

**Blessed Are The Peacemakers** (Matthew 5:9)

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A few months ago, over Memorial Day Weekend, I was standing on a beach in Tijuana, Mexico.

Now before you seethe with envy and imagine me sprawled out on a beach chair with a book in one hand and a fruity drink topped by a tiny umbrella in the other, let me assure you that I wasn't there to feel the sand between my toes or swim in the rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean.

I had come to Tijuana as part of a group being trained by an organization called The Global Immersion Project, which exists to help all people, but especially Christians, think deeply about and take seriously our responsibility to be peacemakers in this world. Our call to pursue peace can be seen throughout Scripture, but is perhaps most clearly articulated in one of the promises and commands Jesus declared during his Sermon on the Mount:

*"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."*

Matthew 5:9 (NIV)

I've been a Christian for almost 20 years, and grew up in a home with a Bible in nearly every room and prayers over almost every meal. I have probably been able to recite Matthew 5:9, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"* for almost all my life.

But 5 months ago, standing on a beach in Mexico with my Global Immersion teammates I witnessed something that drove this verse from something good I knew in my head to something I desired and wanted to pursue with my whole heart.

Part of how Global Immersion trains people in peacemaking is by taking them to areas of the world that have a lot of conflict, brokenness, and suffering. In these places Immersion Teams get to hear and learn from people living in situations that make it hard to find true peace.

My Immersion Trip took place in and around the cities of San Diego and Tijuana, and gave me the opportunity to consider peacemaking in light of the many complex issues at our nation's border. Most of us are at least a little bit aware of immense and life-threatening hardship people from Central America have faced over the last few years that have caused them to flee their homes and arrive at our border to request safe passage, refugee status, or asylum.

This influx of people wanting to enter the United States has overwhelmed our already-at-capacity immigration system, caused lawmakers to scramble for new legislation, law enforcement officials to juggle new policy changes, and immigrants to consider desperate acts to get around the stalled entry process, including illegal entry.

All that hardship, struggle, confusion, anger, and fear sets the context for my trip, and for this picture.



What you see in this picture is the border wall from that beach I mentioned earlier in Tijuana. But the wall itself, as evocative and powerful a symbol of struggle and peace-less-ness that it is, is not what pierced my heart that day.

If you look closely, on the left side of the picture there is a man. You might not be able to see him clearly, but he is standing with one hand pressed against the iron bars of the border wall, gaze fixed on something beyond barrier. In his other hand he has a phone, one he talked on nearly the entire time we were there.

He was, however, kind enough to shake a few of our hands and introduce himself as Juan Miguel. I don't know much about Juan Migeul's story, but I do know that he had been recently deported. Having been caught breaking the law as an undocumented immigratnt living in the United States, he was sent back to his home country of Mexcio.

Stories like these create a lot of mixed emotions within me. I was, of course, sad for Juan Miguel. Yes, he had broken the law and was now living with that consequence, but I could sympathize and have compassion for him and his situation.

And then he told us what he was doing on the beach at the wall that day, and my sadness was immediately transformed into heartache.

Juan Miguel pointed through an opening in the border wall, calling our attention to a man standing 50 or so yards away, also talking on his phone.



That was Juan Miguel's brother. They met at the wall as often as they could to talk, sometimes getting closer when the US Border Patrol would allow it. But while Juan Miguel liked talking to his brother, that wasn't who he was there to see. Look closely at this second photo. See the small black spot at the brother's feet? Sitting there and playing in the sand...was Juan Miguel's daughter (what you can see is her head/hair). Turns out he comes to the border every day to see little girl, to talk to her, and to try and remain close to her to her from behind iron, fence, and barbed wire.

That's the moment the need for peacemaking real to me. Because no matter where you stand on issues of immigration I hope you can look at this picture, share this moment with me, and feel deep within your heart that something here is terribly wrong.

