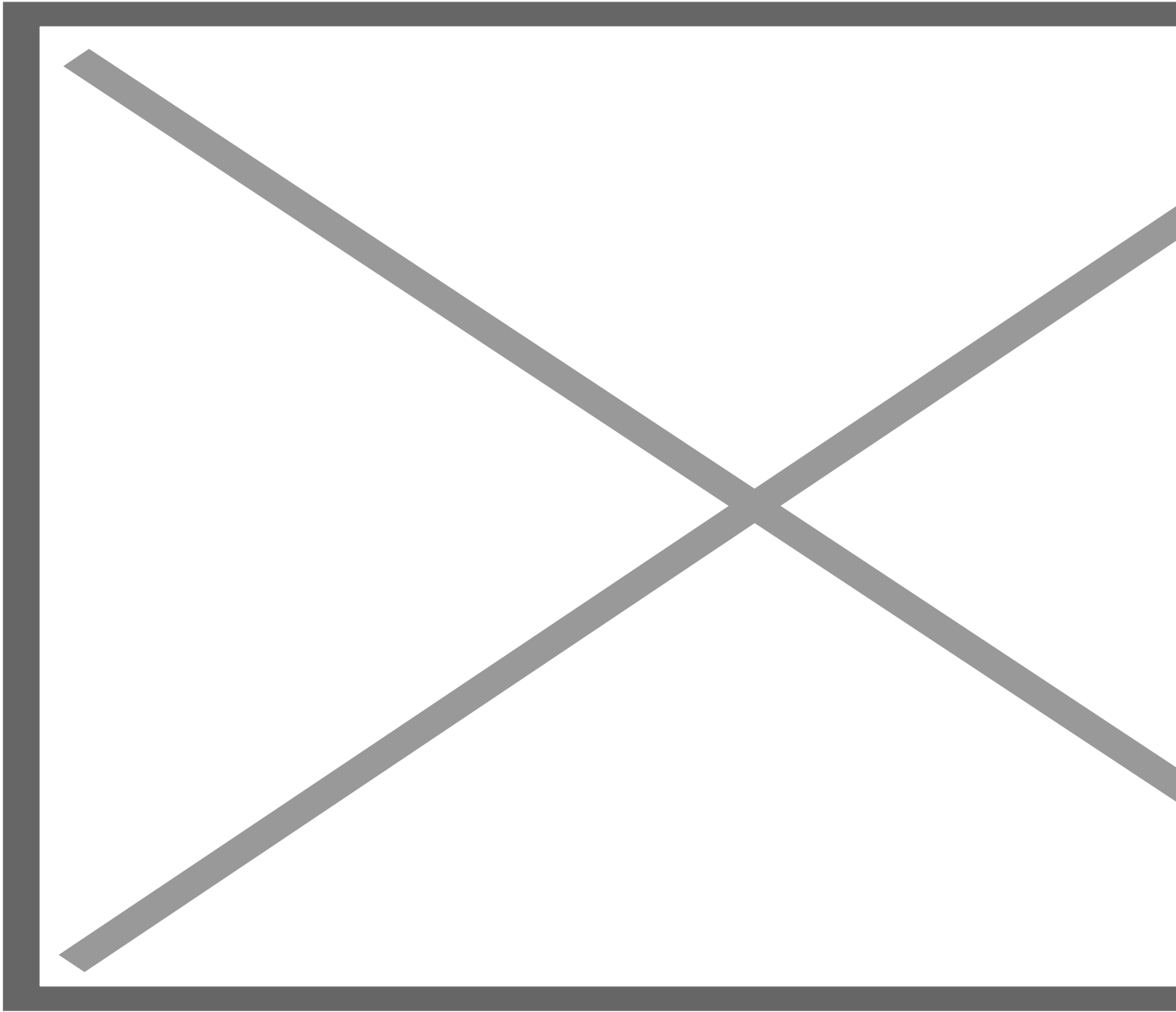


What the border wall does

I went to Tijuana with a group of US Christians to confront the theology embodied by a steel barrier three stories tall.

