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Sermon Transcript: Labor of Love

Her name is Katherine, Kay who we've been praying for. Her name is Katherine, or Katherine as her father would have called her as a young child growing up in Nicaragua. In her lifetime, she saw a lot of changes in her country that she felt she needed to react to, to stand up for what was right. And she got involved in standing up for what is right. That led her to some protests in 2018 on the streets of Nicaragua. And her great reward for participating in those protests was that she was beaten with sticks that had barbed wire wrapped around them. She has sustained scars on her back and her arm from those protests and those reactions that came from it. Over a series of time, it became abundantly clear that it would not be safe for her to stay there. She feared for the rest of her family and did not want to put them in harm's way. And she went across the border to Costa Rica to seek some shelter to escape from the persecution and the danger that she perceived for herself. And that worked for a while. But it seems that the authorities of Nicaragua occasionally go across the border, taking the list of names that they have and trying to identify people so that a clear message is given to the people in Nicaragua that "You cannot escape our wrath." And so they find those folks and start harassing them there. And she started to experience some of that—people coming by her apartment with flashlights and shining them in the window, people leaving pictures of her with a big red X over her face. And she knew it was no longer safe to stay there. But around this time, there was an election happening in Nicaragua, and she thought, "Maybe if I go back and participate in that. Maybe if I go back and vote, our country will change." And so, at risk to her own safety, she went back to Nicaragua so that she could vote in that election, hoping it would be part of a change in authority. But it did not work. And the same authority stayed in power, and the same cruelties continued. And after a period of time, she figured out it was no longer safe for her there. And so in December of 2022, she came to America and presented herself to authorities at the border asking for asylum. And she turned in an application for asylum. And they told her, "We're really—it's too busy right now, we have too many cases. So, you just come back every so many months. And as long as you do that and stay out of trouble, then we'll eventually get to processing your application." And so, for three and a half years, she regularly came to all of her appointments and reported as she was asked. That was up until March 22nd of this year when she went in for her regular check-in appointment and instead was taken into custody and sent to a detention facility in rural Missouri to be held. And her family did not know where she was or what had happened to her. Eventually they found out what had happened, and she spent several months there incarcerated with

others, and there was not a lawyer that she could find, even with the help of judges and political leaders in the area. Eventually, she ended up finding some representation. And we've been walking alongside this family as they've gone through this because they're part of our family. Because they're part of us through our partnership with Brightpoint, they are part of our family.

The Trial and the Nicaraguan Dialect

And on Thursday, I watched her final hearing. During that hearing, she was asked to pull up her shirt and show her scars to the camera, display the scar on her arm from the injury she sustained through sticks wrapped with barbed wire. She was asked about the events that happened in cross-examination. She was asked, "Well, if you sustained all these injuries, did you bring your hospital records from when you got beat up at the protest?" She said, "No, we didn't go to the hospital. We were afraid to go and get our names put down there, but my family did go and get medicine for me and such." "Do you have receipts from those trips to the pharmacy to get what you needed?" "No," she answered. "Well, you say that people came to your house and put flashlights in your window. Do you know the names of these people or who they were?" She said, "No." "You say there was a picture with your face and a red X over it. Did you have that photo with you here today?" And she said, "No." And then they said, "Does your father know how to spell? Your friends in Nicaragua know how to spell?" This is all going through an interpreter. So, she's not really hearing the tone along with the words; she's getting a translation of what's being said to her. And a look of confusion came on her face. I'm watching all of this. And she says, "Yes, my family and friends know how to spell." "Well, then can you explain for us why it is that in these letters from your family and friends that are backing up your story, that they misspelled your name? They all did." She had reached out to her family members despite fear of contact. She specifically had been avoiding contact with family because she didn't want them to be targeted in Nicaragua, but her situation was so dire that they risked it. The family risked it and got the news back and got her family members to write up the statements of what happened and to send those statements to the United States so they could be there for this trial. And they said again and again in the letters, "Your name is spelled Katherine—i-n-g at the end." Your birth certificate says your name is Katherine—i-n-e. "How do you explain that?" You know, and the funny thing was in that moment she got this little girl smile on her face. I know that little girl smile because I have a daughter the same age as Katherine. And with a little girl smile on her face, she went, "Oh, that's—yeah, that's what my family calls me. And I mean, even sometimes when I write my name in English, I sometimes spell it i-n-g." And they said, "Well, that seems pretty unlikely. Seems like there's some question as to the authenticity if your own father can't spell your name right." At that point, I became curious. So, I whipped out my Google. And you know what? I found out that in the Nicaraguan dialect of Spanish, they have what's known as a velar N. It's a nasal N. And in

the Nicaraguan dialect of Spanish, they pronounce names that end with N with an NG sound. N. And so they'll often, when they write the names, they write their name with NG at the end so that you will pronounce their name correctly in their Nicaraguan tongue. This was not brought up. I had no power to break open the mic and go, "Wait, wait, wait. There's an explanation for that." I just had to sit and watch them deride her for how stupid either her father was for misspelling her name or how misguided they were in trying to create false documents with a different name completely.

