

“Immigrants and the Bible”

October 2, 2016

Can We Talk? Where Faith and Politics Meet series

Unless you are Native American, you’re an immigrant, too. You’ve probably heard some say that before, but it’s true. You and I have a fairly short family history here - just over 300 years. Perhaps your ancestors or someone you know saw words that Emma Lazarus wrote in the 1880’s that are placed with the Statue of Liberty:

***"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"***

Beautiful words and wonderful stories of people being greeted at Ellis Island and other entry points by faithful Methodist Christians like Alma Matthews and Kathryn Maurer. Both of them helped people as they settled into a new country, learned a new language, and found work.

And yet history isn’t all good when it comes to immigration – not to mention slavery and oppression. We have to be honest about the way people have been treated. Xenophobia - the fear of the stranger - is nothing new. After the 1850’s, the Irish weren’t so welcome. Anyone here claim Irish heritage?

Later on in the 1880’s it was the Chinese, and a law in place to exclude Chinese immigrants. In the 1920’s, it was those from Russia and other Eastern European countries, and a law in 1924 to exclude them. It wasn’t until 1965 that that law was eliminated.

Still today, immigration is a hot-button issue, especially when we talk about those who are here illegally. I would invite us to use the term “undocumented” rather than “illegal.” And I want to share with you what our Social Principles say:

We recognize, embrace, and affirm all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of the family of God. We affirm the right of all persons to equal opportunities for employment, access to housing, health care, education, and freedom from social discrimination. We urge the Church and society to recognize the gifts, contributions, and struggles of those who are immigrants and to advocate for justice for all.

There are 41 million immigrants in the U.S., and over 37 million children of those immigrants. My spouse, Ivan, along with his parents and two brothers are among those 41 million, and my children are among those 37 million children. So, this is personal for me.

Ivan's family's story has changed my life, and it's a part of my story now. I'm very aware that for Ivan and me, language skills, financial resources, and legal support made a difference in our experience. It's difficult to imagine what it would be like to go through the immigration process without a command of English, money, and legal help. I understand why there's such a struggle for some.

So what's our Christian ethic when it comes to immigration? How do we discuss the issue knowing that our faith in Jesus Christ matters? Jim Wallis says, "God is personal, but never private. And the Bible reveals a very public God." Our faith story in Scripture is a list of immigrants - those who traveled to new lands to follow God's call - think Abraham - or left where they were to escape famine - think Jacob and his sons who go to Egypt. Those who wanted to get out from under oppression - think Moses and the Israelites. Those who fled from danger - think Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.

And I read Jesus' words in Matthew 25, and they cut to the heart. Many times we use them to talk about the ministry that we already do. We celebrate the ways that we feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, help the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner. But these words cut to the heart. When we hear Jesus explaining what it means to serve him, it's clear what he desires from us. And we face our own question: when have we not served Christ and shown the love of God?

There are challenges here. For the first listeners who heard Jesus tell this parable, there might have been an expectation that Jesus was talking about the Jew and Gentile divide. This was about being of the right ethnic group and religious group. Of course, Jesus blows that expectation apart, and the divide is along an entirely different line. It's not about ethnic identity at all. This is about how our faith is lived out and the reality that we can't separate our relationship with God from our relationship with others - no matter who it is, no matter where they come from.

To consider what Jesus says about welcoming the stranger is disconcerting. The kicker here is that Jesus says that it's about what we do that matters - how we respond to needs (or not) and not much about what we say we believe. Take notice that many who are called into the Kingdom are surprised at what Jesus says. They simply responded to needs, but perhaps not with the realization that it was the way of Jesus. They ministered to him. Still others are surprised that this was the point all along - that they are not blessed by the King because they didn't serve the ones in need. They ignored him.

This is about the transformation that he works in our lives. Jesus' words drive us into community with each other. Our perspective about those in need changes – we can always see need around us. We're compelled to respond because we know that Jesus is still found where people are struggling – where there is hunger, thirst, isolation, loneliness, need, illness, and separation. So what do we do?

There are over 11 million undocumented people in the U.S. Statistics say that around 40% actually came to the U.S. legally perhaps on a work or student visa, but it expired. Many of these people have relationships and families. 49% of those who are undocumented are from Mexico. Many are children. Many are working in jobs in areas that are underemployed meaning that U.S. citizens are not seeking those same jobs. We know that for many people who are here undocumented, the situations that they are leaving are desperate and like nothing we can fathom.

I don't think these issues are easy. In fact, after navigating the immigration process, I find it complex. There's always a connection between what we believe about God – what we know – and how we behave. We're called to love one another – not just with words – but with action. Again, fear of the other cannot rule our hearts. Will we let the peace of Christ rule our hearts, or fear of the other? Where will we stand?

Calling Jesus "Lord" means that he defines our lifestyle and our values. What does it look like for us to show the love of Jesus to immigrants? To treat them as we want to be treated? To advocate for the same basic human rights for all people? To seek to understand the issues that we're dealing with around those who are undocumented - and to work for immigration policies that will serve people well, help us to bring people out of hiding and uncertainty, and allow us to be more secure?

There is need all around us and in us - brokenness that doesn't allow for the fullness of life that God intends. As conversation continues around immigration, I'd invite all of us to remember that immigrants – undocumented or not – aren't simply an issue to deal with, but people and families and livelihoods and stories that shape our communities. The way we behave must be motivated by faith, not fear. God calls you and me to work for Christ in the world – to do just what the Scripture cites and respond where there is hunger, thirst, isolation, loneliness, need, illness, and separation.

Earlier this year, General Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was a part of a forum in New York City, and the Wall Street Journal shared some of his thoughts in July. Powell is the son of Jamaican immigrants. He said, "We are all immigrants, wave after wave over several hundred years. And every wave makes us richer: in cultures, in language and food, in music and dance, in intellectual capacity. We should treasure this immigrant tradition, and we should reform our laws to guarantee it."

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we pray that God would help us become “one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” May God transform us as we come to the table, and may we use our faith, hope, and love to transform the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen.