

***Hospitality to the Stranger:
Immigration Reform***
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Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers... —Hebrews 13:2

Earlier this week, I participated in a press conference with other religious leaders to voice opposition to a recent law, SB 1070, signed recently by our governor. Yesterday I participated in the annual May Day march and rally, where the focus was also upon denouncing this new legislation. And last Sunday I reported to you that our own Southwest Conference of the United Church of Christ took the step of call the new law unjust and racist.

Now, most of us here have little understanding of what it is like to be a racial minority in America. Many of us would like to believe that we have dealt with racism and that racism no longer exists in this great land of our. But to assume this is to operate under an illusion. For while we have made great strides, we still have a long way to go until racism and inequality are finally and totally eradicated in our society. We are still, in so many ways, a separated and divided nation. The formal structures of prejudice and bigotry have given way to more subtle, informal practices that can be just as hurtful and damaging.

Back in Cincinnati we had a phrase for being pulled over by the police for a D.W.B., “Driving While Black.” The commonly known fact was that African American people were stopped and detained at a much higher rate than white drivers. The Cincinnati police department was, in fact, sued by the Justice Department of the federal government because of this practice, and it began changing its practices under a settlement about a decade ago.

Here in Arizona, the sad reality is “Driving While Brown.” The practice of *racial profiling* is not only illegal and un-American; it is unethical and unjust. It amounts to unequal treatment of an entire group of people—the stopping, searching, questioning and detention based not upon actions but upon race and appearance. Friends of mine who have received this kind of treatment have described it a humiliating, embarrassing, aggravating and infuriating.

My personal objection with SB 1070 is that it will lead to racial profiling on a massive scale and increase the unequal and unfair treatment of people who are citizens of the country—legal, law-abiding men, women and children. We are already too divided in our community—separate schools, separate neighborhoods, separate friends, separate churches. And this latest indignity will only serve to stoke the flames of division, suspicion, fear and hatred.

This is no way to treat our neighbors. Jesus was once asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” And he said, “Love God... and love your neighbor as yourself.” If we are serious about our faith, if we are serious about showing love to our neighbor, then this issue is very relevant and deserves our prayerful attention.

It is important to remember that after Jesus gave this commandment, by the way, someone “seeking to justify himself” asked, “Well then Jesus, *who* exactly is my neighbor?” And Jesus responded with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan where a traveler, was robbed and beaten on the Jericho Road. And it was this foreigner, this immigrant from Samaria who helped the man, showing Jesus’ audience what neighborly love was all about. It was this migrant who was the neighbor.

How we treat those who are different among us is one to the major themes in our faith tradition.

In the book of Leviticus, there is an entire section dedicated to how God’s people are to live, and in it we hear the words that Jesus would later use: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Everything the writer has to say in this section seems to flow from this statement. And then he writes this:

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. (Lev. 19:33-34)

Now, so far this morning I haven’t talked about immigration law itself. My problem with SB 1070 is that it is an unfair *enforcement* of the law. Many law enforcement officials have made the same point. Even our sheriff has come out very strongly against this law, calling it a "national embarrassment," and that it is "unwise, stupid and racist." Sheriff Dupnik

stated, "If I were a Hispanic person in the state, I would be humiliated and angered." But SB 1070 also highlights the fact that our immigration laws themselves need fixing and reform. And whatever we do, these words from scripture need to help guide us toward a policy that is humane, fair and loving.

In Deuteronomy 10:17-19 we hear the command again:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Now the word, "stranger," is from the Hebrew word, *ger*, sometimes translated as "sojourner," "alien," "immigrant" or "foreign resident," referring to anyone who was traveling or settling in a strange land.

The immigrant or sojourner was someone who didn't have full rights and was dependent upon the protection and mercy of those with power and money.

Abraham was an immigrant in Egypt and received help from the chieftain, Abimelech. Jacob was a sojourner with Laban and claimed he was mistreated and abused. Israel itself migrated into Egypt and was oppressed. There were many reasons for becoming the stranger, as there are today: famine as in the story of Ruth and Naomi), poverty, to find jobs and ways to support one's family, to escape military attack, being taken into slavery, and so forth.

And all through the pages of scripture it is clear that God cares for those who are helpless and dependent: the orphan, the widow and the stranger. Over and over, these three groups are mentioned together as people who require special care and protection according to Jewish law because they were particularly vulnerable.

There's a story in the Bible of three sojourner-immigrants appearing at the entrance to Abraham's tent, "*in the heat of the day*," it says. (Having spent a short while in Arizona so far, I understand was a loaded and significant phrase this it!)

And Abraham did what was the right thing to do—he showed them hospitality. Only hospitality in the desert of the ancient near east (or in Arizona) was not about manners; it was about survival. So Abraham gave these divine travelers water, food and shade from the brutal sun.

Hospitality wasn't about Emily Post. Hospitality was about providing essentials and an obligation to protect other from harm.

By the way, a couple weeks ago I went out to the desert with one of our members, Gene Buell, to fill a few water stations maintained by Humane Borders. Gene has been doing this for quite some time now, and I deeply appreciate his commitment and dedication to this important ministry.

Just recently I heard of a mother and child how perished in the desert. Hundreds more are found dead every year. All of them are God's children.

