

Remember God's mercy for all human souls

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Body

The last chocolate bunny has been devoured, and the baskets are in the closet. Easter is over, but final notes from the cross resound in my heart.

They are the words Christ said as he was dying: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

They express the most radical sense of forgiveness and remain, for me and many other Christians, the fiercest challenge of our faith.

It is easy to be merciful toward the ones we love, who share our homes, our facial features and skin tones.

But what about those who speak a different language and have unfamiliar customs? What about immigrants who are in our country illegally?

The archbishop of Atlanta, the Rev. Wilton D. Gregory, wrote a pastoral letter recently with the bishop of Savannah, J. Kevin Boland, reflecting the Catholic emphasis on social justice.

They pointed out how often immigrants suffer from rejection, hostility and discrimination, even within church communities. They went on to summarize Rerum Novarum ("On the Condition of Labor"), a papal encyclical emphasizing that the human dignity and rights of immigrants --- documented or not --- should be respected.

The immigration issue has elicited fiery discussion in The Georgia Bulletin, the local Catholic paper, as well as the AJC.

Readers have complained that Mexican children are dragging down academic standards. The parents are taking jobs away from citizens.

Not only that, but immigrants should learn English.

"It's what our own grandparents did," is the usual rationale.

I agree that it would be wonderful if everyone acted according to our standards and followed in the footsteps of our ancestors.

But the world is a messy place, and people often don't act the way we think they should. This doesn't give us license to turn our backs on them.

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Huge numbers of people who enter the country illegally are escaping a grim and terrible life that we can't even imagine. The border may represent the line between life and death for their children.

Yes, these people have broken the law. But they are still flesh and blood. They cry real tears.

And they are members of the flock that Jesus loves.

He told us that following him would not be an easy path. He said we are called to forgive those who offend us not seven --- but 70 times seven --- times.

Please don't misunderstand me, though. I am not suggesting that the U.S. government should condone illegal entry across the borders.

But the political issue about whether, or how, to change immigration laws is quite different from another question, which is about faith:

How shall we treat the millions of people already here? They have jobs, homes and children in schools. They pray with us at church.

Immigrants, with papers or without, are our brothers and sisters, which means they are our neighbors.

Which gets us back to Jesus.

When he said we should love our neighbor as ourselves, someone in the crowd piped up with a question that still haunts us today. "Who is my neighbor?"

In reply, Jesus told the story about a man attacked by robbers, who left him dying by the roadside.

Two men crossed the road to avoid the man, but a Samaritan took care of him. He didn't take time to determine the man's nationality, religion or social status.

He simply treated the man with mercy.

Mercy today means the same thing it did then. It means feeding the hungry and giving medical attention to the ailing. And banishing our prejudices, which is a lifelong battle for me.

At times, I struggle with the "Why can't they?" syndrome, as in, "Why can't they play music I like?" and "Why can't they obey the rules?"

But then I find myself driving too fast. And playing country music that I know makes others cringe.

The devil of prejudice, which sneaks into my soul, whispers that some nationalities are better than others. Still, letting that devil take over leads to a hellish existence, where anger and hatred breed.

Prejudice can be banished by recalling Jesus' words, when he said that people who recognized him in unlikely faces would inherit heaven.

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."

Only the eyes of faith can detect Christ in the stranger, or God in the baby in the manger. That baby was born in a messy stable and entered a world that was sinful and violent.

And that imperfect world is where we seek God today.

Can we muster the faith to forgive the ones in our broken world who have fallen down? Can we see that, despite the differences, immigrants are our neighbors? And treat them as mercifully as we'd like to be treated?

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It's true that Easter is over. But the whole point was that Jesus came to lay down his life for his friends. They include everyone, even those without green cards.

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Graphic

Photo: J. PAT CARTER / Associated Press Demonstrators such as Salvador Cruz, seen here at an April 10 protest in Homestead, Fla., have turned out in support of immigrants' rights in marches across the country.

Photo: ELAINE THOMPSON / Associated Press In Seattle, a demonstrator carries an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe during an April 10 march. Some compared the immigration protests to movements led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and farm-labor organizer Cesar Chavez.

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