Throughout Scripture the word "peace" is used to describe our need, our hope, and occasionally our reality of wholeness, completeness, and flourishing. It's reconciliation between the people around us and with the God above us. It's both an inner state of surrender to the Lord and an external commitment to holistically repaired relationships that reflect God's definition and expectation for justice, mercy, and grace.

Peace is seeing the goodness of God restored and flourishing in our own lives and the lives of the people around us.

It is all these things, and more...and it was completely absent in the life of Juan Miguel, his brother, and his daughter.

It is for moments like that, and people like Juan Miguel, that Global Immersion seeks to train followers of Jesus to take seriously their call to be peacemakers. Being a peacemaker doesn't mean you're trying to solve every problem. It doesn't mean you must strive to become a great warrior for social justice. And it most certainly does not mean approach people who are hurting and declare there's no need to worry because you've been trained in what to do and how to fix them up.

Being a peacemaker means you're willing to learn about the lives of the broken and suffering in your midst. That you'll listen to their stories and share your own. That you'll commit to transformation that needs to occur in your own heart so you can love people you previously overlooked or regarded as enemies, even if they don't love you in return. That you want to see the love of God go forth as the most powerful peace-making force this world has ever known, even if it means you'll need to put in some hard work and sacrifice to make it happen.

So, the question we're left with then is, how do we do it? How do we go about becoming blessed peacemakers in a world full of conflict and struggle?

Global Immersion's answer to this question -- and it's one based off a tremendous amount of biblical insight and boots-on-the-ground experience -- is to implement these four peacemaking practices in our everyday lives:

*See. Immerse. Contend. Restore.*

**See:** Commit to seeing the humanity, dignity, and image of God in every person. Understand the truth from their point of view. Listen to their stories and honor them with compassionate awareness.

**Immerse:** Be willing to move toward conflict and into discomfort in order to be present in places and with people who need transformation and redemption

**Contend:** Get involved, get creative, and engage seeking justice alongside the people you've learned to love.

**Restore:** Share your life with former enemies and celebrate with all people the big and small ways God is restoring our broken world.

*See. Immerse. Contend. Restore.* As we press into each of these today my encouragement to you would be to open your heart and increase your awareness of how the Holy Spirit might draw you to one or two of these practices. Trying to do all four all at once might be too much to ask. Let God teach you which practice you need to take up and work on, and build from there.

### **Practice 1: See**

The first practice of peacemaking is to see the humanity, dignity, and image of God in everyone.

One of the most remarkable things about Jesus' ministry during his time on earth was how many different kinds of people he was able to connect with, influence, and love.

Throughout the Gospels we read that on several occasions Jesus shared meals with men and women who were considered social outcasts and people who were thought to be unworthy of acknowledgment, let alone relationship. He listened to the stories of the unclean, cared about the needs of people from outside his own nationality, and he

even looked beyond sins of lawbreakers and sought to know them based on who they were and who they could be, instead of identifying them solely according to what they had done.

Jesus was able to look at people and see them as more than just the sum total of their actions, efforts, successes, or failures. He was committed (and to this day is still committed) to seeing people the way God created them to be -- made in His image, worthy of love, and in need of compassion and understanding.

This is the way Jesus sees the world, sees the lost, sees you and me. The question we have to ask ourselves is, are we willing to also see others in this way? Are we going to see the humanity, dignity, and image of God in everyone? Or will we allow our biases and assumptions get in the way?

Much of my trip with Global Immersion was practicing this first step. "Seeing" people the way God sees them is the grunt work and necessary foundation of peacemaking. For the most part it requires awareness and active listening, and a willingness to unlearn some of the things you thought you knew about the people around you and the way the world works.

This was really made obvious for me during our meeting with a woman named Yolanda and a man named Jose.

They had both been deported to Mexico after having spent many years in the United States as undocumented immigrants.

