



Confessions of a Preacher in the Borderlands

By Rachel M. Srubas

ON APRIL 24, 2010, I attended a parliamentary meeting of Presbyterian leaders in Tucson, Arizona, where I live. I may have been the only pastor present for whom the day carried ancestral significance. April 24 marks the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, begun in Turkey in 1915. Some of my maternal ancestors were among the estimated one million Armenians exterminated in Turkey. Others managed to flee and resettle in the United States. “Who, after all, speaks today of the . . . Armenians?” Adolf Hitler asked this chilling rhetorical question in 1939 when presenting plans to invade Poland and exterminate the Poles.¹

As we Presbyterians deliberated on matters important to our congregations, political outrage was erupting throughout the South-

ern Arizona borderlands with Mexico. Protestors' placards grimly punned, "Arizona: It's a Dry Hate." One day earlier, then-Governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer, had signed into law Senate Bill 1070. It became the United States' strictest immigration law and required local law enforcement officers making "any lawful contact" with a person "where reasonable suspicion exists that the person is an alien . . . to determine the immigration status of the person."² While Roman Catholic Bishops of Arizona had issued a moderately worded letter opposing the bill before it became law, once Brewer signed it, Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop of the Los Angeles Diocese, blogged, "I can't imagine Arizonans now reverting to German Nazi and Russian Communist techniques whereby people are required to turn one another in to the authorities on any suspicion of documentation."³ Paul Dobson, a twenty-year veteran of the Phoenix Police Department, posted a video on Facebook, calling the law "racist" and adding that it would "make me feel like a Nazi out there."⁴

At the church leaders' meeting, anxiety spiked when pastors known for their work with migrants' rights groups leafleted commissioners, urging us to oppose the law. One pastor literally wailed and gnashed his teeth as he spoke in favor of a motion that our judicatory denounce the law. While Robert's Rules of Order do not lend themselves well to public lamentation, Presbyterians do have a long history of political activism and resistance. Indeed, one of the "six great ends" of our church, as stated in its constitution, is "the promotion of social righteousness."⁵

Fully cognizant that, a century earlier, my ancestors had suffered grave injustices stemming from xenophobic policies, I suppressed my queasiness, stood, and spoke against the motion. I recognized the biblical and moral reasons for it, but I argued that we needed more time to process a law that had been signed fewer than twenty-four hours earlier. Most of us were only then learning about the legislation. I was mindful of my congregants, predominantly white middle-class suburban retirees, some of whom believed (mistakenly) that separation of church and state means the church must never take a public stand on legislative matters.

While I stated—and believed—that more education was needed before the regional church body could take informed collective action, I was also afraid of losing my job. I feared one congregant in particular, who, five years earlier, had played a leading role in the ouster of the

congregation's previous pastor. Among her other complaints, she had disapproved of his involvement in border ministries. German-born during World War II, she had immigrated to the United States as a child in the early 1950s—a traumatizing experience for her. In the late 1990s, she and her American-born husband had helped to found, and substantially fund, our congregation. They held positions of influence as well as unchristian views on undocumented migrants. He once sat in my church office and told me, "If I ever saw illegals crossing the border, I'd shoot them on sight."

Somehow, I had to try to lead not only these people in following Jesus, but also congregants in the clear but quieter majority. Most held moderate-to-progressive perspectives on undocumented migrants who trek through the sometimes-blistering Arizona desert to search for economic opportunity. Too often, they die trying. While our regional church judicatory's formal denunciation of Arizona's new "show me your papers" policy might have exerted a little moral pressure on lawmakers, it also might have subjected pastors like me to the mistrust of some congregants whose reactive sabotage could ruin our ministries and mental health. In short, I voiced an opinion based as much on my own fear as on pastoral realism, and I incurred a withering public rebuttal from one clergy colleague.

Then another pastor rose to speak. He opposed the motion. Although his own spouse had fled war-ravaged Central America during the 1980s and entered the US illegally as a child, he did not believe the church judicatory was ready to publicly denounce the new immigration law. He invoked one of the ordination vows that ministers of our denomination make: "to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church."⁶ He wasn't willing to subject his already hurting flock to political controversy. Like me, he too probably wanted to hold on to his job.

The motion failed. By some moral estimates, we church leaders failed too. Arizona's immigration law faced intensive legal challenges and, in 2016, the state announced that local law enforcement officers would no longer be required to determine the immigration status of suspected undocumented people. The decision was a victory not only for borderlands families, but even more for Christ, in whom no dualistic categories prevail. Soon, however, political barriers were fortified when a man who touted border wall-building became the US President. The fractious days surrounding his election had been foreshadowed by many tensions, including those within Arizona in 2010.

