As we gather for brunch, I would like to reflect on JVC Northwest’s theme this year, “extending the table.” This year, I have had the privilege of gathering around a dinner table with my Seattle Mercy community mates, Sarah, Teresa, Christina, Bea, Abby, Laura, and Maddie. These women continuously inspire me with their dedication to the radical hospitality called for by this theme. They have worked to find and foster safe and loving homes for individuals otherwise marginalized because of mental illness, addiction, or differing abilities. They have graciously cared for clients and residents, even when their efforts went unrecognized or un-thanked. They have shown, through their actions, what it means to be part of a community where everyone is welcome and inspired me to ‘extend the table’ at my placement, the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project.

As the Asylum Intake Coordinator, I have met over 200 individuals in search of lawyers and legal assistance on their asylum cases. The mission to extend the table seems particularly appropriate at an organization like NWIRP, whose vision is to strive, “for justice and equity for all persons, regardless of where they were born.” How many other tables does one get to sit at and work with clients from all over the world? At this table, we speak more than twenty languages, from Oromo to Spanish, Lingala to Punjabi, English to Russian, and Kanjobal to Somali. We come from varying faith traditions, diverse professions, and differing life circumstances. All of my clients have journeyed to be here, including some who have flown over the Atlantic and others who have traversed the approximately 4,000 miles between Brazil and the U.S. border to seek asylum. It is remarkable that in a world divided by borders, where it is hard to get just a singular family to sit around a Thanksgiving dinner and agree, that so many people pass through our office doors sharing the common hope of finding safety, peace, and opportunity for themselves and their families.

I have found that extending the table is more than just the opportunity for people to come together over vast geographic and cultural distances. It is more even than advocating for due process or the right of individuals to not be deported to a country where they fear being killed. I have learned that extending the table means, first and foremost, meeting people where they are. It is an invitation to sit down and listen; to accompany those who are suffering even, and especially when, there’s nothing I can do to alleviate that suffering. I remember one intake where my client reached across the table to the tissue box between us. “I’m sorry,” she said through tears, “But telling you what happened forces me to relive it. I can see it all before me again.” I felt bad, typing up her story and asking her to relate her worst memories to a complete stranger. Yet after the intake, she thanked me, “I’m glad I’m not the only one to carry that now.” Extending the table is an invitation to be, to accompany one another through both suffering and hope. When governments, whether from malice or indifference, have treated individuals as criminal and detainable, and ultimately expendable, meeting people where they are means shaking their hands and looking them in the eyes. Extending the table means never forgetting the dignity of the human soul, no matter what policies, whether misguided or well-meaning, dictate about how we are to treat our neighbors.

Extending the table means participating in our shared humanity together, from the most profound to the most mundane. Over the past ten months, I have had the privilege of meeting clients who have moved, inspired, and challenged me. They are the advocates who have stood by those on the margins of society at the risk of government persecution, the journalists who sought the truth even when they feared no one was listening, and the parents who have left everything they have known to build a better future for their children. In the same intake room, I’ve laughed in amazement as my client’s kids spun around on the chairs countless times without getting dizzy andI have been astounded by the generosity of a client’s friend, only a stranger a few months before, who took the entire day off work to drive my client to the appointment and interpret for her. The clients who have shared poignant examples of the human capacity for forgiveness, resilience, faith and love, are the same individuals with whom I’ve chatted with about the weather and the Seahawks, and the weird fact that in the U.S. we date documents with the month first.

“My liberation is bound up with yours,” were the words by Lilla Watson, proudly printed on the cover of the flyer for the Second Annual Catholic Immigration Summit at Seattle University this past March. After my role doing intake with asylees, and being entrusted with my clients’ stories, Watson’s words have struck me in a new way. When we truly believe them, we recognize that the lives and well-being of the immigrant and the refugee are intertwined with those of individuals born citizens of the U.S. and that we are all bound by our shared humanity. Extending the table then, is not about *extending* the table at all. It is the chance to join the table of which we are all part. It is the invitation to pull up a chair.