by [Liz Charlotte Grant](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue
Published on August 18, 2026



Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

The white 15-passenger van pulls into a dirt lot, and already I cannot stop staring. The border wall is 20 feet away. To my surprise, it is not one wall but three fences stretching 30 feet into the sky, sectioning off the dust, wildflowers, and scrub within this region, nicknamed Whiskey 8, a few miles from the San Ysidro port of entry. We, a group of post-evangelicals and Episcopalians from Colorado, have arrived for a weekend learning trip about border relations between San Diego and Tijuana. It's August 2025, months before the raids that will ignite protest movements in US cities. But even now, we're hearing bad news about the border. So we've come to act as witnesses and learners.

We circle our guide, Jon Huckins, to hear about this isolated spot and the looming wall. But first he warns us that we may face removal. Though we're not trespassing per se, he knows others who've been chased from this spot, so we'd better be quick. Customs and Border Patrol, it seems, wants to limit its witnesses. Jon is a thirtysomething San Diegan, and it's easy to picture him lugging a surfboard to the nearest cove, a guitar strung around his bare shoulders in case of an impromptu worship sesh. A former evangelical, he left his inherited Christian nationalism behind years ago, first by leading peacemaking tours to Israel and Palestine and then by founding Journey Home, an organization devoted to teaching US Christians, most of them White, about the politics and spirituality of the California-Mexico border.

In an orientation meeting, he tells us to expect to feel discomfort. In the next two days, Jon and other Mexican and American guides will ask us to reflect upon the complexity of the interdependent economy between the United States and its southern ally, the disparity between what we have believed about the border versus what we see when we witness it, and the theology of separation and hierarchy that such a border provokes. We will also experience our American privilege as we stand within a line of hopeful, bored migrants preparing to cross from Mexico to the United States on foot. Our group will encounter people at every stage of the migration journey; we will meet deportees, CBP agents, and policy advocates. What we're doing, Jon says, is essentially ethical, educational tourism. "Let these questions rumble inside of you," he says.

The border wall is our first stop. Partly, we're here because the US contingent of the Border Church meets here. [The binational congregation used to meet at the border wall in Friendship Park, on the coast between San Diego and Tijuana.](#) But the US side of the park closed during the pandemic and has not reopened, and since then US church members have met at Whiskey 8, several miles from the original location. Apparently, CBP also saw the bread and wine that used to be passed through open fence slats as contraband, marking one more separation between the worshippers.

But mostly, our group has come to Whiskey 8 to gape at the wall. I assumed it would be a chunky slab of concrete, offering the United States fortress-style protection from intruders. Instead the wall physically represents the diversity of US immigration policy over time. Rather than a single monolith, a variety of barriers stretch erratically across 2,000 miles of fields, cities, and desert. The wall covers the ground at least once, sometimes doubling back; near the Pacific Ocean, the Rio Grande, and the Gulf of Mexico the United States has often skimped on construction, relying on the water to deter crossings.

The section of wall at Whiskey 8 represents at least three distinct building projects and three presidential administrations. To the left I see cement columns, 18 feet tall, a remnant of George W. Bush's post-9/11 policy. After the terrorist attacks, the newly created Department of Homeland Security rebuilt the permeable fence that had demarcated Mexico from the United States. A few stakes in the ground with rope stretched between would no longer cut it. Border incursions became "national security threats." Travel between border towns turned into an ordeal of long lines, paperwork, and suspicion. On Bush's orders, border fences were turned into concrete.

To the right, however, I see suspicion magnified. The next section of the border wall owes its construction to presidents Obama and Trump, a testament to the bipartisan nature of US immigration policy. In fact, the construction of the first standardized barrier fences goes back to Bill Clinton's Operation Gatekeeper initiative in 1994. Eight to ten feet tall and made of steel planking repurposed from temporary runways used in the Vietnam War, Clinton's fences looked like the corrugated steel that clads sheds and farm buildings. The Obama and Trump barriers, however, are composed of thick, rusted steel slats, set three inches apart and dug six feet into the dusty earth. Obama added this steel, which Jon says helped earn him the nickname *Deporter-in-Chief*. Trump added much taller slats—they rise 30 feet high. Joe Biden continued his predecessors' steel installations.

