

Immigrants and the Bible
Leviticus 19:33-34, Matthew 25:35
4/17/2016

For this sermon series I am again using resources from Pastor Adam Hamilton, lead pastor at Church of the Resurrection United Methodist Church in Leawood Kansas.

A recent National Public Radio report noted, "Immigration is shaping up to be one of the most contentious and emotional topics in the 2016 presidential race." Where you've likely heard about immigration to date in the last few months is in the call from some presidential candidates for a wall or a fence to be built across the 1,989 mile border with Mexico to discourage persons from coming into America. Or last year's executive order by the President regarding immigration and the court battles that ensued. And there has also been talk of possibly changing the Constitution regarding those that are born on American soil, were no longer automatically citizens, but they had to have parents who were citizens. These are some of the conversations around immigration and they are serious conversations around complex issues.

When it comes to immigration, I think most thoughtful Americans, and I would hope all Christians in America, feel a bit torn. We are a nation of immigrants. The first settlers of the Americas came across a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska at the Bering Strait during the last Ice Age somewhere between 20,000 and 13,000 years ago (with some suggesting even earlier dates). They were immigrants. Europeans began arriving in North America in larger numbers in the 1600's. The Pilgrims, a congregation of Christians seeking religious freedom, came over in 1620. Since that time tens of millions of people have immigrated to the U.S. so we became the great Melting Pot.

Each of us is descended from immigrants who came here seeking freedom or opportunity. We know this, right? I was in New York City many, many years ago chaperoning a church group of high schoolers. While there we visited the **Statue of Liberty**. Completed in 1886, she greeted immigrants entering the U.S. by steam ship for decades. As we approached by ferryboat, I tried to imagine those people coming in by ship and seeing her. Liberty is an

icon of America and represents who we are as a nation that welcomes immigrants. **Emma Lazarus' famous 1883 poem**, which now hangs on a bronze plaque inside the statue, captures this part of our national character and aspirations: 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-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

This represents who we are and who we have been. What a great ideal and yet how we feel inside is sometimes a little different from the ideals. It's part of our history that those who were already here also often struggled with those who came after them as Americans.

The Greek word for stranger or foreigner is XENOS. Xenophobia is the fear of foreigners or strangers. Those fears have been seen throughout our history. They are a part of who we are as human beings. We fear the stranger.

In the 1800's many came from Ireland due to the famine that was causing people to starve and die. They came in ships that were called "coffin ships" because of the number of people who died during the journey. They arrived and took work that no one else wanted – hard labor of building the sewer system in New York and roads in other parts of the Northeast. They were labeled "**dirty Irish.**" Then came the Chinese who were fleeing a initially welcomed because they took the even harder job of building the railroads, but when that was done people weren't so welcoming of the Chinese and they became known as the "**yellow peril.**" By the 1920's it was no longer the Irish and Chinese who were feared it was the people from Russia who were fleeing the Bolshivek revolution and people were worried that there might be those Russians who would want to lead revolution among those fleeing to our country. What if they are really coming to take over our country and turn it into a Soviet state? This became known as the "**red scare.**"

So the questions of immigration are not new to our generation. The same forces are at work in all of us—there is the worry that immigrants will take away our jobs. We cannot say it aloud today, but there is a concern on the part of some that the foreigners might be rapists, murderers, thieves—or that they will simply "diminish the American stock." There is a concern for our safety and security as a nation. These fears have been found in every generation.

There are about 11.3 million persons in the US today without authorization....We have 11.3 million people who neither have a Green Card nor some other kind of visa that allows them to be here. Somewhere between one-third and one-half came here on a visa which has now expired. This includes students, temporary workers and tourists. They finished high school or college and did not want to return to their home country. They had jobs, had built relationships, perhaps sought a Green Card in the lottery but were turned down, and they just stayed. The other half came into our country by crossing the border without authorization. Most of these, like our forebears, came here hoping for a better life. Half of all undocumented aliens in the US are from Mexico—about 5.5 million people....

In May of 2015 the Pew Research Center conducted a poll and found that 72% of Americans favored allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in America legally if they met certain requirements. In another question asking if there should be a concerted effort to deport all immigrants here illegally only 27% of Republicans favored this and a much smaller percent of Democrats with 76% of Republicans noting this was “unrealistic”.

