

Yes, We can!

¡Buenas noches, Iglesia! Good evening!

I have often heard the parable that was read tonight as though we were the ones knocking on God's door at night. But God was the one who brought me to you, my dear church. You received me, even though you didn't know me.

My name is Francisco Feliberto Pereira Navarro. I was born on the beautiful island of Cuba, in a small village called Zaza del Medio in a province named after the Holy Spirit. I came to know the gospel of Jesus Christ in my own home at an early age. I am the son of Christian parents. They taught me as a priority to love God with all my heart and to love my neighbor as myself.

In Cuba I lived out my childhood, my adolescence and my young adult years. In Cuba one day I felt the calling to the holy ministry. I decided to consecrate the rest of my life to being a Protestant pastor. In Cuba I studied theology. There I was ordained and began a pastoral pilgrimage that continues, 51 years later. As a young pastor in Cuba I witnessed the difference that is made when human beings know the love of God in Christ Jesus. As I proclaimed that transforming Gospel in Cuba, I had problems with the laws of the time and spent almost four years in forced labor. I was obligated to make a difficult and painful decision in 1969. I left my homeland with my family to go into exile without knowing, actually, where I was going. But God was already knocking for me at the door of a friend whom I didn't know. Today, 44 years after that difficult and painful moment, I stand before you proud of the identity that experience gave me: I'm Feliberto and I am a refugee... a refugee to whom the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) opened the door, welcomed with open arms, and has covered and protected from the moment I set foot for the first time in this country.

(PAUSE)

Tonight, however, I have not come to this Assembly to talk about myself... the truth is that things have gone very well for me as a refugee in this country. As a Cuban, I have enjoyed the legal advantages that all Cuban exiles have here. This evening I come to knock at the door, to seek welcome for the thousands and thousands of men and women, children and adults - human beings made in the image and likeness of our Creator - who have immigrated to this country without the advantage I had. Their lives are in danger and need the protection, defense and hospitality that only the Church of Jesus Christ can provide. Their human rights are violated every day due to unjust laws and economic, racial and social prejudices. I want to invite all of us together to knock at the door for them.

Tonight I would like to talk about a person whom we'll call María García. I cannot reveal her real name for obvious reasons. One night María came knocking at our Church in Los Fresnos, Texas, having just crossed the Rio Grande. She came without permits or papers. She had been abused on her journey through Central America and Mexico as she headed to what she believed would be a new day of justice and hope for her and her family.

When Maria came to our Church, she was about 32 or 33 years of age. Until recently she had lived relatively well in her beloved Colombia, where she was a small business owner. Maria had never thought of leaving her country, but one day she had no choice. In the midst of a civil war, one of the paramilitary groups tried to kidnap her to exploit her sexually. Miraculously, she escaped that horrible attack, but had to flee the country. Those who had stalked her wanted now to kill her. They had already assassinated several of her friends - simply for having declined to serve as prostitutes.

Maria left Colombia alone, in search of a new way of life. She didn't have the slightest idea of the suffering awaiting her on the road. She was assaulted and even raped on her way through Central America and Mexico. Three months after leaving Colombia Maria arrived at our sanctuary at night. Someone had suggested that perhaps she might receive help at the Good Samaritan Ministries of the Disciples of Christ in Southwest Texas. After her long ordeal of hunger, thirst and physical breakdown, she found a place to stay in our simple shelter. She was finally able to find a decent bed to sleep in, food to nourish her body, pastoral comfort, and guidance to take the first steps toward a new day of hope and well-being for her life.

Today, María García has her papers in order. She has a permanent job. She has been able to bring the son she had left in Colombia. Both are faithful members of our Congregation. God worked this transformation through the compassion and support of our Church. That is, of **this** Church: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada.

(PAUSE)

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, the case of María García is just one example. Similar cases happen day after day and night after night, on the border that separates the countries south of the Rio Grande from the richest, most powerful and supposedly most democratic nation on Earth. The pain and the despair of María García are shared by hundreds and thousands of human beings who come to our nation day after day in search of a new dawn for their lives. Their dreams and illusions are the same as those of the flood of European immigrants who came to this country more than 100 years ago. María García and all those who like her cross the river every day to reach our country are not wild beasts that invade our land to destroy what we have. Instead, they are the friends of God. They are made with the same stuff with which we are. It may bother us that they do not have immigration papers, but they possess a dignity and sacred identity that unites them to each of us. They deserve for us to leave our comfortable beds to address their needs and care for them.

María García is not an exception. Men and women (elderly, young children) - victims of torment, torture, exploitation, persecution and abductions - knock on our doors constantly. They come with fear and trembling, but confident that the Church (the only agency that offers assistance right now) is the friend of God seeking to remove them from the quagmire in which they live. Some of these men and women have been victims of cruel totalitarian regimes, both left and right; others are fleeing from the clutches of drug traffickers; others are victims of ethnic conflicts; and others (why deny it?) arrive for economic reasons. They come because they are hungry and thirsty and need to work to support the family. And although the majority of those who knock on our doors come from our neighbors to the

South, our Ministry at the border has also received others with open arms: Russians, Kurds, Iranians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Ethiopians and Eritreans,... people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bangladesh, and many other nationalities ... all made of the same stuff with which we were created and all of them are God's friends. The Holy Spirit intercedes for them with cries unutterable and the result is that Jesus comes knocking at our door at midnight on their behalf.