As our group approaches the wall, hands reaching toward the surface to pray over this imposing architecture, I am looking through the fence for a glimpse of Mexico. But my view is interrupted by sheets of mesh rebar and a tangle of coiled razor wire, lined with pieces of metal shrapnel threaded through the metal coils with points at least as sharp as the razor my husband uses to define the boundaries of his beard. This is Trump's addition to the wall. In February 2025, he commissioned the Marines to wind razor wire as a bloody reinforcement of his administration's immigration aims. Trump is also the sole American leader who has expressed a desire to electrify the border wall and, on another occasion, to add "spikes on top that could pierce human flesh."

Another thing Jon draws our attention to at Whiskey 8 is CBP's technological militarization. Guard towers, motion-activated floodlights, and paved government roads make it possible for trucks, ATVs, horses, and helicopters to enter the "enforcement zone" between the fences. Agents monitor this borderland night and day. Drones circle the skies, recording with night vision, motion sensors, GPS, thermal imaging cameras, and "electric eye" ground sensors. A ground detection system tracks footsteps using seismic sensors and cameras and artificial intelligence.

In April 2025, the US Army provided new autonomous, solar-powered radar surveillance towers to San Diego's enforcers. The tech was developed for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, making it tough enough for harsh desert conditions. Mounted on a mast, the radar surveys 360 degrees over an eight-mile radius. With these towers, fewer boots can surveil more territory.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation, an anti-surveillance privacy advocacy group, called this recent technological incursion "a digital dumpster fire for human rights and civil liberties." Whether or not such surveillance on US soil is technically legal, it's happening in California and Texas, and other border states are lining up to upgrade their own virtual walls. As with so many Trump-era policies, this forever war against migrants creates a presumed state of emergency in which the normal rules of privacy fly out of the truck bed, judicial consequences be damned. That August, we had no idea how dramatically this would play out across the United States in the coming months. As Jon told us then, "in the name of national security, you can do a lot of harm."

Our second stop: the regional CBP headquarters in Chula Vista. Outside the cement block building, our group fills a few picnic tables while two agents from the publicity office present a press-friendly account of their work. Stephanie is a young Latina woman; Joseph is a middle-aged White man. Both wear the olive green uniform of Border Patrol agents.

While migrant advocates refer to a *wall*, Border Patrol agents use the word *fence*. I wonder if this is meant to soften the barrier between the allied nations. A fence implies friendly relations, like those between suburban neighbors, in contrast to the permanent militarized barrier that in fact separates Mexicans from Americans.

After a brief presentation touting CBP's work with the Drug Enforcement Administration to halt drug traffic from Mexico to California, our church group has questions. A woman asks, How did these officers come to do this work? Stephanie brightens, saying she had wanted to join the Border Patrol since she was a teenager

growing up in the border town of Calexico, California. She and her friends used to park near the border late at night, watching for shadows. “When we saw crossers, we’d flash our headlights, and Border Patrol would pick them up,” she tells us, grinning.

An awkward silence follows her confession, and Joseph steps in. “What Stephanie *didn’t* say,” he says, reading the room, “is that working for Border Patrol is a fulfilling, rewarding career. I’ve always considered myself a patriot, and this is how I serve my country.” End of recruitment speech.

Someone asks what it’s like to be policing the border under a new administration. “The law didn’t change,” says Joseph. “How we interpret the law and then how we enforce the law, that’s changed with a new administration. But we have the same job we’ve always had.” We must look skeptical, because Joseph continues, answering a question we haven’t asked: “We aren’t ICE, by the way.” Those detentions you’ve been hearing about in the news? The white vans pulling alongside immigrants on sidewalks, ransacking restaurants, and rounding up farm laborers from fields? That’s an entirely different agency. They clarify: Border Patrol wears green, Customs wears blue, ICE wears black. San Diego Border Patrol agents only police a few miles along the border wall and then along the Pacific coast. And no, Border Patrol doesn’t have “pick up” quotas to meet—though, yes, it’s true that they, like ICE, have received additional funding in Trump’s One Big Beautiful Bill. (I wonder now how these agents would have answered the same question months later, after deportation raids escalated in intensity.)

