

## border crossings

### *the reign of Christ 2015*

James Donovan was an American insurance lawyer who in 1957 defended accused Soviet spy Rudolf Abel in court, presumably because this was the in the depths of the duck-and-cover paranoia of the Cold War and no other lawyer would take the case. The trial concluded with a verdict that surprised no one, but when the government wanted to swap Abel for Francis Gary Powers, an American U2 pilot shot down in soviet airspace, it was insurance lawyer James Donovan who was dispatched, with no experience in government or espionage, to East Germany to negotiate prisoner exchange.

This is the plot of Steven Spielberg's very fine based-on-a-true story film Bridge of Spies. The characters in the film bring to life the fears of 1950's cold-war America: crowds and attorneys and judges who wanted a trial to prove that Americans lived by a rule of law, but who expected a guilty verdict no-matter-what; shadowy CIA agents who pressured the players to produce the right outcome; a lone man played by Tom Hanks, James Donovan, who struggled to maintain his integrity in the face of enormous pressure from his colleagues and his family, even under the threat of violence.

But when Donovan is dispatched overseas we encounter a whole new canvas of fear and pressure. He meets soviet functionaries, East German party bosses, and American agents who seem to lose confidence and competency the closer they get to the border between East German and West.

This was a story about players. But for all the cunning players in the film, the one that loomed largest wasn't a person or a character at all. To me, the most important player in the movie was the perilous border itself.

The film takes place as the Berlin Wall was being constructed. We see the visceral panic of the people of Berlin as the wall, brick by brick, was built by soldiers. We see the defenses go up around them, and indeed witness the lethal violence by which these borders were enforced. We feel the sense of dread and danger as Donovan approaches and then moves repeatedly across the border, a border that was both a reminder and an enforcer of the state of war.

So much of the tension of this story - indeed much of the tension of the cold war - was created by the state of violent readiness that existed at the dangerous borders between east and west. The border was not just a part of the story; the border was the story.

And this week, it was the border that has again been the story. We've witnessed terrible violence with roots in a land far away, raising important

questions about who came from where and when, and who else is to be allowed in. France, within hours of the Paris attacks, closed its borders. Here in the United States, far from the violence and yet not far, governors from a number of states have said that their own borders would effectively be closed to refugees from Syria, despite a 2-year vetting process that is already in place that far surpasses anything France had. To this we could of course add the ongoing debate here about borders security and immigration, but for the time being I'll leave that alone. Suffice it to say, borders are a topic of great currency and importance.

The sad reality is that borders have been the story for many months, for a great many people. The very important story of the past 6 months of refugees pouring out of war-torn places, in particularly Syria, into a European continent ill-prepared to take them in has raised vital questions about our responsibility – from a civic standpoint, mind you – to our neighbor. Several years ago I preached here that the number of displaced persons – 50 million – was the highest since the second world war, and even then was largely the result of the conflict in Syria. That number has only grown.

I admit it's often hard to follow this very important story. It's hard to understand the suffering of millions of people violently torn from their homes. It's hard to follow a story that seems so far away, especially when we are tied up with the very important questions of whether Starbucks is keeping Christ in Christmas through the graphic design of its coffee cup.

We have forgotten what it means to be on the wrong side of a border, largely I think because we have become a comfortably domesticated people. But now the question, fairly or not, of what borders can and should do has now come to a head as Paris grieves the terrible losses of last week's attacks.

The question of borders has come to me when I heard an interview this week with Marine LePen. She is a widely-quoted leader of the far-right nationalist party in France, and as you can imagine has a great deal of influence right now. The interview came to the question of borders, and immigration. She said – and I'm paraphrasing – “we must have strong borders in order to protect the liberty of the French People.”

“We must have strong borders in order to protect liberty.” This statement has stuck with me. It has problems but it's also not so easily dismissed, and whether we're talking about Paris or El Paso, it will hit the same buttons with the same kind of folk. As much as I (as a priest) want to dismiss this idea I have to acknowledge that our world is broken, this kingdom in which we live is broken. The stories at the border express just how broken we are.

We clearly need borders to live in the world as it is. But we must not forget that their very existence proves the fallen nature of our world; that we live in a state of separation from God, that we live in a state of sin.

There were no borders in the Garden of Eden. Not at first.

