



## **Introduction to Vigil and Call to Remembrance** **and Re-Commitment Against Violence**

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(Rainbow Over Tornillo Detention Tents, 7/29/19)

*(Read or adapt from the following story to set the stage for migrant suffering in the El Paso area before, and leading into, the tragic Walmart shooting.)*

In late afternoon of July 29<sup>th</sup>, less than five days before the Saturday when 22 people were killed and 24 were injured in the El Paso Walmart shooting (which was to become the seventh most deadly mass shooting in recent U.S. history), a rainbow appeared above the expanding detention center tents in Tornillo, Texas. As a pastor, I had driven with several other faith partners to Tornillo following an action outside an El Paso city detention center earlier in the day with Rev. Dr. William Barber and Repairers of the Breach. In the morning, we had joined with key national inter-faith leaders including our General Minister and President, Rev. Dr. Terri Hord Owens, along with dozens of other clergy and hundreds of lay-leaders, who simply asked permission to make pastoral visits to any of the detainees inside. Our request was not only denied, it was completely ignored.

Turned away from that location, we sought to stand in the space of additional disturbing, yet too often unheard of, realities in the area. Between the morning's action and the early evening's rainbow at Tornillo, we had travelled the twenty miles southeast from El Paso to the Customs and Border Protection center in Clint, Texas. In this one center alone is where, as of the end of June, over 350 migrant children were being held. Immigration lawyers who interviewed sixty of the children reported learning of conditions that were unsanitary, with children sleeping on concrete, siblings separated from one another, up to 300 children in a single room, and some without toothbrushes or soap (<https://www.apnews.com/46da2dbe04f54adbb875cfbc06bbc615>.) Yet days later, when nearby residents had sought to deliver supplies for the children, they—like our team in the morning's action—had been ignored and turned away. (<https://time.com/5613583/border-patrol-migrant-children-donations/>.)

Across the street from the Clint center, we'd met a veteran named Ray who, after joining tens of thousands to protest childhood detentions at the Homestead center near his own Florida home, had come now to stand faithfully day by day in the Texas sun outside the Clint center. He'd been disturbed by how Homestead has been holding up to 250 immigrant children per month in military style barracks. He was appalled at how Homestead's designation as an "emergency influx center" meant it was not subject to the child protection provisions included in the Flores settlement, which limit the detention of children to the least restrictive environments and to a time limit of only days. (To learn more about Homestead, go here: <https://www.afsc.org/blogs/news-and-commentary/why-its-time-to-shut-down-homestead-detention-center>, and note also how advocacy has helped shut down Homestead in early August!) But as his signs communicated, his concern was deeper and broader than just one place and center. He wanted the nation he'd served as a veteran to "Treat People Humanely," to remember there are "4,900 Separated Kids In Just Texas," and to hear that "Veterans (are)...Saying NO!" to keeping any humans in cages. He shared how he had been pushed across the street from the center, but he said he wanted to be sure veterans were not also, like so many others, just ignored and turned away.

Eerily pulled by repeating threads of migrant suffering in the region, we found ourselves leaving our conversations in Clint to drive next a half hour in the late afternoon sun down the road into rural Tornillo, Texas. A community of about 1,500 in the Rio Grande Immigration District known historically for its cotton gin and pecans, Tornillo gained a different reputation in June 2018 when it opened a detention “tent city” for 400 migrant children along the border’s edge. Quickly, the number escalated to detaining 4,000 children. Finally closed amid outcries in January of 2019, we found it now has become a construction zone; ramping up quickly to open a new chapter (any week now) as a 2,500 bed adult migrant detention center. The guard at the border crossing urged us to “avoid the violence” on the Mexico side of the border. Yet we felt especially concerned, too, about the damages to children and to adults in our own nation taking place in the growing detention center in Tornillo on “our side” of the border, and in the Clint center, and in the El Paso center that we’d seen—all in just that one day. We were disturbed, along with Ray, about the children detained in the Homestead center near his home, which eventually had led him now to stand as a veteran in the hot Texas sun. And we felt sad, especially, about the discrimination against migrants who were finding themselves in detention and broadly criticized through public rhetoric, after most had faced and were seeking protection from terrifying conditions of violence in their Central American homelands of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

To see a rainbow--a symbol of hope and light--in such a place of such migrant despair, at the end of such a day of pain, and seemingly descending into the very edge of Tornillo’s detention center tents—seemed incongruous. And, as we know only now, the day we saw it was just a few days BEFORE the tragic, exacerbated pain caused by El Paso’s racially motivated mass shootings. Was that rainbow over the expanding Tornillo detention center designed to be an image offering perspective and promise? Was it placed in the sky to encourage us, as we neared the time when the Walmart shooter would soon post his anti-immigrant manifesto online?

The meaning of the rainbow in that time and place, I am convinced, was no “magical moment” or simple solution to migrant and border community challenges. Rather, I sense its significance is rooted in the profound reason why God first placed a rainbow as a sign to Noah at the end of the floods in Genesis 9. “When...the bow is seen in the clouds,” said God in the Noah saga, “I will remember my covenant...and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Genesis 9:16.) Ancient sources imagined the bow as God’s weapon of destruction upon the earth. But in Genesis, God “upturns” the bow; keeping it no longer in shooting position as a weapon, but offering it instead as a disarming promise—and visible sign--for the ending of violence.

In this vigil, we are here to remember the lives lost in El Paso, and to honor each one. They must not be forgotten, for theirs is the courage of the hundreds of thousands who build communities within the borderlands, and whose lives and love and families remind us all of the nearness of neighbors and shared histories on each side of boundaries. But we are here, too, to do much more. We are here to link together our promises to do all we can to end violence together. When we fight violence together against immigrants and all neighbors, we honor the rainbow God offered through the covenant with Noah. As it was in Noah’s time, may a re-creation of the world based on love and disarmament happen likewise in our own time, and in all places, as well.