The Decision and Voluntary Removal

At the end of the hearing, they made a judgment to deny her application for asylum. And they said, "Now, you can appeal this if you want to, but you'll likely have to be incarcerated for one to two more years in that facility. So, you can try to stay there another couple of years and fight this, but it probably won't go in the other direction for you. Or you can take a voluntary removal and that'll give you a better status in the future. Won't ban you from the country and we'll send you back in the next couple of weeks." So, she was left with this decision. Do I—they're telling me it probably won't make a difference and I'll have to stay in this facility for one to two more years, but if I take a voluntary removal, then it will be the least penalty against me if I ever want to try to come back. And so she took it. So if you ever hear of, "Well, these—all these people are taking voluntary removals," yeah, under this kind of circumstance. She spent her entire four years here never breaking the law. Her only run-in with the law was last year when her car got stolen. She's been a victim in this country from a US citizen who stole her car. She's facing a sort of second chapter of persecution, it feels, and it doesn't really feel like there's a lot of choices as to what happens next. Persecution is something that you and I don't really know that well. We have hard times, but we don't know what it's like to be scared to live in our own country—although maybe some of you do. And when you find yourself in the situation, or you hear about the situation, it can be hard to even relate to it. We're reading a scripture passage today to a community that surely was feeling its own sense of persecution because of their faith. This letter to the Thessalonians that Paul sends, this is to a community—this is probably the oldest book in the entire New Testament. Before the gospels were written, Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, probably the first of the letters that eventually made it into our holy scriptures. And he writes to them and he's aware that they have undergone incredible persecution and they've had a great cost for their faith because to be a faithful Christian in their context meant they were shunned by their local culture, their local society. It cut off economic and social opportunities for them to stand in their faith. But these did, and Paul saw that and he recognized it. And not only that, the communities around the Thessalonians were talking about them, talking about their incredible faith, talking about their incredible hospitality and serving and the hope that they held on to. And Paul says to them, he's like, "I see—I see your faith. I see your love. I see your hope."

And these, later on when Paul goes to write other letters that we have in our Bible, these become very important themes for Paul. Those you might remember from First Corinthians where he later says to that community that faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love. This is early Paul writing, and already these fundamental concepts of what it is to have faith and to truly love one another and to have hope in the midst of how they're being received, in the midst of the courage that it takes to be people of faith—he is congratulating them. He's encouraging them and he's recognizing what's going on. And he doesn't just simply say, "Yeah, great faith, big love, hope." He says, "You are doing a work of faith, a labor of love, a steadfastness of hope." Paul doesn't want them or anyone else to think that faith is just something that's up here. "Oh, I believe." Faith is not just a mental lifting up of an intention, but faith is meant to be a work—a work of faith. It's a faith that cost you something. It's not an easy faith. And especially in the context of where they were and what they were dealing with, truly being a person of faith and following Jesus Christ had a cost. A cost that you and I never come close to. And then he goes on to say that you exert such a great labor of love. And we have a phrase, a labor of love. You know, that's when like, "Oh, that's just something that I love to do. It's a labor of love." That's an English expression. Paul, when he says a labor of love, he's using a word for labor there that means this is hard labor. This is the kind of, "I'm out in the heat of a St. Louis July summer and I am sweating and I am tired and I ache and I have completely exhausted myself." That's the word he uses there. That kind of labor. That it is a labor of love that these Thessalonians have such a reputation of how they love one another in their community, that it's recognized as a full exertion—loving one another until they're exhausted from loving one another.