They’ve mentioned money, so I ask how much Border Patrol, in particular, will receive from the blank check distributed to the immigration enforcement agencies. Joseph demurs, says he doesn’t know the exact figures. (It turns out Border Patrol, like ICE, got a larger budget than that of some countries.) And they emphasize again that they cannot speak for ICE because they’re not ICE. So don’t even ask. “We’re trying to be as transparent as possible,” Joseph says.

“We’re not hiding anything,” Stephanie says.

Another hand: What’s it like to wear the uniform here in San Diego? The officers glance at each other. Calexico, Stephanie explains, was law enforcement–friendly. She got free coffees, salutes, high fives. Here, in liberal San Diego County? She gets flipped off at stoplights with her kid in the back seat, and she lost her best friend over the politics of her job. Joseph doesn’t tell acquaintances what he does for work. Neighbors have keyed his colleagues’ cars in their driveways; one even poisoned an agent’s dog.

I ask about asylum seekers: What’s the policy look like on the ground? Jon has already informed us that the number of migrants asking for refuge plummeted because CBP One, the Biden-era app that allowed migrants to request asylum digitally, is no longer in use. Still, I’m unprepared for their response. “That number has dropped to zero,” Stephanie says.

“What do you mean, zero?” I ask. “Zero people asking? Zero people granted asylum?”

“Zero. We don’t let them ask,” Joseph says.

Stephanie explains: Before Trump returned to office, when CBP agents apprehended a migrant within range of the border, if the migrant asked for asylum, this initiated a yearslong process—interviews, court dates, reviews of criminal records, a list of relatives or potential citizens or green card–holding sponsors, a judgment about the threat faced in their home country, and eventually, perhaps, documents to resettle. Placing a foot in another country permitted migrants to ask for protection, based on international law. That option no longer exists in the United States. Instead, agents either charge migrants with a crime and send them to detention to await a trial and eventual deportation, or they ship them off to Mexico City the next day.

What counts as a crime is another question. For many migrants, their crime can be as minor as crossing the border illegally, a civil misdemeanor that politicians often misclassify as a felony. The agents explain that by immediately deporting someone to a location far from the border, they aim to discourage an immediate about-face back into the United States. Meanwhile, the CBP One app has morphed into CBP Home: Undocumented immigrants within the United States who want to avoid the trauma of an ICE raid can self-deport, registering through the app to receive \$1,000 and a free flight out of the country.

“So, there’s *no* way for a migrant to ask a Border Patrol agent for asylum?” I ask.

“If they want to claim asylum, they have to do it the right way,” says Stephanie.

Joseph finishes her sentence: “At the port of entry.”

Refugees already have so few options, I think, and now the US immigration system has eliminated most of them. The only option left to asylum seekers is Customs, the office we plan to visit the next day when we cross the border on foot.

Someone raises a hand before the interview concludes to ask the most basic question that’s been bothering the group: What’s with the razor wire on the wall? “It’s a visual deterrence,” Stephanie says. The agents repeat: We’re not trying to hurt anyone, but we do want to keep criminals out. Don’t you want your kids to be safe? But, I want to ask, is a three-story wall lined with razors the only way to do this?

That afternoon, our group hears from Pedro Rios, director of the American Friends Service Committee’s US/Mexico border program. An immigration advocate, Rios sees the border wall as a weapon. He says, “The building of border walls is *meant* to injure.” The injuries of others—cuts, broken bones from climbing the Mexican side and jumping onto the American side, even deaths—then convince others to avoid the wall altogether.

