

Hello, my name is Paula Mackey and I'm a member of Macalester Plymouth United Church and a pediatrician. I'd like to talk to you this morning about family separation at the border.

This issue is now personal for me. I was anguished by the deliberate cruelty of the policy of family separation which began in 2017. At least 5500 children were separated from their parents at our southern border with Mexico. This separation of children from their families (from breast-fed infants to teenagers) was part of the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" anti-immigration strategy. It was deliberate and cruel and coldly calculated to deter immigrants seeking safe haven. Images of separated children in cages, crying and huddled together, prompted an outpouring of international outrage.

What kind of society does something like that? I was deeply ashamed of my government.

In 2019 it became even more personal when I met and became friends with new members of our congregation. Originally from Honduras, my friend was separated from her 9 year-old son for 5 weeks by our government. This occurred while they were legally and legitimately seeking asylum at our border. They ended up in Minnesota and our church welcomed them as part of our mission as a Sanctuary church--housing and supporting immigrants in need of shelter & support. This opportunity for friendship has changed many lives as our church members reached out and saw up close the faces of families who had endured separation. We've heard our friend speak publicly about her journey to the US, the unexpected separation of mother and child at the border and about their resulting trauma and the ongoing emotional & psychological effects.

As a mother, grandmother, pediatrician and Christian, I cannot fathom the terror suffered by my friends and so many others while separated. To this day, they are unable to talk about it without tears. The trauma persists, emerging in the night, with certain smells, and triggered by random memories. I look at their faces, particularly the perfect smiling innocence of a child, and I can feel the damage and trauma inflicted on both. When this happens to a child, it becomes part of who they are with lifelong consequences. And if you're a parent, you can surely imagine what scars will remain for this mother.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics this treatment of children at the US border fits the Geneva Convention definition of torture: it was purposeful and state-sponsored and intentionally inflicted severe pain and suffering--in order to deter migration. Let's start thinking of it that way, as US, state-sanctioned Torture. The practice has ended but the separations and the traumas persist even today. Nearly 700 parents have not been located.

So, over 3 years later, hundreds of children remain separated from their parents. The Biden administration is working to rectify this injustice but the way forward will not be easy. President Biden has rescinded the Trump immigration policies as of Jan. 26 and is preparing to launch a task force to potentially reunite hundreds of Central American families. It remains unclear what legal status this administration will offer to reunified families and how it will protect them from deportation. "We must work to engage as allies/advocates to reverse US border policies that continue to result in the torture of children and their parents. The need for action is clear. "

You won't find the term "refugee" in the Bible. But our faith has plenty to say about people called "strangers" and "sojourners" or "foreigners". From Matthew 25:

*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me and Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me.*

My faith prompts me to try to imagine a world, truly a sanctuary world, where these verses are embraced and strangers and sojourners and immigrants are not tortured, but protected and welcomed.