Today is a part of the liturgical year that has special significance. It's the last Sunday of the church year – we begin anew next Sunday with the first Sunday of Advent. This is the Last Sunday after Pentecost; it's not a principal or major feast day, but it is a day of special commemoration that we call Christ the King, or Reign of Christ. It's a sort-of-kind-of-but-not-really fulfillment of the Christian year. It's sort-of-kind-of a fulfillment because we look to the ultimate return of Christ and the redemption of this very broken world as we bring the drama of the liturgical year to a close. But it's not-really fulfillment though because as fulfillment goes, I don't think you can top the resurrection, and we celebrate that every single Sunday.

This day of celebration of the Reign of Christ was created in the years following the First World War, in which 15 million people lost their lives, at one level, over the issue of where borders should lie.

It is almost an act of protest or defiance to say it, but to claim the Lordship of Christ, to say that the very first commitment of our hearts is to follow and be transformed by the Prince of Peace, a man who never sought to disrupt any man-made borders, who led no uprisings and who took up no arms to defend his homeland. We don't just follow him; to be a Christian is to be willing to see our man-made world – and the borders that maintain its divisions – for what it is. Borders are the cost of living in a state of sin. They are the enforcers of a broken and fallen world.

You see, we don't decide where borders go. We don't set them and line them up just so. We assume that borders were drawn to divide us along lines that fit with some kind of natural order. But the reality is that the borders themselves us shape us, and tell us who to be. But shape is too positive a word: I think that our borders - necessary though they may well be in this broken world – distort our very identity. They certainly distort our relationship with our neighbor, when *loving our neighbor* is at the very heart of God's mission for us.

Borders allow us to create fantasies about who we are and about who *they* are, and then – and this may be the most sinful part - remain warmly nestled within those fantasies. They allow us to remain pleasantly domesticated, like kept

and pampered poodles contained by a hidden electric fence, blissfully unaware of the suffering of those far beyond. Sadly, the state of distance and kept-ness that so many of us live in is self-reinforcing. In short, we get better at it. The better we are at shutting out our neighbors from far away, the better we get and shutting out our neighbors across the street and next door. Real borders shape us, they distort us and turn our fear of enemies into our fear of neighbors, which is really, fear of ourselves.

And so when Jesus says “Love your enemies,” we are cast into a state of crisis, because we *cannot* love our enemies, not when the existential state of border security has become our very own private reality, warping our vocabulary and poisoning the well of fidelity to neighbor.

When James Donovan chose to defend Rudolf Abel he found very quickly that those who surrounded him – his colleagues, his neighbors, even his own family at the dinner table – had become warped into a state of heightened non-reality by the fear of the coming invasion by the soviets. I’m not pretending that their fear was not based in something very real, in the possible outbreak of war. But what did happen – and the movie shows this very well – is that human relationships had become so distorted by fear that very, very few could fully separate right from wrong.

This is life in a state of sin. This is what a fallen world looks like.

We see, in the images coming from Paris, another terrible image of what a fallen world looks like. These were acts of terrible violence that were deeply sinful, but even more so for the ways that they have led us right back to the fortifications at our borders. Whether through armed guards or barbed wire or policy or hateful rhetoric, when we rush to defend our borders we are *not* expressing our freedom or our liberty, certainly not the God-given freedom that can make us who we ought to be. When we rush to defend those borders (even when it is prudent and necessary so to do) we let a broken world shape us, and form us in the image of something that is decidedly not-God.

But we can still ask: who would we be...who *could* we be....if we were not shaped and defined who scared us? If we were instead formed by the Gospel? How would we live if we could see ourselves as neighbors, first and last?

Today we celebrate the reign of Christ. It is a curious thing to celebrate the fulfillment of something not-yet-complete, but in some ways that is part of the curiosity, the mystery, indeed the hope of the Christian Life. It is a life of following – foolishly, and fearlessly - the one who said: *Love your enemies; bless those who curse you, pray for those who persecute you.*

When we can do this, especially when we do this in the face of such heartbreaking anger and violence, the reign of Christ becomes a real thing in our world. Healing can begin as borders are seen for the man-made vulgarities that they are.

They may always be a part of our fallen world, but when we instead proclaim Christ as Lord, as the very indwelling of the Kingdom of God, we can stop being so scared all the time.

It is then that the borders will lose their terrible power to shape our souls and decide for us how we should live our lives.

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*The Last Sunday of Pentecost*

*November 22, 2015*

*St. Andrew's Episcopal Church*