But, he told us, this danger will not deter people from climbing the wall if they do not know about it. For example, some migrants hire Mexican smugglers to sneak them over the wall, thinking they’re paying for illegal but safe entry into the United States. In reality, the smugglers put a single ladder on the Mexican side. When people reach the top, they find there is no second ladder—so if they want to enter the United States, their only option is to jump. A 30-foot fall can cause permanent disability, paralysis, or even death. Before the wall’s height was increased from 16 feet to 30 in 2019, Rios attended a meeting at which a San Diego Border Patrol leader explained that the agency had conducted psychological tests that identified 30 feet as the height a wall needed to be in order to leave a person disoriented enough to stop climbing. This disorientation is by design, and Rios suspects that the pain and injury is as well.

Since the height of the wall was raised, migrant accidents have increased so dramatically that border hospitals have reoriented their trauma units around these injuries. “The appearance of the wall was maybe designed to be intimidating, and maybe it was thought to be unclimbable,” trauma surgeon Jay Doucet told a local reporter in 2024. “Well, neither of those things is true. The wall is quite climbable, and a large number of people are climbing it.” A trauma nurse within our group expands the picture: The pressure of hitting the ground from that height can burst all the blood vessels in a person’s legs. They can receive concussions, broken bones, spinal and brain injuries. A fall from 30 feet changes someone’s life.

Earlier at the Border Patrol headquarters, Joseph pleaded with us. “Look, we’re not inhumane,” he said. “We’re just enforcing the laws of this country.” Yet Joseph and Stephanie have plugged themselves into a system larger than themselves, one that seems determined to ignore the guardrails of the justice system even as CBP erects

more stringent boundaries around the nation. I suspect that Joseph and Stephanie have no idea of the harm they've caused.

The next day, we cross from San Diego to Tijuana on foot. Our entry into Mexico occurs with little fanfare—a park-and-ride, a sidewalk, a turnstile, a winding line through an open-air warehouse, a quick squint from a Mexican immigration agent, and then a stroll through a metal detector. It takes less than 30 minutes.

We follow in the shadow of one of our pilgrimage guides, Mexican theologian Alejandra Ortiz Chacon. She holds dual citizenship. Her parents lived in Tijuana, and her father crossed the border daily to work in San Diego. Two weeks before her birth, they crossed again, and Chacon was born in a San Diego hospital, granting her US citizenship before she returned home to Tijuana three days later. Now she has a binational identity, though she resides mostly on the Mexican side of the border. We hike around Chacon's home city, strolling through the red-light district frequented by US tourists, lunching at a Haitian immigrant's restaurant, and conversing with the staff of a family migrant shelter.

Meanwhile, the return border crossing awaits. We have been told that this crossing is the point of the entire trip, because waiting in line for it forces our group into close, unfiltered proximity with migrants. I can't wait.

By 3 p.m. we are headed north. The line to enter the United States winds and spirals. Even our guides express surprise at the length—one tells us she's never stood in a line so long to cross into the United States. Apparently Tijuana has planned a music festival on the coastline for today. "I hate to tell you this, but you could be in for a three-hour wait," she says. We grimace.

Meanwhile, I begin to note my own discomfort. I have traveled abroad before, and I am now remembering what I'd forgotten: the cultural discomfort of encountering a foreign country's government, which enforces laws I do not understand in a language I do not speak. But again, disorientation is the point. Together with the migrants, we will now submit to the indignity of crossing the border. Whatever happens next, we will act as each other's witnesses.

The line inches forward, a few feet every ten minutes. It curves back on itself at least four times along a urine-spattered square lined with Mexican vendors. The sun is hot, and we joke about the intensity of burn each of us will accumulate in the next few hours, the majority of us white as the sunscreen we lather onto our shoulders. There are two White men directly in front of us, their blonde hair standing out in the crowd. A woman in our group, Allison, makes conversation with them, and we discover they are San Diegans who've spent the weekend in Tijuana for a bachelor party. Their friends left them already, driving across the border, because as one of them tells us, "he always forgets his passport." His friend, a shirtless thirtysomething and chronic forgetter, only smiles and shrugs.

"But we heard that the crossing rules have changed," Allison says, her eyebrows raised. "Won't he need a passport to get through?" No, they tell her, shaking their heads at each other, sharing a joke. They never have any trouble with customs. For *him*, a driver's license will work just fine.

