

By: Alejandra Ferguson

In my preparations for today, I have had to do quite a bit of soul searching. I'll be honest in saying that when Pastor Pat first asked me to do this I did not fully understand what she was asking. She kept talking, but in my head I was counting the days between that moment and the 11th, trying to figure out if I had heard her correctly. I had to confirm with Ryan that I was not losing my mind and that I had really just been asked to do this terrifying thing. Pastor Pat explained that the overarching theme for this Sunday is about being bold. I trust in her bold faith that I am the person that needed to share this message with you today, and that I would speak truth to a topic which is very much a part of my story. What exactly does it mean to be bold? Dictionary.com says that the word bold is an adjective which means *not hesitating to break the rules of propriety; necessitating courage and daring; challenging: beyond the usual limits of conventional thought or action.*¹ The truth is that I rarely share my story, and almost never in its entirety. As I was contemplating how to share my thoughts with you today, I read stories of bold actions that occurred just this past week. I read about the mother who died shielding her son in the mass shooting in El Paso, TX, and I read about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and about their decision to become the first sanctuary church body in the U.S.² In reading about these stories I am reminded of the great sacrifices that were made in order for me to be here in front of you today, and I am emboldened to tell you my story. The scripture read this morning from Acts chapter 3 tell me that I **must** tell you my story, because in order to make disciples I must first be a witness. Peter and John are headed to the temple when they see a lame man. He asks for money and instead of ignoring him, Peter and John see him. They don't just see him, they look directly at him. Peter then says to the man, "look at us". "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk". The man gets up

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/boldly>

² <https://thehill.com/latino/456851-largest-us-lutheran-denomination-becomes-first-sanctuary-church-body>

and immediately begins praising God and telling what just happened to him, how his life has been transformed, but the Israelites who have just seen what took place are stunned. Peter tells them that they should not be surprised because it is not by their own power that they have made the man to walk. He reminds them that it was because of Jesus that this was able to happen through them, and that they are witnesses to this. The idea that one must first witness in order to then witness to others is striking to me because it requires action. Peter and John don't look at the man and tell him to believe in Jesus, they **show** him Jesus in their actions. What does the church say about this? The United Methodist Church has a revised mission statement in its book of discipline that reads, "The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ **for the transformation of the world.**"³ Now I mention that the statement is revised, because the original statement read only, "The mission of the church is to make disciples of Christ". For the transformation of the world was added, because it is not enough to simply say that we are to make disciples, but that those disciples must then go out into the world in order to transform it. The revised mission statement is a bold statement. How can we boldly follow this call to action?

My personal story fits into this larger calling, not because I have been the one making disciples like Peter and John, but because I have been witness to discipleship in ways that have shaped my life. Between October 2018 and February 2019, the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended more than 136,000 minor children and adults travelling as family units and about 27,000 unaccompanied children along the Southwest border.⁴ I can speak to the bold desperation of these families and children because when I was 4 years old, I was a child who came to the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant with my parents, my older brother, and younger sister. I was

³ <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodist-mission-statement-revised>

⁴

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states#Unauthorized>

born in the city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Honduras is a beautiful country with lush mountainsides, picturesque beaches, delicious food, where the social foundation is built on the family unit. Honduras is also filled with brutal crime, few resources for its population, a lack of opportunities available for its citizens, and an unstable government that is rife with corruption. I did not know any of this, I just knew that it was home. There is one moment that I will always remember from my time in Honduras. We were having a party at my grandmother's house and everyone was invited. There was a lot of food and even a cake, but all I remember are the tears. Family and friends told stories and laughed and cried late into the night, and I was an observer. My favorite aunt hugged me so tight I couldn't breathe and my grandmother cupped my face with her hands. I don't remember what she said. I didn't realize then that it would be the last time I would ever see her. I would later realize that this was our last night in Honduras. Leaving everything we had ever known behind and holding on to my brothers' hand, we left the next morning. My parents were bold in their hope for a better way of living. Their hope and their courage gave our family a better chance at life, and whether I knew it or not, God was right there with us.

When you are a child the smallest actions can transform your entire world. My family had settled in Georgia and within a year I was starting Pre-K. The first day of school is one of those moments that sticks out in almost everyone's mind because it is such a visceral experience. For me, this was only magnified because I couldn't speak a word of English. My mom walked me into my pre-k classroom at Red Bud Elementary and I cried the entire day. It was a small country school with a lot of loving people in it, but I just simply could not understand what was happening. My teacher, Mrs. Pierce let me sit in her lap and she held my hand a lot that day and every day after when I was overwhelmed. These elementary years are when I fell in love with music, because you do not need to speak in order to make music. It is why I am a teacher today. These small consistent acts are what I remember most from those early years. Students whose

parents were apprehended at the workplace raid in Mississippi earlier this week had just finished their first day of the school year. Some went home to empty houses and locked doors, only to have to return to their school because they had nowhere else to go. I am grateful for the memories that Mrs. Pierce gave me. She was bold in her compassion to me, regardless of how different I was from her other students. I later discovered that Mrs. Pierce was actually one of the young adult leaders at what would later become my church.