(PAUSE)

Tonight, as we have done on several occasions since the beginning of this Assembly, we ask again that the Lord of our lives teach us to pray in truth. The parable we have read shows that for Jesus true prayer is **compassionate**. Truly, real prayer seeks God's compassion. But prayer also calls involves a risk to ourselves, because true prayer asks that our daily behavior would demonstrate the will of God: "your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". (*Luke 11:2, KJV*). And I say "risk" because, in many cases, the will of God is that we show uncomfortable, annoying, impertinent and controversial compassion.

For Jesus, doing the will of God is to understand and exercise hospitality with joy ... it is to recognize and take care of those whom we often forget and ignore. Only thus we will see the face of our Lord. We will see Jesus only if we have hospitable eyes. We will only be able to hear Jesus if we listen to the voice of the one that asks for help.

The will of God is not merely one choice among many, or a simple proposal or suggestion. God's will is clear and precise: you feed those who are hungry; you give a drink to the one who is thirsty; you give a ride to the stranger who is due both shelter and protection. The one who is naked needs to be clothed. God's will is for us to visit and accompany the one who is sick or in prison. (*Matthew 25:35-36*). And all this, we are to do as the Samaritan of the famous parable did. God's will must be done without prior investigation, without waiting for reward, and without verifying documents or religious affiliation.

There is no other alternative, Church, there is no other alternative! God's will is not negotiable. If it is true that we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind,... then we also have to love our neighbor as ourselves, even when that neighbor does not have a "green card", does not speak our language, does not have economic resources and does not belong to our ethnic group.

God's will is not anonymous. God's will is called love... love that manifests itself in acts of justice, acts of peace and, above all, in acts of compassion and mercy, without questioning the origin or the identity of the one who has been assaulted along the way.

(PAUSE)

My beloved Disciples of Christ family gathered in this Assembly: as you open the door to God's compassion, you will find the border between Mexico and the United States. It is one of the most risky and dangerous borders of our time ... maybe more dangerous and feared than the road between Jerusalem and Jericho from the time of Christ. Two thousand miles of border with Mexico separate the

richest and most powerful nation in the world from those who live in extreme poverty; those who struggle to get at least enough to eat today to hold body and soul together for dawn tomorrow.

The US-Mexican border is a "valley of the shadow of death", where every day the sons and daughters of God are victims of "thieves who come only to steal and kill and destroy." It is a gloomy valley where innocent, hardworking people are victims of paramilitary forces controlled by drug traffickers ... but it is also a valley of uncertainty, pain and tears as a result of our own biased and unfair laws.

It is precisely in the midst of that "valley of the shadow of death" where one day our God confronted us as a church with the challenge of making a reality his will and not ours...even as we prayed, "Your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven." And in this "valley of the shadow of death" we shall not fear because God is with us.

It is in the midst of that "valley of the shadow of death" where our God has raised us from our beds... not to make another feasibility study on the possibility of a reform in the immigration laws, or to make a new sociological, philosophical or theological analysis about what happens at the border... but to move us to mercy; so we might heal the hurts and wounds of our brothers and sisters who have been robbed.

It is in the middle of that "valley of the shadow of death" where our God has challenged us to help more than 20,000 people over the past three decades.

In the middle of this "valley of the shadow of death" over 27 years ago we began to develop the Southwest Good Samaritan Ministry. We did this believing that to some extent our precious Lord himself was lying wounded, the victim of an assault by the road. And do you know something? We found that even as Jesus taught us to pray in compassion to move mountains - the mountains began to move. Among the sea of refugees, the United States immigration service began to seek our help. In the midst of the lack of facilities in our own refuge and the lack of decent housing for hundreds of families along the border, God moved dozens of Disciples of Christ congregations, along with other Catholic and Protestant congregations to come to our Valley to **build** where the enemy sought to destroy. In the midst of poverty and the homelessness of Matamoros, God moved the local Government to invite us to give support to an orphanage, a clinic and a feeding program for people living in the city dump. You do realize, don't you, that when I refer to "we," you all are included? Your prayers and your support for the Good Samaritan Ministry have opened doors to Jesus in places that you would not believe. At this time we are praying for God to open doors right through the very drug trafficking cartels - because not even the gates of hell can remain closed to a compassionate Church that prays.

I dare say that not even the very gates of the United States can remain closed to a compassionate Church that prays. On the fourth of July, 1984, I proudly and gratefully became a citizen of the United States. I've loved and I've prayed for every President and Congress. But I have to say that sometimes our Government behaves like the neighbor in the parable who said "the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up to give you anything."

It is from this valley of sorrow and hopelessness that God invites our Assembly tonight to stop being spectators from the sidewalk - as were the Levite and priest of the famous parable – instead God invites us to become true "first responders", like the Samaritan "who worked mercy."

Above all, with eyes on that Jesus who accompanies us in the "valley of the shadow of death," I invite us to risk asking our God to teach us to pray, but pray in truth with compassion. May God teach us to be so trusting that in our faithful witness as a Church, God's will may be done and not ours.

(PAUSE)

Disciples Church, do you believe that we can be a church that welcomes the lowliest? Do you think that we can give dignity to those who have none in the eyes of governments and powerful cartels? Do you believe that we can pray until mercy descends as streams of living water? I believe in a God of powerful compassion, and because I believe it, I say that in Christ—**Yes, yes we can. Sí se puede.**

God bless you today and always. Amen.

Rev. F. Feliberto Pereira

General Assembly

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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