



November 7, 2022

To the Least of These

You've probably heard about the planeload of people, mostly asylum seekers from Venezuela, who were flown from Texas to the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, this past September, and left there. The politicians behind that stunt (using money intended for Florida's recovery from Covid) were quite open about their motives: to inconvenience and embarrass a wealthy northern vacation community that couldn't possibly, so the thinking went, comprehend the situation at America's southern borders.

I heard about the story from about as close up as you can get without actually being there. A friend I've known for fifty years, who was the organist at Keith's and my wedding forty years ago, is now the organist at St Andrews Episcopal Church in Edgartown, population 517, one of half a dozen villages on the island. Our organist friend lives in a second-floor apartment in the parish house directly across the street from the church. So not only did he see this all unfold right out of his living room window, but also, most of the immigrants were emergency-housed on the ground floor of the building, directly below his apartment.

One of the immigrants said, "When we landed no one was waiting for us. No one knew we were coming. We realized they [the people who had put them on the plane] had lied to us. But, thankfully, we came upon kindhearted people who have supported us with everything we need."

The islanders, despite having no notice of the arrival of fifty destitute people, rose to the occasion with food, shelter, clothing, bedding, counseling, legal help, transportation, even cell phones and gift cards to help these people find their way to wherever they had actually been trying to go in the US, after having made harrowing journeys to get here. The donations quickly exceeded the need.

One resident told a reporter, "I think that's a testament to the community of the island, and it's a testament to the citizens of Edgartown. It's a testament to everything that's going on now. We've been through Covid, we've been through hurricanes, we've been through this, we've been through a lot of things unimaginable for a small community and every one of those we've risen up as

the Vineyard, 'cause we're resilient. We take care of our own, we take care of the community, we help people out."

Or as my organist friend put it, "The governor of Florida got it wrong. I think he thought we wouldn't know what to do. And actually people here really give a damn. They really care."

We here at another church also called St Andrews also live in a wealthy northern vacation community. With BACN, care packages to seniors and migrant workers, and many other social assistance efforts in our church, we're in training. Eventually, maybe also with no warning, it'll be our turn to do what the compassionate people of Martha's Vineyard did, because between political unrest and climate change, it's likely that we'll be challenged with increasing numbers of "the least of these" at our doorstep, and we all remember what Jesus had to say about that.

~Written by Ruth Griffioen



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