There is a Latin theological term called *Missio Dei*, which can be translated as “Mission of God”. The *Missio Dei* essentially refers to the work of the church as being a part of God’s work. In order to live out this mandate the church must be bold in its call to action, because sometimes the transformation of the world can begin with a simple question . “Will you go to church with me?” That’s at least how it started for me. I was 10 years old when I was asked to go to a Vacation Bible School with a friend. We were fed pizza and sang songs, and there was a jolly man who was as large as he was kind named Woody Lee (the pastor) who kept telling us about a man named Jesus. When the week came to an end, we were asked if we wanted someone to pick us up on Sunday and we said yes. So, my siblings and I got up on Sunday morning and went to church. Week after week, ever so faithfully, someone would pick us up and take us to church and drop us off at home. I did not know that the church was using its resources to pick us up and they never told us that was what they were doing. This was bold. It was not enough to just ask us to go to church, but to show us that they were willing to be relevant to our current needs. With time we grew into the church community. I sang in the choir, and went on youth camping trips, eventually even taught Children’s Church lessons. Antioch Baptist church, with all of its people taught me that a simple question can be bold, but that the follow-through can be transformative. Like Peter and John the members of Antioch did not just see us, they were bold in their actions toward us.

I'm going to skip over most of my teenage years, where my biggest concerns were about the silly drama my friends had gotten themselves into, and how I was going to get through AP biology. I worked hard and was accepted into Shorter College. I was the first person in my immediate family to go to college. I became friends with Ryan. We would run together and hike together, and get coffee together. Our friendship blossomed to love in a way that could only be designed by God, especially considering I was born halfway around the world. I asked him this past week if he remembers me telling him about my immigration status and what it would mean for our future together and he says that I cried, but I don't remember it. Ryan showed me love. Bold, unwavering, steadfast love. We got married, moved to Baltimore, Maryland, and within 3 years we landed right here at St. James.

Before I go any further I am sure that some of you might have questions regarding the nuts and bolts of my legal situation then and now. I don't mean to gloss over these details, it's just simply that it is complex and there is too much to tell. I am going to give you an overview of how all of this was able to occur, and where I am right now, but if after I am finished you still have questions or would like to know more, please feel free to ask me. Ryan has also come to know a lot about immigration policy, since he has had to be there with me every step of the way as my sponsor. While we were adjusting to life in the U.S, my parents were able to secure a status for themselves and for us called TPS, which is short for temporary protection status. This allows non-resident immigrants to live and work in the U.S, due to circumstances within their own country that prevents them from being there, typically extreme hardship. TPS is a status whereby you are vetted through an expensive set of applications, fingerprinting and background checks, and once approved you are authorized to work. You are given a social security number, you can apply for a driver's license, and you pay taxes, but you are not eligible for federal assistance of any kind. You are also not allowed to leave the country or you forfeit your status. TPS is expensive, especially since you have to begin the process anew

every year and a half to reapply for each member of your family. TPS and the program most similar to it, DACA, do not offer a pathway to citizenship.

Now, I could stop right here and tell you that everything worked out for me, legally speaking, once Ryan and I got married, but this would be a lie. I could give you the boxes of documents that comprise my case file and tell you about the challenges of adjusting my status from TPS. If you could believe it, I have one of the most straightforward types of cases compared to other immigrants. I could tell you about the absolute mountain of challenges Ryan and I both faced in order to obtain permanent residency, or as most people know it---a green card. I could tell you about the attorneys we hired and the work we've had to miss. I could tell you about the exorbitant amount of money we have had to pay in fees because you must make a certain combined income to even be eligible for an adjustment of status. I could tell you about the trip we both had to make to Honduras so that I could fulfill one of the requirements for my adjustment, and also about how beautiful it was to see my family. Or about the contingency plan my principal set up for my position in the event that I could not return. I could tell you that I finally obtained my permanent residency last year after living in the U.S. for all but 4 years of my life, and that it's still not over. If I am honest with myself I most want to tell you that throughout all of this that I was right here, singing and worshipping with you. I am no different than the children currently being held in a detention center, and my parents are no different than those who were taken from their children this week. I was that child. That child is me. The love of God is limitless, and his calling to make disciples from what we have witnessed is bold. I am here because of bold love. If the God who gave my parents the strength, allowed Mrs. Pierce the compassion, made Antioch Baptist steadfast, and gave Ryan unwavering love could bring me here in front of you today, then I believe that you and I as St. James United Methodist Church are capable of transforming the world. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer:

Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos.

Santificado sea tu Nombre.

Venga tu reino Hágase tu voluntad.

En la tierra como en el cielo.

Danos hoy el pan de este día, y perdona nuestras deudas como nosotros perdonamos nuestros deudores,

y no nos dejes caer en al tentación sino que líbranos del malo.

Porque tuyo es el reino, el poder, y la gloria

Por los siglos de los siglos. Amen.