

Good morning.

My name is Hannah Perls and I am the Development Director for Cristosal, an Episcopal human rights organization based in El Salvador. Many of you knew me first as the Young Adult Service Corps volunteer when I preached here three years ago – for the first time – in preparation for moving to El Salvador to work with Cristosal.

I loved the readings this morning because they speak to a very human and I think ubiquitous reaction of anger, frustration, and despair when we look at the newspaper every day. What does it mean to be faithful, what does it mean to “do good,” when there is so much violence –direct or indirect - occurring in our world.

For Cristosal, we are especially aware of the violence that affects millions of people, forcing them to flee their homes. Two weeks ago, we presented at the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants – a global meeting of member states that was called to address the now 65 million people worldwide who have been forced from their homes because of violence and persecution. That number is higher than any time in human history, including World War II.

This violence is not exclusive to the Middle East and Africa. El Salvador is currently the most violent country in the world, and last year in the Northern Triangle of Central America – a region made up of the three countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – over 17,500 people were murdered. This is a rate of violent death that compares only to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

As a consequence of this violence, more than 1 in 20 Salvadorans are internally displaced by violence, with many more having sought protection abroad. And yet, for the victims of violence in our hemisphere, we do not recognize their fundamental right to life and protection. Families who flee violence are criminalized as supposed members of gangs and organized crime, and therefore do not merit protection. When these families cross a border, the international community does not recognize them as refugees but instead as illegal migrants, often deporting or returning those with valid protection claims back to the very homes and communities they have fled.

“Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?” the readings say. Why am I forced to witness not only grave injustice and persecution, but also a justice and protection system that refuses to recognize the rights of victims, and an international community blind to the sufferings of their neighbors? I am one person, I am one individual with limited gifts, skills and empathy, so *why* do you make me look at things I cannot fix?

I did a little research yesterday with Susan's help, and found that Habakkuk means "to embrace." To walk through the discomfort, the inequity, the injustice, and to take actions consistent not with how we know the world to be, but consistent with a vision for how the world *ought* to be. This is our call, this is what I think it means to be faithful – to believe in and more importantly to act with a common vision that all humans are born equal in rights and dignity, that every life is sacred and deserves respect.

I chose to work for Cristosal three years ago because of this vision – because I saw in their human rights-based approach a clear, step-by-step pathway towards a world in which everyone has an equal opportunity for self-determination regardless of race, language, gender, religion, nationality, or sexual orientation.

In April of last year, we – as an organization – chose for the first time to offer emergency protection and legal assistance to a family fleeing violence. We made that choice not because it made logical sense – by all standards it was the craziest thing we've ever done – but because as an Episcopal human rights organization it was the only option.

The program that grew out of that choice is designed not to save every family, but to accompany those with emblematic or potentially precedent-setting cases to produce reforms and the strengthening of a national protection system. Our hope is that, one day, those who flee violence are not forced to also flee their homes and country as a result.

Recently we attended to family of three – a young girl who had just turned 18, her 12-year old brother, and elderly father. She had been forced as a child to join the gang, had committed murder, and served in juvenile detention. When she was released, she decided she wanted to leave the gang – an action punishable by death. Gang members arrived at her home, and murdered her mother and shot her. Her brother had been out back, and arrived to see his mother dead and his sister wounded. In the hospital, the gangs found her and promised, upon release, she would be eliminated. The family entered Cristosal's safe house program soon after.

Despite the imminent threats facing the family, we were in a bureaucratic waiting game. As a minor, we couldn't get the young boy's passport without a death certificate proving the mother was no longer alive, a process that typically can take 6 months to a year. We formed a partnership agreement with the national public defender's office, creating streamlined processes for other displaced families who will receive Cristosal's protection, ensuring those with imminent threats would not be placed at further risk because of a paper jam.

I had the chance to interview the young boy the day before he was to fly to their new home. He looked just like my youngest brother with the same awkward arms and legs that had grown too fast for the rest of his body, the same changing voice, the same self-conscious shuffle of his feet. He was wearing pink crocs with short cut black hair. He told us, step by step, of how he had found his mother dead, how he had to leave school four years ago because of “those men,” how one day he hoped to be a farmer like his dad. “What if you could go back to school?” our lawyer asked him. The boy paused, looked at us, and finally said, “I want to be a lawyer too.”

In every moment of despair, we can find evidence of our faith, of our vision of the way the world ought to be. From that despair we can find a pathway to take actions consistent with that vision to help make it a reality.

For Cristosal, we offer you four concrete actions. The first is to pray – to pray for those displaced by violence and persecution, and for those who persecute that they may meet justice and so find their salvation. The second is to learn – to go to our website and learn more about those displaced by violence and our work, or join us and your Salvadoran peers on a Global School seminar. Third is to teach others – expand this conversation to raise broader awareness amongst those in Tarrytown and beyond. And the last is to give – to make a gift that will directly support Cristosal’s work in accompanying families and creating real alternatives for those seeking protection.

Finally, I want to thank you all personally for welcoming me into your parish home, for praying for me and Noah and Cristosal every Sunday, for holding us in your hearts, for painting our bird on the side of your church! In those moments of our own despair – yes, we have those too – it makes a very real difference to us and to our staff. So thank you.

*En el nombre del padre, del hijo, y del espíritu santo. Amen.*