

I wish I came here this morning with a happy, warm and fuzzy story from our time in Costa Rica, like the little guy whose mom brought him in to see us a year after our docs saved his one week old life from meningitis last year, but that isn't the story that has been holding my heart. No...the moment that still plays over and over in my brain is the mom who wanted to talk to a pastor about her twin sons. We sat down with our translator, me, the pastor of the Carpio church, her, her youngest son—a senior in high school, her daughter who was maybe four or five, and her sons girlfriend. What followed was a story that seemed like it was out of some Hollywood blockbuster epic, something that clearly had to have been invented by the Coen brothers or something, because it couldn't possibly be real life.

She told us about her twin boys who had been recruited by one of the gangs in Carpio. They were recruited because they owed the gang money most likely from drugs that she had no idea they had discovered. But now...no one knew where he sons were, they had disappeared, and because they were gone, debts unpaid, her family was being targeted. Masked men had broken into her house at various points threatening her and her family for money and for information about her boys. Her son was being followed at school, followed everywhere. His girlfriend showed us pictures she had been sent of him coming into her house, threatening evidence that they knew

his every step. The mom told us she was terrified just to come to the clinic for care because every stranger made her flinch, certain this was another person come to threaten her. To top everything off, her oldest son was in a mental health institution dealing with schizophrenia and she was no longer allowed to visit because he had been marked as abandoned since the fear of leaving of her house had become so great, she had gone too long between visits and they wouldn't let her come anymore.

Alvin, the pastor in Carpio, told her that her best option right now might be to move, to rent out her house, and get somewhere else in the city that was safe. But then she told us she was one of the lucky ones who actually had worked her way to *owning* her house, she had met the 12 year requirement of needing to live there and make good on payments and now it was *hers*. She feared a renter would claim squatter's rights or something and she would lose her house she had worked so hard for, plus her son just wanted to graduate school. He got good grades, he had dreams, he wanted to get a job so that they could eventually get out, but to do that they needed to stay. After all of that, it was my job to pray...and I had no idea what to say, because what do you pray for? How do you pray for it? This woman's life was in tatters and she was terrified and the only place she could turn was to us because she didn't know what to do anymore. There are so many

reasons why this woman has stayed on my heart, most of them obvious, but there has been one insidious question that just keeps circulating...we hear her story and we feel pity and sympathy and devastation, because she's in Costa Rica, but what if her story was *here*, at home. What if this was a woman who came into my office off the streets of Newport News? What would the reaction be then? And it is that question that has brought me up short when staring down our gospel this week.

Fear, confusion, and a grappling for answers is universal, and it has been from time immemorial. Jesus is in the last days of his life and he and the disciples are leaving the Temple, and all they can do is stare open-mouthed agape at the wonder of how big the building is. Jesus is facing down death and the disciples are just like, "Whoa, Jesus, but have you seen how big this building is?!" Jesus tells them that there will come a time when not one of those gigantic stones will be left upon the other, that all will be torn down and ripped asunder.

It doesn't take long for James, John, Peter, and Andrew to sit down with Jesus and try to assuage the fear and confusion that Jesus' statement has caused to well up in their hearts. When will this happen? How will this happen? How will we *know*? And Jesus' answer isn't exactly comforting. He gives them no timeline, just a laundry list of items that are more

terrifying that buildings being destroyed. Wars, earthquakes, famines, nations at odds, false prophets. None of it sounds good, and then Jesus throws this little tidbit in just for fun—these are but the birth pangs. Once that happens, know things are going to get *so much worse!* I mean, yeah, the gospel of Our Lord, thanks be to God.

It sounds awful. It sounds awful and on more than one occasion, honestly on more occasions that I can count, I have had people say to me that this is it. They look around and they see all of these signs everywhere and they're like, this is what Jesus talked about! We're in for it now. They look at others' behaviors and they're like, there are the false prophets, there are those leading people astray, and they're convinced the world is coming to an end, but here's the curious thing about all of that...never at any point in the looking for the signs and finding them does the finger turn back around at ourselves. Never do we see *ourselves* in the warnings Jesus gives. We just look for all the external proof and never wonder if we might be part of the problem that leads to the birth pangs.

Now, before I go further, let me say, every generation, every civilization has had their, "the world is ending" moment. They have had their earthquakes and famines and thought it was over, so this is not the sermon you are looking for if you're looking for me to say yup, we're there,

buckle up. Jesus said we will never know the time, so stop worrying about finding the evidence and keep doing the work of the gospel. And that's where all of this gets us, because what is the one other thing Jesus warns us about, beware of the people who will lead you astray. We want so desperately to point our finger at the people we think are doing that, but we never want to recognize that the finger might need to be pointed at ourselves. So let's turn back to my woman from Costa Rica and the question I posed...what if she was here?

What if I told you this story, but only a few of the facts changed. What if this wasn't Costa Rica, but it was here? What if her sons were involved in drugs and one of the gangs here in Newport News? What if she wasn't an undocumented Nicaraguan in Costa Rica, but an undocumented Mexican in the United States? What if her son wanted a job here? What if her son with schizophrenia was here and didn't have health insurance? What would we say to her? Would we feel the same pity, sympathy, and compassion for her then as we felt when she was in a third world country out of sight and out of mind? We want to say yes...but we all know the real answer. No...we wouldn't.

If this woman's story was the story of so many here in our own city, in our own country, our reactions would be: well, they're undocumented and

got here illegally so they need to be kicked out anyway. They're people are the ones who probably helped bring in the gangs anyway. They're all probably drug mules so no wonder her sons got hooked. It's great her son has dreams and all but he better not take one of our jobs. Her son doesn't have health care, and we certainly aren't going to give it to him because he doesn't belong here anyway. Plus, he has no family, his mother doesn't even care about him, she hasn't come to visit him, why should we care? All of them need to stop sponging off of our system. This is what's wrong with the world, people like them and systems that enable them.

And you know what's scary? We might dare to even think that God supports that line of thought, and suddenly *we* are the ones leading others astray. Because do you know what God *really* says? Care for the widows, orphans, and aliens amongst you. Heal the sick. Have mercy on the poor. Love your neighbor as yourself. Whatever you do to the least of these you do also to me. Feed the hungry. Let the oppressed go free. God doesn't say, deport the alien, ignore the orphan, judge the gang member, let the uninsured die, tell the hungry to find their own food, and only love those who look, act, sound, and come from the same country as you. When we become the people expounding those thoughts, we become the false prophet who seeks to lead people astray. We put the words of our own politics and

prejudices into the mouth of Jesus and then try to convince others that we're right. But in what world does the Son of God who died on the cross proclaiming, "Father, forgive them..." declare that one human being is less worthy than another just because of the color of their skin, their country of origin, their income, or their lifestyle? We are the false prophets who say such things, not Jesus.

If we have more compassion for a refugee in a foreign country than the ones within our own borders, we are getting Jesus' message wrong. When we want to say that the work all of us did the last week in Costa Rica is worthy and good and godly, but wouldn't support doing that same kind of work here for the same kind of people, we are getting Jesus' message wrong. If we want to lament that people in a third world country don't have access to good medicine, but don't lament the rising costs of health care and the brokenness of our system here, we are getting Jesus' message wrong. If we are more heartbroken by families living in corrugated metal houses in Costa Rica, than we are by the families living in tents down our own streets, we are getting Jesus' message wrong. Jesus has given us all the words we need to live the kingdom here, but whose words will we believe and live by? His or our own? Will we follow in Jesus' footsteps or be led astray by our own hearts, begging others to follow? **AMEN!!!**