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One Sunday in May of that year, two weeks after the anxious judicatory meeting, I preached into the tensions, urging my congregants to think biblically about immigration. I was trying to foster the very reflection I had argued was necessary before political action could wisely be taken. I was also attempting to bring some faithful, nonpartisan nuance to the process. To that end, I quoted biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann's insight: "Ideology is the self-deceiving practice of . . . taking 'my truth' for the truth."⁷ But I could not pretend neutrality. By this time, I had studied Arizona's new immigration law and was convinced it sanctioned racial profiling and violated the unconditional love of Jesus Christ for all people. In the sermon, I praised faith groups that had denounced the law for such reasons.

Preachers have reasons, both acknowledged and unconscious, for what we preach. Sometimes we appear to contradict ourselves when, in reality, our minds have changed. To undergo a change of mind is, in essence, to repent. My sermon was an act of repentance. Having worked to keep the church judicatory from publicly opposing the immigration law, I now criticized the law from the pulpit. In doing so, I surfaced a fault line within the internal politics of my congregation. To the powerful congregants who had once scared me out of preaching prophetically, I announced, in effect, that I would no longer kowtow to them. This wasn't all bravery and righteousness on my part. Enough naïveté and self-deception were also in play that when a dozen congregants (among them those who had forced the previous pastor's resignation) staged a walkout, I was stunned.

Their protest was more passive-aggressive than theatrical. They waited until after the service of worship and orchestrated a boycott over brunch. Then the man who had pledged to gun down "illegals"

was dispatched to my office. He said, "I'm not good at this"—but he was good enough. I got the message: Either I retract the sermon and its liberal subtext, or the church would lose a dozen or more charter members. With a membership of about 140, this would represent nearly ten percent of the congregation.

In as pastoral a tone as I could muster, I refused to take back the sermon. The man issuing the ultimatum countered plaintively, "They're calling us Nazis." He was speaking of those protesting Arizona's stringent new immigration law, but I sensed displacement at work. "They" meant "you." "Us" included his German émigré wife, whose parents, it was not outlandish to imagine, may once have affiliated with the political party of the Third Reich.

Writing such words feels dangerous, but denying their possible veracity seems more so. The delusion of innocence can keep whole societies from admitting their wrongs, as the Republic of Turkey demonstrates in persistently denying the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by its twentieth-century founders. When John Calvin (1509–1564), theological parent of the Presbyterians, pointed out the "total depravity" of our species, he meant to eliminate any supposed soteriological loophole; we're all thoroughly complicit in evil, he argued, and God alone can save us. In Calvin's anthropologically pessimistic yet doxological view, we must admit the worst about ourselves if we are to rejoice in our redemption by a surpassingly gracious God. Like it or not, this is a historic, foundational premise of the little church where I preached what I came to think of (with an odd combination of self-effacement and hubris) as "the sermon that would live in infamy."

The departure of the congregation's disgruntled dozen made for a rocky year. Once-occupied seats in the church's intimate sanctuary sat glaringly empty. Close friends of those who had left the church struggled with divided loyalties, in some cases lashing out at me, in others lavishing affection, as if to prove there were no hard feelings.

Over time, transformation occurred. Newer congregants stepped into leadership positions previously unavailable to them. At the church door, following worship one Sunday, a respected charter member looked me squarely in the eye and made an elliptical but laden remark: "Good work. It's better now." The measurable signs that it was in fact better now included a significant increase in financial pledges supporting the congregation's operating budget and mission commitments. The latter came to include our loving sponsorship of

Congolese and Syrian refugee families. Since before the previous pastor's resignation, the congregation had served and sold fair-trade coffee produced in a Presbyterian binational cooperative just over the US-Mexico border. The congregation set and met higher coffee-sales goals and increased its support of other borderlands ministries. They also gave me a raise and, eventually, a three-month sabbatical.

The time off allowed me to make an ancestral pilgrimage to Turkey, one year before the Armenian Genocide's centenary. En route to Istanbul, I spent a week in Berlin, Germany. On an overcast Ash Wednesday morning, I visited Berlin's Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe. There, over an entire city block, an uneven concrete foundation undulates disconcertingly underfoot, giving rise to corridors of boxy stones, seeming sarcophagi. Cement staircases descend to steel doors that would open to brick walls if they could be opened at all.

In a restaurant booth, I drank cup after cup of tea and read the memoir of an Auschwitz survivor. He recalled the musical performances that inmates managed to present for their own entertainment and that of the captors who would send them to their deaths. He remembered the guileless blue summer sky beyond the reach of the camp's demonic miseries.

That evening, I made my way to an English-language liturgy in a cavernous church so chilly the ushers handed out blankets along with worship bulletins. A pastor in a purple stole read from the Book of Isaiah: "Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God" (58:2a, NRSV). As choristers harmonized our contrition, a multinational smattering of shivering Anglophones went forward to receive sooty cruciform smudges on the forehead. Defaced, I returned to my pew, wrapped a loaner blanket around me, and steeled myself to travel on to yet another country of forsaken people. •