Yolanda had lived in California for 17 years, working to support her two children, managing a fast food restaurant, paying her taxes, and trying to navigate dangerous task of seeking legal permanent residency without being arrested and deported for revealing her undocumented status. Nevertheless, on New Years Eve of 2010 she was detained, quickly deported, and banned from ever returning to the United States. She now lives permanently in Tijuana and has founded an organization that specifically ministers to and resources deported mothers.

Jose is a United States Army veteran who served as a Sergeant in Vietnam. When he first joined the army he was told that he'd automatically become a US Citizen when his service ended. After his career in the army came to an end he continued to build his life and family with the assumption he was now a legal citizen. But a few years ago Jose was detained for a crime he did not commit, but in the time it took for law enforcement to clear that up, they discovered Jose wasn't a citizen. Soon after he became one of the oldest deportees under under the current administration. He now works with an organization that supports other deported veterans and tries to gain them their citizenship.

Nothing about Yolanda or Jose's lives or pasts make figuring out the "right thing to do" very easy. But that's part of why the Global Immersion team wanted us to meet with them. These are two people who, if we're being honest with ourselves, we can do nothing to help. The goal of our time with Yolanda and Jose was not to solve. It was to see, listen, learn, and love them for who they are.

In Yolanda I saw a mother who had made mistakes in her life and now suffered the consequences of being apart from her children, possibly for the rest of her life. A woman who had tried her hardest to find the right way to do things while surrounded by nothing but bad choices. A believer who still clung to her faith in God even though she did not understand why God had allowed such painful things to happen in her life.

In Jose I saw a man who had given his life to service but then lost everything on a strange and merciless technicality. I heard the story of a man who didn't even know he'd done anything wrong, but couldn't find any place to appeal to grace or even common sense.

And in each I also saw the strength to keep going and still contribute some good to this world, even though that's not what they'd received. They each talked about almost giving up, but that building relationships with others and holding tightly to their faith in God had saved them.

I heard their stories. Saw their humanity. Admired their dignity. And was most certainly drawn to them by our common bond of being made in the image of God.

This peacemaking practice of "seeing" strips away the ugliness the world wants us to see in other people and leaves us with the true person God sees and loves. I could have dismissed Yolanda for all her mistakes. I could have been put off by Jose for the bitterness and anger he most definitely still feels toward the United States. But those are not the things that define Yolanda and Jose. They are instead defined by the same truth that defines me: they are beloved by God.

A question I'd challenge you all to ask yourselves this week: who is it you need to "see" in your own life? Who is someone that, for whatever reason, you've never looked at as having humanity, dignity, and value as a fellow image bearer of God?

If you can think of a specific person you've overlooked or haven't seen through the gracious eyes of Jesus, then I have a second challenge for you: ask to meet with them. Listen to their story. Share your own. Build a relationship that has the chance to create peace by seeing the humanity, dignity, and image of God in all people.

Blessed are the peacemakers, who see the humanity, dignity, and image of God in everyone -- for they will be called children of God.

## **Practice #2: Immerse**

The second peacemaking practice is to immerse. To be willing to move toward conflict and into discomfort in order to be present in places and with people who need transformation and redemption.

Obviously, when you take a trip with an organization called "The Global Immersion Project"...you're going to do a lot of immersing. The three days I spent in San Diego and Tijuana were PACKED with new experiences, emotionally charged interactions, and moments of awkwardness and discomfort.

But the immersion experience that stands out the most, that for weeks I thought about every day after I returned home to Manhattan and quite honestly still frequently reflect on was meeting a woman I'm going to call Mary.

Our team met Mary at a shelter for migrant women who were attempting to escape their violent and abusive pasts. She had fled from her home in Central America in the middle of the night after her husband demanded that she work for him, and since her husband was a pimp that meant he was commanding Mary to become a prostitute.

She had known throughout the ten abusive years of their marriage that he might try to make her do this someday, but the threat became too much when her husband said that if Mary didn't start sleeping with other men for his profit, then he would take her two young children away and never let her see them again.