A Mexican man works the edges of the crowd, balancing a tray of steaming churros in paper bags. We buy two bags full of the fried cinnamon swirls, and then, after he passes our spot six more times, and having only moved through two iterations of the spiraling line, we cave and purchase two more bags to share.

By 4:30, an hour and a half into our return crossing, my legs begin to ache. We've already traversed miles this morning, and now I am damp, sore, and agitated. I note a rising edge of entitlement within myself, and I find myself thinking, Why should I, a US citizen, have to wait in this line? I realize that what I really mean is, Why

should I have to wait in this line *with them*? I mean, of course, the Mexicans who stand with us, shoulder to shoulder, all of us languishing in the sun so a few uniformed men can approve our onward momentum. I, the exceptional American, should not have to wait in lines. I should be granted my own special line, one that acknowledges my privilege as a citizen of one of the wealthiest nations on earth. Why am I still standing here, stupidly repeating “no gracias” to the children who walk up and down the line selling handmade stuffed dolls, avoiding the eyes of buskers who belt Selena ballads through their portable sound systems, or trying to decipher what type of liquid, precisely, has just been dropped from an upstairs apartment onto those of us standing below? Why stand among these fragile bodies as if I were one of them?

Within seconds of these thoughts arriving, I feel ashamed. I take a breath. I remember how hard it is to skirt the US authorities. I remember stories of those who have tried, the lengths to which my own government goes to make the journey perilous and to hunt down those who sneak across these lines. I begin to understand the fear of the people who wait in lines to enter my country, the futility of those who understand that they will never reach the shelter of the front of the line. I begin to understand the point of submitting to the democracy and humiliation of a line. This process offers me the gift of another’s experience and helps me understand that I am so often wrong.

Just before 7 p.m., we finally reach the entrance to the customs warehouse, where armed guards in blue stand blocking an open iron gate. Now the stop-and-go rhythm of the line makes sense, as a hand raises to halt those in the main lane. Then, five at a time, we step into stanchions to approach the gate. The two officers in blue demand to see our papers, and I hold out my blue passport, hurriedly flipping to the front with my photo. But they do not care about the photo; they only note the flash of blue that means I am an American, a citizen, and therefore I deserve to enter this official CBP port of entry.

Then I’m inside and speed-walking along wide cement hallways, grinning with relief before I remember: Pedro Rios described these guards stationed at the port of entry, but I didn’t understand before. Anyone who steps onto the soil of the United States—anyone who crosses through that barrier—can ask for American help. By posting these customs agents at the precise line between the countries, they can reject refugees and asylum seekers with impunity. The rejection is not even recorded. Asylum seekers have no opportunity to ask for help, even if they’ve spent an afternoon and evening waiting for the chance to register a claim of “credible fear” the right way, the way Border Patrol agents told them to do it. They will not be allowed to enter—asylum seekers can no longer so much as knock at the door.

There is no right way to seek asylum, not since Trump returned to power. And the Supreme Court’s June 2026 decision allowing CBP to “meter” access to the asylum process will make it that much easier for future administrations to evade the nation’s responsibility to asylum seekers by simply blocking the entrance.

We’ve nearly made it through the open-air building and into a terminal with yet more stanchions. I take my place, this time waiting for the attention of a customs agent in a glass booth. Ahead, agents wave the San Diego surfer with no passport through without issue. He is not detained, does not seem to face resistance at all. As he indicated, the rules do not apply to him.

I consider something Chacon told us: For her generation, many of whom hold dual status and cross the border weekly, these changes to US policy mean anxiety. Illegal immigrants are not the only people to face the suspicion of the CBP. Even before the controversial Supreme Court decision that allowed ICE agents the leeway to profile people suspected of being undocumented, brown-skinned immigrants with legal status already faced increased suspicion. If these daily travelers forget a vital piece of paper, then they risk interrogation and detention.

Asylum seekers have no opportunity to ask for help. They are not allowed to enter—they can no longer so much as knock at the door.

