

Using People for your Own Ends

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There's been a horrifying story in the news the last few weeks, coming from the southern USA. This week it rose to a peak of ugliness and repugnance. Although it happened in the USA, I'm writing about this because I think it serves as a cautionary tale for us.

It's a story about xenophobia, which is defined as "an aversion or hostility to, disdain for, or fear of foreigners or strangers." There is a strong element of xenophobia in Canada as well; I suspect you'll find it in every city and town across our land.

The story is about two self-described "Christians," Republican Governor Greg Abbott of Texas and Republican Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida. Both states are struggling with border control issues. We know that the immigration system in the USA and in wealthier countries around the world is strained. We have seen long lines of immigrants and refugees at border control points in Europe, at the southern border of the US, and in other places. We've heard of refugees trying to cross seas in overcrowded boats, only to sink and have most of them drown.

It's a worldwide problem, and responsible leaders are trying to figure out how to deal with a wave of desperate immigrants and refugees who are trying to escape persecution and find a better life.

But these particular governors are not interested in finding a solution. They only want to score some political points, and they are using the lives of these helpless refugees to do so.

If you didn't catch the story, Governor Abbott has been bussing refugees from the border with Mexico to Democratic strongholds such as Washington DC and New York City. Two days ago, it got worse. Governor DeSantis rented two planes, lied to immigrants in a shelter in San Antonio (nowhere near Florida, the last time I checked), promising them a "surprise present," jobs, and housing if they just boarded the planes. Instead, the planes landed on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, where no one was prepared.

It was a cruel, callous, calculated, and inhumane political stunt. It is cynical beyond belief. Even more sickening is the fact that it has inspired a lot of amusement among self-declared "Christian" politicians.

There is nothing Christian about this kind of act. Indeed, it goes against everything that Jesus taught about Christian hospitality, and against the whole history of Christians exercising the most generous form of hospitality they can.

Jesus' own notion of hospitality can be found in Matthew 25: "Come you that are blessed, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you; for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was a prisoner and you visited me." The ancient church took that teaching very seriously.

In her 2004 book "A People's History of Christianity," Diana Butler Bass reminds us that in the ancient world, hospitality was not about parties and social gatherings and fancy restaurants. "For ancient Christians, hospitality was a virtue, an expression of the love of neighbor that was fundamental to being a person of the Way." Being hospitable was a way of welcoming the stranger. As Hebrews 13 puts it, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

In other words, hospitality was a profoundly moral issue. Ancient writers are unanimous in stressing the importance of this practice for followers of Jesus. The virtue of hospitality was the

gift of welcoming those whom Jesus called “the least of these,” into the heart of community. It is precisely the opposite of what Abbott and DeSantis are doing.

Indeed, early Christians practiced hospitality so generously that even atheists marvelled at the compassion and grace shown by Christians. Lucian (c 160), a pagan critic of Christianity, wrote about the lavish hospitality offered to a local prisoner: “The efficiency the Christians show whenever matters of community interest like this happen is unbelievable; they literally spare nothing.”

It was universally acknowledged in the ancient world that being a follower of Jesus meant that one had to practice hospitality, and that ancient Christians did it very well.

Why was hospitality such a great virtue? Precisely because it prevented the church from becoming a club, a members-only society. As historian Rowan Greer claimed, hospitality affirmed an inclusive ideal of community life, and went on to say that “we may also suppose that implementing this ideal was no easier in ancient times than in ours.”

When the church exercises the gift of hospitality, it becomes a community with its arms thrown wide open and attracts inquirers through a practical demonstration of God’s love. African theologian Tertullian wrote, “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of our many opponents. They say, ‘Only look how they love one another!’”

These two politicians claim to be Christian, who claim in the abortion debate to be pro life, who claim to care about other people. Yet they fail in every respect. And not only them; indeed, many Christians support them. Even in Cranbrook, some Christians agree with their actions.

Theologian Letty Russell commented that the Greek word for hospitality in the New Testament is “philoxenia,” which is the opposite of xenophobia. These two xenophobic governors, along with their thousands of supporters, have failed in one of the most elementary virtues of Christian faith. Rather, they use the weak and vulnerable for their own political purposes and posturing.

A group of small churches on Martha’s Vineyard opened their arms to welcome the refugees, and to pour shame on the heads of these political poseurs. These small churches showed once again that philoxenia turns strangers into friends.