an undocumented immigrant.

A year later, Vargas appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine with fellow undocumented immigrants and then produced and directed *Documented*, a feature film recording his undocumented experience. (adapted from Vargas' website)

When he was twelve when he was put on a boat with false identity papers and sent from the Philippines to be raised in America by his grandparents.

He says there is still one question he's always asked (after "where are you from... I mean from, from?"): "Why are you here?" His answer is simple- "We are here because you were there! We, the majority of refugees in this country, are here because your country came to my country and imposed financial and military pressure on my people, such that life is no longer livable in my country of origin. We are here because you were there."

Vargas spoke of his rebellious choice to take on such a public role in spite of his immigration status- he became a journalist in order tell the truth about his own story.

Everyone deserves a chance to tell their own story. Vargas asserted "**we cannot change the politics of an issue until we change the culture around an issue.**" He tells his story, to help change the cultural understanding of citizenship and belonging.

The story of the man born blind John 9:1-3

As (Jesus) walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

You see, this was the common cultural understanding based on public policy. It was the law of the land that the lame, the blind, the leper, the orphan, the widow, the prostitute- were not allowed the protection of the temple or the state. They were left to fend for themselves as beggars and thieves.

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind..."

And the miracle in this story happens **here** where the cultural norm is being challenged. The miracle isn't that the man can now see it is that society is

forced to rewrite their narrative about this man- they are being forced to make a place for him and that causes all kinds of push back.

Jesus knew as Juan Antonio Vargas knows- the politics of an issue will not change until our cultural understanding of that issue changes.

So the miracle in the story of the man born blind happens here and it happens every time any one of us has the courage to challenge a cultural perception for the purpose of greater inclusion.

Jesus said "I am the light of the world." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

So, what else was Jesus up to in this story?

Could it be that Jesus was trying to say that legality: laws that keep disfigured or disabled, and otherwise vulnerable people on the margins of society- that kind of legality must be scrutinized because it is merely a construct of power, not justice!

Could it be that Jesus was trying to show both his followers and the Pharisees that building the kingdom of God requires seeing beyond the borders of division? And that faith in God necessarily means undoing laws that protect some of God's people and not others.

Of course, we don't need to look too far back in history to see that legality and justice do not always go hand in hand; the holocaust was legal, slavery was legal, colonialization was legal, apartheid was legal, internment of Japanese's American Citizens was legal and today deporting undocumented people who show up to work on any given day of the week is legal. Legality does not always equal justice.

Perhaps what Jesus is trying to say and what we his followers must continue to say is that dignity and equality cannot **ever** be denied a person based solely on legality.

Legality was then and it is now a construct of power, and therefore cannot serve as the only trustworthy benchmark for justice. Not where people of faith are concerned.

Returning to scripture...

⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen the blind man before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." But the people did not believe him and drove him out of town.

Every person has a story that deserves to be told in their own words, a story that deserves to be heard, a story that deserves to be believed. Legality and Justice are not the same thing.

The second day of the conference we were treated to a panel of Elders. Voices representing the Sanctuary Movement, the continuing Civil Rights Movement and the Center for American Progress. The plenary was titled; Reflections on the first hundred days of the Trump Presidency.

Again we heard the importance of listening to people's stories, of not allowing one's story to be diminished or coopted into labels that don't adequately describe them.

The Elders emphasized the importance of working together across issues and seeing ourselves as allies to each other- resisting being siloed off into our own objectives. These veteran faith leaders impressed the importance of becoming allied with **all causes for justice**, because it is there we will find our **shared humanity**.

Our job as followers of Jesus today- they told us- is to build communities of **faithful action**. As we act together with God's people to build the kingdom of heaven on earth we must resist the "either/or" thinking that divides us into factions and pits us against one another.

Surely the Source of all creation has many more options for us than "either/or".

This brings me to the final workshop of the event which was led by the National Faith Organizer for the ACLU. I know, who knew there was such a person? Her name is Liz Welch, she lives in Montana and she is awesome. Her workshop was called, “Building Community at the Wall of Church and State.”

She told a lot of stories about transformation, some of them were hers and some where the voices of those who need to be heard. She talked about the need for people of faith to have **courageous conversations**. We must talk to people with whom we *think* we disagree-“**don’t build walls find shared values**”.

She told us about a conservative legislator in Tennessee, who she thought had come into a courtroom armed for bear against creating public bathrooms for transgendered teenagers only to find that the night before- this legislator had dinner with one of his best buddies from church. That buddy- someone he had grown up with, and shared political affiliation and faith perspectives- had told him that his daughter was transgender and that without this protection life would be more dangerous for his child. The legislator’s heart was changed and when he did speak in court the next day he spoke in favor of the bill.

Liz encouraged us to search for the common human story and connect with one another on shared values. We all want our kids to be safe. On that we can agree. There are loads of things we may never agree on but this is one we can. Find a value upon which you can agree.

³⁹ Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see might see.”

Jesus is interested in our shared humanity. We should be interested in our shared humanity too. He wanted all people to embrace the possibility of a just and equal world.

And because this conference was about cultivating practical skills- I will leave you with the homework I took from the weekend.

Task one: talk to someone who is hard to talk to. Think of a shared value and take that person out to lunch, or for a walk and listen to their story. Find a way to connect.

Task two: think about someone in our community who is being treated like the man born blind. Develop a compassionate relationship with this impacted person and when the time is right, ask...

How they are being affected by public policies.

How they might like to proceed in facing some of the inequalities they experience.

And lastly, ask that person how you might help to amplify their voice.

Beloved, as good liberal progressives we often still assume we know what people need. What I learned at this conference is that everyone deserves the right to determine their own labels, if any, and to tell their own stories and to ask for, not to be told, what they need.

Friends- no one listened to the man born blind, no one believed the man born blind, no one but Jesus advocated for the man born blind.

I wonder if we can do better when our chance comes?

Amen