Humane Borders operates over 100 water stations that have either one or two 55 gallon barrels. All the barrels are painted blue, fitted with spigots and marked with a blue flag on a 30 foot pole. All of the stations are placed with the permission of the owners of the land.

These stations are maintained almost entirely by trained volunteers, who drive trucks to the various sites. Each station is checked regularly, some as often as each day. The trucks are fitted with large water tanks and pumps with hoses to fill the barrels. The volunteers often fix stations that have been vandalized and pick up trash and discarded belongings left by migrants heading north.

This is a good example of fulfilling the command of providing hospitality to the stranger-immigrant. It extends a common human decency that is needed for survival. Biblical hospitality makes no moral judgments about the stranger-immigrant, but it simply that every person has value and dignity that must be protected and that no person deserves to die of dehydration in the desert.

In the letter to the Hebrews it says, probably with the story of Abraham in mind, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for in so doing you help angels without knowing it." (Heb. 13:2)

This, by the way, was the true sin of Sodom—the *failure to show hospitality*. The failure to provide life-sustaining protection. When two stranger-immigrants visited Lot it says they were getting ready to go to sleep for the night.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” (Gen 19:4-5)

This sin wasn't about homosexuality. It wasn't about a caring and loving sexual relationship. It was about gang rape, intimidation, and humiliation. It was what often happens in prison—a violent, aggressive, assertion of control over a more vulnerable human being. It was predatory behavior. This was a story of inhospitality toward two vulnerable immigrant-strangers, the opposite of what God requires.

The word in the Greek for hospitality, *philoxenia*, is from the words, “love” and “stranger.” And it is just the opposite of *xenophobia*, the *fear of strangers*, which is rearing its head in this nation of ours today.

History often teaches us that blaming and scapegoating immigrants and the stranger happens when times are hard, when there is unemployment, economic stress and social decay. However, this fear is often not rational, and in fact, makes the situation worse.

Often out of fear immigrants are cast as dangerous and violent drug dealers and criminals. But in the words of the head of the U.S. Border Patrol, David Aguilar, himself, drug smugglers make up only 1% of the number of immigrants coming to the U.S. each year. This means that 99% of immigrants coming into the U.S. are only looking for a better life and their families.

Each wave of immigration has inspired anti-immigrant anger through history with claims that “illegal alien hordes” are pouring across the border taking jobs away from Americans. We heard it in the “yellow peril” that led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. It was directed against Irish and Italian immigrants at the turn of the century, portrayed as drunk, violent and lazy. Many then came in undocumented, “With Out Papers,” shortened to WOP, becoming a derogatory term.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that 12 million undocumented immigrants have been living in the U.S. for years. And a number of studies indicate that they have been anything but a drain on the U.S. economy:

Douglass S. Massey, a Princeton University professor, has documented the contributions of undocumented workers to the government: 62% have taxes withheld from their paychecks, and 66% pay Social Security. Their payments to Social Security totaled \$7 billion in 2004, and in the same year they paid \$1.5 billion to Medicare. Ironically, Massey found these workers usually don't take advantage of these programs, fearing the INS will be alerted to their presence in this country. (Forbes)

So, often they put in, but don't take anything out.

Friends, this whole question of immigration reform has exploded, and as people of faith, the hour is now unavoidably upon us. We cannot avoid this issue or ignore the plight of the migrant.

My hope is that we can find a starting point, remembering that Jesus was born into a family that immigrated to escape threats of violence. And later, he chose to live as an immigrant, crossing the Galilean border. He said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matt. 8:28) And in his ministry Jesus said, "I was a stranger-immigrant, and you received me into your homes... for whenever to you this for one of the least of these, you did it for me." (Matt. 25:35ff) So in showing hospitality to the stranger-immigrant we are not only "entertaining angels," but Jesus himself.

As we examine our immigration policy may we *never* forget this. May we never lose sight of the precious image of God in all of God's children.

Look, caring for the stranger-immigrant goes to the very heart of who we are as people of faith. Moses told the people, "love the sojourner, *for you were sojourners.*"

There's a story of a wealthy business man who, himself, was an orphan and was invited to come to an orphanage. And he thought, "O.K., I'll go and listen to their pitch, maybe give them a little money." But when he got there

he noticed a small boy, and when he looked at that boy, he saw himself. The man was not ready for how much he was affected. And he found himself totally devoted to that orphanage, giving great amounts of both his time and money. And he felt *whole*.

As Americans, we would do well to remember that almost all of our families were immigrants. And this should teach us that we should treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. *We* need to remember, as Israel needed to remember.

And as people of faith, the first toward a compassionate and just immigration policy is to remember who we are. It is to remember that there but for fortune to you and go I. It is to remember that this world is not our home, that we are all aliens in a strange land, that each of us is utter dependent upon the love and hospitality of God in this sometimes harsh and barren land.

“There are some things in our social system,” said Martin Luther King, Jr., “to which all of us ought to be maladjusted.” We are not at home here.

Look, I’m not saying that the issue of immigration is simple. It isn’t.

But as citizens, we are responsible to learn about it and educate ourselves. And as people of faith, may we remember the words of Martin Luther King that “hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.” And may our starting point be God’s special love for the stranger, the alien, the immigrant in our midst.