As so many citizens like myself are just now learning, the laws of immigration, which seem so immutable and rigid from a distance, have turned out to be as flexible as identity and status allow. Afrikaners and Ukrainians enter the United States within a matter of hours, cutting a line of Haitians and Venezuelans who waited at the back for years on end. Still, they wait, sold on the hope of American capitalism. But capitalism, as Chacon pointed out to the group, only allows the cheapest, fittest labor to squeeze through the slats of the border wall. The weak, the disabled, children and women—they do not make good workers, so US policy disincentivizes their entrance into our nation, legal or otherwise.

The border wall is *American*, after all—funded by America, built by America, maintained by American contractors—and the wall does not represent partisan politics so much as an ideal of American exceptionalism. We are the best, brightest, Whitest, and most able. Those who do not fit the mold face resistance and prejudice, keeping them out of the country entirely. Some in line give up and head home. Some become permanent border dwellers, settling their families at the gates of the United States, in Tijuana or other Mexican border towns. Some languish in US detention facilities or prisons, separated from family and legal services, dependent upon a system that does not acknowledge them. Even if an immigrant does win the lottery and enters the United States, they may face a forced exit policy or containment. As a citizen, I have been blind to my nation's immigration policy. In fact, only those seeking to join us—who are not yet part of us—understand what it takes to become an American.

As I cross into the United States, placing my backpack through the metal detector and heading toward the van, I am haunted by the words of St. Basil: “Thousands huddle about the door, all of them letting loose a miserable howl . . . but you, unfeeling, dismiss the needy, not fearing the just repayment of the Judge. You have not shown mercy, you shall not receive mercy; you’ve not opened your home, you shall be evicted from the kingdom [of God].” It’s been generations since we meaningfully represented the welcome of Lady Liberty on Ellis Island, if we ever truly did. As we leave Mexico in the rearview mirror, I fear that I have glimpsed the true nature of Americanism and that its ugliness will haunt me for the rest of my life.

I leave my pilgrimage with one lingering question: Do borders work? Border Patrol insists that national barriers matter and that they keep out unwanted migrants. But the evidence is not so clear. As the American Immigration Council points out, congressional research into the efficacy of a border wall suggests great expense and diminishing returns. “Migration continues around a wall,” Amy, one of the immigrant advocates, told us during the pilgrimage. “Policing—including the existence of a wall—will only cause migrants to get more creative in finding a way through.” Even Republicans like Texas representative Will Hurd have been critical of Trump’s obsession with a barrier. Yet the wall infrastructure continues to balloon—and the increased funding and deportation efforts within American cities have caused the border to collapse inward, so that even White American citizens must witness the inhumane tactics by which the Department of Homeland Security “secures” our nation from outsiders.

I can’t help but see the border wall as a metaphor for the United States’ relationship with its southern neighbor. And while the American side of the wall is deserted, siloed from the citizens who have paid for its construction and the safety it allegedly offers, the Mexican side looks very different. For one, it’s inhabited. Tijuans have turned their side of the wall into an art gallery, a vegetable garden, and a place of worship. The Mexican contingent of the Border Church still meets along the wall at Friendship Park (Parque de la Amistad), bordering the Pacific Ocean, with Americans joining by video call. The Tijuana slats feature murals of eagles and sunsets, and the anti-climb panels at the top of the fence have been coated in wheat paste protest posters. Rows of corn and tomatoes grow in raised beds beside the fence, and artists have constructed half of a bridge that intersects

with the wall, representing a time when relatives could reach out and touch each other through the fencing. When we visited, evangelists preached in Friendship Park, and graduation parties cut cake and snapped photos with the wall as a backdrop.

The building of walls, it seems, never stops, whether or not they do what we intend, because border walls act as symbols of superiority and inferiority. By way of walls, we separate and otherize. We hoard what we have and define who we are. The border asks, Who is in, and who is out? Who is my ally, and who is my enemy? Who is my neighbor? The United States answers these questions with steel. Mexico responds in Technicolor.