I believe that our regular exercise of Needs Among Us here within our congregation helps us to flex those similar muscles as well—to look at one another and say, "It's okay for you to not be okay here. It's okay for you to have a need. In fact, I hope you'll share it with me because I want to help you because it's part of my faith. It's part of my calling." I want to have a labor of love like the Thessalonians. I want to have the opportunity to take how I've been blessed and help you because we are one as a body of Christ together. That's the attitude and the exercise that we bring to bear every time we do around this Needs Among Us. And the dirty little secret around here is that you don't have to wait until there's a Needs Among Us Sunday to reach out and find someone here who will love you and help you, because that's the kind of community of faith we want to be. We want to get close to what those were pulling off in those early days of the church. And then Paul says to them, "And you have a steadfastness of hope." Not just, "You have a hope like, 'Oh, I hope everything's going to be okay.'" This is hope in Christ. This is a real belief that ultimately God is in charge. And no matter what awful things happen, what persecution happens, how many steps you have to take backwards in your journey, you never doubt that God is with you. You have a hope, and not just a hope, a steadfastness of that hope. And you hold on to that. And that's

what the people of God are called to do—to hold on to faith when it doesn't make sense, to hold on to an assurance that God is with us when others might laugh at us for having that kind of hope. That's the kind of hope that Paul is celebrating in the lives of these Thessalonians and the kind of hope that you and I are called to have.

Jensen's and the Cage in Louisiana

On Thursday after that trial, later in the day, I had the opportunity to go to Katherine's family's house and again sit on the floor with her son, a 22-month-old son, and his name is Jensen's. It's not James. It's what it says in all the literature that was passed around through the child. His name is Jensen's. And while I was there, the video phone app where families can pay into the detention system and those who are being held there can make video calls out—a call came in and her family said she specifically wanted to call while the Brightpoint and pastor were at the house. And she called up after hearing this verdict and knowing what was ahead for her, knowing that what lies ahead for her is that in a couple of days she's going to be taken to a cage in Louisiana. And I know that may sound like strong language, but I saw pictures of the facility. It's a cage filled with bunk beds. She'll be taken to a cage filled with bunk beds until they can figure out the final arrangements of putting her on a plane and sending her back to Nicaragua. She is not being given an opportunity to—she's not being given the opportunity to hug her boy one last time before she gets sent off. Not because she's a criminal in need of punishment, because she had an application denied. She will spend the next several days in a cage in Louisiana and then sent back to a place that is not safe for her. And while I'm sitting there next to her son, whom she will maybe not get to hold again, she says, "I know that God is still with me, and I want to thank you and your church for what you did for my family. And I know that God will bless you. And I know that God will bless your church." She has nothing at this point to gain from us, but she wanted to call and tell us that she's going to be okay because God's with her. And she wanted to thank you. Steadfastness of hope. A certainty that God is with you. How many of us facing such circumstances could take our privileged faith that's been handed to us, that we so carelessly toss about at times, and hold on to it in the midst of those circumstances? How many of us could hold on to such gratitude and blessing? So what will be your witness? Your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope? Because I know a faith that humbled me. I'll tell you what—I'll tell you what you do with this faith. You've got this faith that's been handed to you, gifted to you by the Holy Spirit. Next week for church, you show up. You show up next week because this week your friends in Christ are being vulnerable enough to share the needs that are afflicting them, and they need help. They need someone to do the labor of love, the exhaustive sacrificial labor of love in their life. And so you show up next week so that when that list of needs—and by the way, some of Jensen's needs, that little 22-month-old, some of his needs are going to be on that list next week—you show up next week and you look at that list and you say, "I know I can at least

pray for somebody for 30 days. I know I can give a dollar towards that need. I know I can give some of my time to help out that person who needs some work done at their house and it's just too much for them because of their health. You show up because we need that kind of witness." And I know this is a little strong coming from pastor. I always like—I'm a little bit nicy-nicy around this kind of stuff, folks. But you know what? We need to show up. Now, I know some of you are like, "Ah, but I'm—I'm leaving town, pastor, or my family has this thing." Okay, okay, okay, okay, that's fine. The needs are going to be on the church website. You can log on Sunday afternoon or Monday morning and still show up to do a labor of love. And if it's too much—if that's too much amidst whatever is going on, if that is too much for you to show up, then I think you need us to show up for you. I think if it's too much, the idea of showing up for the people, that must mean that you're carrying an incredibly heavy load right now. And I want you to share whatever needs you have today so that next week we can take care of you, because that's what the people of God looks like. And it doesn't care about your politics or your policies. It doesn't care about your background. What it cares about is you because you are a child of God and we are the family of God together. And we are going to be the people of God. And I don't think we're going to be able to measure up to the Thessalonians necessarily, but it'd be fun to try. Let's stand up before our God and let's show up. Hallelujah. Amen.