

Good morning.

The title for my sermon today is PRAYER AS RESISTANCE.

By that I mean this.

Our prayers can be an alternative voice to the dominant voices around us.

Our prayers can help us build God's Beloved Community here in our little corner of the world, an upside down community where the last are first and the first are last, a space where everyone, EVERYONE, knows they are a child of God and welcome in this place.

#### PRAYERS AS RESISTANCE

As Hatuey was about to be burned at the stake, a Franciscan friar attempted to convert him to the Christian faith, with the promise of heaven and the threat of hell. Prior to setting the fire that would burn the Indian leader alive, the friar promised mercy in the form of strangulation. Hatuey asked that if he accepted Christianity would he go to heaven, and if he did, would he find Christians there. "Of course," the friar replied, to which the condemned warrior retorted that he did not want to go anyplace where he would be forced to be with such cruel people as Christians.

We must resist the image of God presented by the conquistadors of old, just as we must resist the image of God presented by the conquistadors of the present.

We can do this through prayer.

Luke delights in frequently presenting Jesus praying. In all the decisive moments of Jesus' life, Luke never forgets to point this out. Jesus' frequent prayer and his unique way of starting it, "Abba, Father," is the best sign of the content of his spirituality as a filial experience. It is trust and surrender to the Father and his will, even in the paradoxically darkest situations. Jesus' last words before his death, "Father into your hands I commend my spirit," are a succinct summary of his daily surrender. - Gustavo Gutiérrez

Through prayer, Jesus shows us a God, the big G God, who is upside down from the god, a little g god, the conquistadors presented to Hatuey and the first peoples of the Americas.

I pray the Jesus prayer so I can know God as Abba.

#### PRAYER AS RESISTANCE

We can pray with our EYES AND EARS

We can look closely and listen carefully for the people at the margins in the world around us, for those who've been 'othered' by the dominant group among us (the group with the most money and power, and therefore the loudest voice), those who one of the first and best missionaries in the Americas, Bartolome de las Casas called "the least and most forgotten among us.

The Sister's of Mercy did this kind of looking and listening and saw and heard immigrants, migrants and refugees around them.

This seeing and hearing led them to pray this prayer for immigrants.

## Sister's of Mercy Prayer for Immigrants

That all those who immigrate to the United States in search of a better life for themselves and their families, now and into the future, may find in this country a place where they may live in peace, safety and dignity...

Lord, hear our prayer.

That United States citizens, mindful of the God-given blessings of life and freedom that this country affords its citizens, may have the willingness to share these same blessings with those who have immigrated from other countries...

Lord, hear our prayer.

That all who are immigrants in countries throughout the world, whether by choice or as a result of violence or disaster, may find a welcome extended by those into whose communities they come to live...

Lord, hear our prayer.

That immigrant workers be treated justly by employers, supervisors, fellow workers and all who are in a position of advantage over these workers...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For the families and children of migrant workers, that they may be reunited...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For employers and corporations, that they may choose the dignity and worth of each human person over profit and power...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For our Mercy Community, that we may continue to serve those without homes and resources, and that we speak out for just immigration reform...

Lord, hear our prayer.

## Ave Maria

Maria was a second grader at my Title I elementary school.

Her parents fled the after-effects of the brutal civil war in El Salvador and found a new life on the farms and in the fields of South Carolina.

She was like those farms and fields, the color of the ground, garden-hearted and producer of love and joy as if they were tomatoes and beans growing in good South Carolina soil.

Once, I saw her hold the hand of a frightened kindergartner in the cafeteria line during early morning breakfast.

Another time, I saw her offer her shoulder to a crying friend who scraped a knee on the blacktop during recess.

She was a wonderful kid.

At school, I could see her smile all the way from the end of the hall.

Sometimes, I could hear her steps from there, too.

On special days, she wore tiny high-heeled shoes that went click, click, click as she made her way over the tiled floor.

This always made me stop and smile.

One day, I realized I'd forgotten to send a check through the mail to the water company to pay my bill.

I stopped by the Greenville Water building to make my payment in person after school.

Three-fourths of the residents of Greenville county must have forgotten to send in their payments, too, because the place was packed with people.

In the middle of that mass of humanity, I heard a click, click, click.

I looked up, and coming around a desk was Maria!

She was pushing a stroller with her baby brother inside.

I could barely see her over the handles of the stroller.

She was leading her mother, who was holding a toddler in her arms.

She saw me.

Her face lit up with a Maria smile.

