Nero's Fire

Contributed by Jim Rigby
02 July 2011

At a gathering on World Refugee Day, we remembered the 1,900 people deported or detained last year from Austin. Friends and family gathered to weep for their missing loved ones. We spoke about the private prisons springing like toadstools to profit from the misery. What follows is reconstruction of the speech I gave.

A United States senator claimed recently that the wildfires in Arizona were possibly started by immigrants. When asked to produce his evidence, he backed off a bit, but the damage was done.
Another layer of mythological sediment had settled over the unexamined lives of the American people. Some had come to believe the fires destroying much of Arizona are not the result of climate change, nor poor water management, but, instead, are a curse brought about by strangers in our midst.

The technique has a classic lineage. A leader redirects the attention of the people away from the powerful guilty and upon the weakest and most vulnerable innocents in the population. For Nero it was the Christians, but it could have been any marginal group of outsiders. Immigrants have always made perfect scapegoats. The problem is that blaming our problems on scapegoats also means not confronting the actual roots of our suffering.

To be sure, some fires are probably started by immigrants trying to make do in dried out areas, but there is a larger fire smoldering that threatens to take down our entire nation. Our nation's infrastructure shimmers and crackles with heat. The rich are getting richer and poor are getting poorer. The poor did not start that fire, but, like Nero, our rich elite assure us that America's problems come from the weakest among us.

A moment of thought would be sufficient to realize that whoever robbed America, would still have the booty. The poor are innocent by definition. The rich are suspects by definition. The real fire was not and could not be set by the powerless. It could only be set by the mindlessly rich and the heartlessly powerful.

America's immigration problem does not begin when someone crosses U.S. borders in search of a better life. America's immigration problem begins when our corporations cross over into other parts of the hemisphere and destabilize the economies of other nations. Our immigration problem begins when our military is used to destabilize entire nations in the name of "American" interests. America's immigration problem begins when we in the United States forget that the word "America" refers to an entire hemisphere and not to ourselves alone.

Centuries of exploitation have produced masses of rootless sojourners who wander our hemisphere without a real home. The walls we are building to keep them out are becoming our own prison. Privately run prisons intended to exploit immigrants will easily and unavoidably come to house dissident citizens as well. As the saying goes, "None of us is free while one of us is in chains."

We U.S. citizens who are not rich have two options as I see it. We can wait until we also become pawns in some rich person's game, or we can declare our solidarity with humanity now while we still have the power to do something. Perhaps if we stopped selling out the weak, we could find critical mass to stand up to the strong. Liberation movements have a chant, "the people united cannot be defeated". Alone we are helpless, together we can take back our world. It comes down to a choice of whether we will speak up for the universal human rights of all people, or will go on following Nero until Rome completely burns.

* * * * *

Jim Rigby is pastor of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Austin, TX. He can be reached at jrigby0000 "at" aol.com, and videos of his sermons are available online at staopen.com.

The above column, first appearing at VoiceOfTheMainland.blogspot.com, was submitted by Robert Jensen, author and journalism professor based in Austin. His work has appeared on Culture Change, such as his essay on collapse from one year ago: Struggling to be 'Fully Alive': Reports on Coping with Anguish.