Immigration Reform is in part about what the right solution is—about finding a way to help them gain some legal standing, so that they are paying taxes, getting driver’s licenses, and coming out of the shadows....Many economists say deporting this large a work force would be disastrous for the U.S. economy—both the loss of this labor and the loss of their dollars spent buying goods and services. They are actually a net plus to our economy. In addition these persons often have family and friends here, are involved in their communities. They are, though in the shadows, part of us—they are people. Most Americans feel some ambiguity about this. We know we cannot let in unlimited numbers of people. We believe people should follow the rules and laws. But we also feel compassion for people who work hard and contribute to our society, and are willing to risk their lives to come here.

I’d like to end by turning to the Bible and the question of our Christian ethic as it relates to immigration. The Bible doesn’t function as a policy manual. It won’t spell out for us precise solutions to the question of immigration. It can tell us how the people of God understood the heart, character and will of God regarding immigrants.

With regard to this subject, the Bible has over 150 references to foreigners, strangers and aliens. The Bible largely begins with a story of immigrants. Abraham and Sarah lived in Mesopotamia and God called them to leave their homeland and travel to the Land of Canaan, where they were immigrants in a strange land. Later they move to Egypt, then back to Canaan. Abraham and his descendants are nomads and travel from place to place. His grandchild, Jacob also known as Israel finds life in Canaan so difficult due to famine that he and his family immigrate to Egypt.

Many people come to Egypt and xenophobia sets in. The Egyptians begin to fear these strangers, the Israelites, and they oppress them with slavery. Then God seeks to liberate these slaves and sends Moses to call them out of Egypt to a promised land.

While the Israelites were travelling from Egypt to the Promised Land, God gave the Law to Moses. It speaks to how the Israelites are to treat the aliens that will be in their midst—foreigners, strangers, immigrants. Listen again to our scripture from Leviticus 19:33-34: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” It doesn’t tell us what we do with people who violate the immigration law, it tells us God’s heart toward people who are immigrants. The people living in the shadows – God cares about them. Aliens were to be given the same rights as citizens and this happened in no other place in that time. Aliens were to be treated with love, respect and dignity.

This reminds me of the famous words from Matthew 25. In his parable of judgement – you know the story where he separates the sheep from the goats and tells the people whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me?” Jesus notes those whom he will welcome into his eternal kingdom, we read, “[Then the Son of Man said to the righteous], ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’” Do you know the word used for stranger here in Matthew 25? Jesus says, in Matthew’s Greek, “I was a XENOS, an alien, a foreigner”—and instead of being phobic, you “welcomed me. As much as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me.”

I love the fact that in the New Testament in 1 Peter and in Hebrews the picture of Christians is presented that we are aliens, foreigners, immigrants

living in a strange land. Because this world is not our permanent home. We are only here for a while, our permanent home is the Kingdom of God. Our leader, our highest authority is God our King.

We have laws for restricting immigration into our country, maybe we need all those laws, but some of them need to be fixed it seems like. We have people who are desperate, who are willing to bring their children to the border and hope they make it through. Somehow we've got to ask, "what is a just way of resolving this?" Of course we can't welcome every person from every country around the world who desperately wants to come here, but somehow we've got to find a more just solution than what we have now in particular to those who are already living here, who have grown up here, have married here, have made their lives and livelihood here.

What I'm asking of you is not to vote on a particular solution, I want you to wrestle with this issue in light of your faith, and to see our undocumented immigrants as human beings, and as children of God. Not to paint them with a broad brush, not to look for hard line solutions to human beings, but instead apply your faith to these complex issues.

Let's face this issue in a way that we will not be ashamed of decades from now, but in a way that is consistent with the values etched within the Lady Liberty. Let us, as Christians, seek to serve as the conscience of our nation so that when we face the Son of Man on the last day he can say, "You spoke up for the stranger, and you welcomed them in, and in as much as you did it for one of the least of these, you did it for me."

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Today's scriptures are from the Old and New Testaments and give us God and Jesus' instructions about how to treat those who are an alien or stranger in our land.

Leviticus 19:33-34**New Revised Standard Version**

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Matthew 25:35c**Common English Bible**

[Then the Son of Man said to the righteous], “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and doing of this Word.