Mary knew she and her children had to get as far away as possible, which is how this mother of two little kids from Central America ended up hiding at a shelter at the Mexico Border and waiting for an asylum hearing with the United States.

This part of my trip went from from “seeing” to “immersing” when Mary, with tears on her face, told us “My dream is to keep my kids safe, to give them a chance at a good future, and the only place I think that happen is with sister...who lives in Kansas.”

Y'all...when she said that my body went ice cold.

Kansas. Reaching Kansas is her dream. A place I have taken for granted quite literally every single day I have been alive. I was terrified to ask her where in Kansas, because if she had responded “Manhattan” I was going to lose my mind and go from choked up to weeping. Still, I did manage to ask where in Kansas she hoped to live someday, and while because of the facebook live broadcast the still very real danger of her husband finding her I won't share the name of the city with you, I can tell you it is not Manhattan...but it is very close by.

After Mary spoke I was blessed to be asked to pray for her and her children. I can't remember any of the words I said, but I can remember that it was one of the hardest prayers I've ever prayed. I just kept thinking, “how can I say anything, pray anything that is going to change this woman's life?”

But after I prayed, and our group dispersed to see the rest of the shelter, Mary found me and thanked me for the prayer. She told me that meeting people from the United States who were willing to hear her story, pray with her, and care about her and her kids' future gave her some comfort, hope, and...peace. And I thanked her for honoring us with her vulnerability and testimony. We hugged, and teared up a little, and went our separate ways. I have no idea if I'll ever see Mary again until the day Jesus returns. But I do keep an eye out for her anytime I'm in the Kansas town she hoped to reach.

Immersing is moving into those moments and being willing to accept the discomfort and share in the conflict for the prize of relationship, transformation, and redemption. I will forever be changed by meeting Mary, and I hope the love our little group shared with her that day stays with her in some way, too.

I wonder what it might look like to immerse into conflict and chaos here in Manhattan? How can we move toward places and people who need connection, love, redemption? Immersing doesn't have to be as dramatic praying with a woman attempting to immigrate to the United States. I'll be honest, I rarely get the opportunity to do something like that here at home. But there are still some really simple and amazing things we can do to get out of our comfort zones and move toward the lives and conflicts of the people around us.

If you live in a multicultural neighborhood you could try learning the home language of one of your neighbors. Head to one of the community meals that happens every night in our town, but don't go as a server -- go as a guest. Rub shoulders and swap stories with other diners. Join a community sports league with people you've never met before. Or if you, like me, are UN-athletically gifted, go to a coffee shop in town, but don't take your music, your books, or your journal. Just sit there, say hi to the person next to you...and see what God does next.

The bottom line for peacemaking through immersing is to move toward people. Don't isolate yourself. Displace yourself a little bit and find out what God is up to in the places you don't often go and among the people you don't often connect with.

Blessed are the peacemakers, the ones willing to move toward conflict and into discomfort in order to be present in places and with people who need transformation and redemption...for they will be called children of God.

### **Practice 3: Contend**

The third peacemaking practice is to contend -- to get involved, get creative, and engage seeking justice alongside the people you've learned to love.

As you read through the Gospels you find lots of examples of Jesus being an expert at "Seeing" people in a loving way and "Immersing" in their lives in order to build beautiful, life changing relationships. But in a scene from Luke 4, we also discover that much of the work Jesus was sent to do on this earth included getting directly involved in freeing people from their bondage and establishing justice for those suffering from oppression. When given the chance to read and teach at synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus applied the following words to his life, purpose, and ministry:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Luke 4:18-19 (NIV)

Justice-seeking is something Christ cares about, a major part of his earthly ministry in the Gospels and a continuing feature of his ministry while reigning from Heaven as Lord over all Creation. It is part of his peacemaking process, and so it should be part of ours, too. However, seeking justice and peacemaking are not synonymous. The founders of Global Immersion state this clearly in their book, *Mending The Divides*:

*"Peacemakers who **see and immerse** will inherently encounter injustice and be called to join God in righting wrongs. In short, peacemaking is the journey and justice is one of the central components of walking the journey with integrity. Our third peacemaking practice, **contend**, is where our call to justice is fleshed out in tangible, costly, and creative ways. Through Jesus' words and embodied in his life, we get a robust understanding of what contending is in everyday life."*

*Mending The Divides, Huckins & Swigart (116)*

In other words, this step of contending for and with others is important...but you cannot isolate from the rest of the peacemaking process. Our tendency is to skip seeing and immersing, to forego the hard work of feeling the pain of others and building relationships with our neighbors, and rush right into fixing problems. This almost never works out well in the end. We miss too many details, make too many assumptions, and often end up hurting those we'd hoped to help when we try to contend without first connecting in meaningful, loving ways.

One of the best "contenders" I met while in Mexico was Benito.

He was deported after living in San Diego for 28 years. He's got an amazing story that I wish I had the time to tell you in detail, but suffice it to say that after he was deported Benito discovered many deportees living in constant danger and being preyed on by corrupt landlords who would take what little money they had then force them from their homes. He's now working hard to change all that and overcome the injustice he almost became a victim of himself. He spends each day networking all over Tijuana and finding safe places for migrants and deportees to stay. He's countering injustice with hard work and a big, big heart. He summed up his ministry in one of my favorite statements from the whole trip: *"We try to be nice. We try to give people a chance to start a new life. And I thank God for this chance."*

Benito contends -- gets involved, gets creative, and creates justice for the people he's learning to love -- every single day of his life. I wish Benito could be my neighbor. I'm so glad he is my brother in Christ.

Because contending first requires the work of seeing and immersing -- of establishing relationships with the people you want to love and serve -- you may not be able to think of a way to begin this practice right away. That's okay. If you leave here today and start investing in seeing the dignity of people and immersing into their stories, that will be more than enough for me to sing praises to God.

But you might also be ready to contend in some small way...or maybe even a big one. Maybe you're already contending, already pushing back against injustice and standing in the trenches with those who are oppressed. If you feel you are in this place then my challenge to you would be to keep going, keep praying, and seeking after what God has planned for your next step. And then, help the rest of us out..invite us along in the work you're doing. Challenge us to see and feel what you've encountered. Justice is a big deal to God. It should be a big deal to us, too.

Blessed are the peacemakers, the ones who get involved, get creative, and engage seeking justice alongside the people they've learned to love...for they will be called children of God.

#### **Practice 4: Restore**

The fourth and final peacemaking practice restore -- Share your life with former enemies and celebrate with all people the big and small ways God is restoring our broken world.

There is a catch to this practice of restoration: it's less something that we do and more something that God is doing that we get to be a part of.

God takes the initiative to restore broken relationships. Throughout the Bible, it is God that reaches out to us and finds a way to heal us, deliver us, and ultimately save us from our sins. God restores broken relationships. God mends broken people. God shed his blood so that we could be alive and whole and with him forever. In Colossians 1, it says

*"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [in Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."*

Colossians 1:19-20 (NIV)

God makes all things new. God makes peace possible. We are blessed to be peacemakers because our God is a God of the Gospel, of restoration, reconciliation, and revival. He brings the dead to life. He set the captives free. He loves His enemies, and He teaches us to do the same.

I could end our time with a story of restoration from south of the border. But instead, I want to invite you to take some time, right now, later this week, or perhaps during our time of communion, to reflect on what restoration means in your own life. Who do you know that God has restored? How has he restored you? When was the last time you thanked him or praised him for that restoration? What restoration do you still hope for, pray for, and long to see?

Blessed are the peacemakers -- the ones who joyfully share life with former enemies and celebrate with all people the wondrous restorative work of God as our broken world and broken hearts are made whole and new -- for they will be called children of God.