She let go of the stroller for just a moment, wrapped her arms around me and said, "Oh, Mr. Barton! Buenos tardes! I am always so glad to see you!"

Then she took hold of the stroller again.

I heard her voice, her sincere, serious voice, rise above the noise.

"Excuse me," she said to a lady at a desk, "but could you help us pay our bill?"

And there was Maria, 7 years old, translating for her mother.

Helping her family.

Sharing her life with the world.

While the dominant group around me was saying, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're

bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people," I saw and heard Maria.

I pray with my eyes and ears.

## PRAYER AS RESISTANCE

We can pray with our HEARTS

We can think deeply, feel deeply about the people, places and things that we see and hear.

For example, I love mangos.

When Robin and I lived in Mali, West Africa, mango trees surrounded our village.

There were so many mangoes, the trees seemed to have haloes when they were circled in the soft yellow light of sunrises and sunsets.

One morning, when we were back in the states, I took a store bought mango into my hands and gazed at it for a while.

This prayer welled up inside of my heart.

### Mango Prayer

Dear God, this morning I held a mango in my hand.

It came from Guatemala.

It was soft like a human cheek and the color of the sunrise.

I thought about the person who picked the mango.

Was it a man with two boys like me?

Does he pick mangoes to help his family survive?

Was it a little girl like the little girls in my classroom at school?

Does she pick mangoes to help her family live?

Who picked the mango?

May our lives help the person who picked the mango.

May they help all of your children, O God, especially the smallest and most forgotten ones in the world.

May your beloved community come on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

Praying with our hearts helps us see the world in an upside down way.

Consider this poem by the Poet Laureate of Twitter, also known as the Banksy of poets, Brian Bilston.

### Refugees

by Brian Bilston

They have no need of our help  
So do not tell me  
These haggard faces could belong to you or me  
Should life have dealt a different hand  
We need to see them for who they really are  
Chancers and scroungers  
Layabouts and loungers  
With bombs up their sleeves  
Cut-throats and thieves  
They are not  
Welcome here  
We should make them  
Go back to where they came from  
They cannot  
Share our food  
Share our homes  
Share our countries  
Instead let us  
Build a wall to keep them out  
It is not okay to say  
These are people just like us  
A place should only belong to those who are born there  
Do not be so stupid to think that  
The world can be looked at another way  
(now read from bottom to top)

When I hold a mango, I think and feel deeply about more than just “a tropical usually large ovoid or oblong fruit with a firm yellowish-red skin, hard central stone, and juicy aromatic pulp” (Webster’s definition of a mango).

I find a deeper meaning.

I pray with my heart.

#### PRAYER AS RESISTANCE

We can pray with our HANDS AND FEET

The great Civil Rights activist and humanitarian Fannie Lou Hamer once said, “You can pray until you faint. But if you don’t get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap.”

Those words remind me of a quote from St. Francis, who once said, “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words.”

Whenever we bring good news to the poor, it is a prayer.

Whenever we proclaim liberty to the captives, it is a prayer.

Whenever we help the blind see, it is a prayer.

Whenever we set the oppressed free, it is a prayer.

When we are building the Beloved Community, it is a prayer.

Listen to this prayer.

It is called the Oscar Romero prayer, based on the life of St. Oscar Romero, known as the voice of the voiceless, the Archbishop of El Salvador, who was assassinated by a right wing assassin trained at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, while offering mass at a tiny hospital chapel on March 24, 1980.

It is for all of us who pray with our hands and feet.

Dear God,

We are planting seeds that one day will grow.

We are watering seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We are laying foundations that need to be built upon.

We are providing yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it with all of our heart.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future that is not our own.

A future that is in your good hands and your good heart, dear God.

Amen.

I can pray with my hands and my feet.

PRAYER AS RESISTANCE

So go out from this place today and pray.

Use St. Clare of Assisi's method of prayer.

GAZE at God. Look into God's eyes and see that God is gazing back at you with love as your Abba.

Gaze at the marginalized, the 'other,' the least and most forgotten around you. Look into their eyes and see that they are gazing back at you. Become friends. Become neighbors. Build the Beloved Community.

CONSIDER using your eyes and ears, your heart, your hands and your feet as you pray.

CONTEMPLATE what you see and hear, what you think and feel, and who you serve.

IMITATE Jesus.

Let prayer be a resistance to the hatred, injury, fear, despair, darkness, and sadness all around us.

Let prayer be an instrument of God's peace.

Amen.