

THE CHILDREN'S CRUMBS – THOUGHTS ON IMMIGRATION

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Reading: Mark 7: 24-30

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

I will speak today on immigration. These are thoughts that neither defend nor decry a political party or a politician. One will not leave this sanctuary with immigration reform legislation. I do not even presume that the Christian values that I will offer will ever have political clout. I do hope that these words might shape our part of the public conversation. I hope that our conversation might stem the tide of demagoguery, fear, and racism that seems to be dominating political advertising, political commentary, and the media.

Let me begin by outlining some of the assumptions that I am working under. First, I think there is an important distinction between border security and immigration. They are, no doubt, connected but not co-terminus. Border security has deeper implications than immigration. I am worried about the porous nature of United States borders. But I am less concerned about Mexican agricultural workers than I am about potential terrorists entering this nation through port cities along the Atlantic and Pacific coastlines and the Gulf of Mexico.

My second assumption is that fear plays a significant role in the current debate about immigration. And there is nothing like an economic recession to engender insecurity in the minds of people. With fourteen percent of Americans living at or below the poverty level and with unemployment near ten percent we naturally question how we can both provide for the general welfare of our citizens and carry the burden of non-citizens, especially their children, in our public schools, housing, health care, and security. These are responsible legal and moral questions that are plagued upon by fear. Who can ignore the real and present danger of another terrorist attack? These are the times that try our souls and foster a paranoid worldview. It is my observations that Mexicans and Muslims are the scapegoats of America's anxiety. Until we can remove the venom of fear we will not be able to logically solve these social challenges.

My third assumption is that the nation has both the right and responsibility to determine the legal processes by which citizenship can be attained. I further believe that every person who wishes to become a citizen of the United States is legally and morally obligated to follow those processes. At the same time I recognize that there are an estimated 12 to 20 million illegal immigrants in America. The idea that we are going to send back all of those people is absurd. It makes no sense. How could such a plan be enforced? How much would it cost and how would it be paid for? People may not like the term "amnesty" but how about common sense? What kind of process can we create that facilitates citizenship and all of the rights and responsibilities thereto?

My fourth assumption, quite frankly, is that the government, regardless of the party or administration, will not get it right.

Now many people would hope that their minister might be able to find some passage from the Bible that would solve the immigration question. There is no such passage. In fact, we have to understand that there is no equivalent word or meaning in the Bible for “immigrant” or “immigration.” The best words that we can find are “stranger,” “alien,” “foreigner,” and “sojourner.” And the meaning and nuance of these words shift in the Hebrew Bible. It is important to understand that the Ancient Near East was made up of many populations of people who were constantly moving about. On the one hand there was a thriving commercial class of people on both land and sea. Geo-politics could cause some people to leave their homeland for another country. Countries were defeated and occupied by wave after wave of foreigners from Phoenicians and Egyptians to Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

No nation understood this better than Israel. Father Abram was called out of Haran into Canaan. His descendants would flee to Egypt during a time of great famine. Moses would lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, into the wilderness and then back into Canaan. God reminds the Hebrews, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt...” Eventually the Jews would be led out of Jerusalem as captives to Babylon. And by the beginning of the Common Era they became known as the Jews of the Diaspora.

And if we think about the history of this nation we recall that wave after wave of many nations has landed on our shores and crossed our land boundaries. We think first of Western Europeans such as the English, French, and Germans. Middle and

southern Europeans followed these. On the West Coast in the 19th century Pacific Rim peoples came from China and Japan. Today there are Samoans, Koreans, Thais, and Philipinos. In the past fifty years we have witnessed refugees enter the U.S. from wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Viet Nam, and Somalia to name a few. There is a Hmong community in Kansas City and an emerging Somali community in Dodge City. Eighty – that’s right 80 – different languages are spoken in the Wichita Public School system. In 1939, Dorothy said, “I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”¹ I have a feeling that she had no idea what that would mean over 70 years later. But her next line is instructive. “We must be somewhere over the rainbow.” The United States of America, the State of Kansas, and the City of Wichita is a rainbow of nationalities, races, cultures, and religions. And what of the indigenous people, the Wichita, Pawnee, and Kichai?

For me the question is how we are going to live over the rainbow. At a very basic level, classifications of citizen, immigrant, and alien cannot answer that question. It is a question that nations have struggled with for time immemorial. In the Hebrew Bible there are ninety references to the *ger* or *gerim*. This is a word that scholars typically translate into “sojourner” or “stranger.” The meaning of the word varies throughout the ancient witness. It can mean people who live in a place that is not their own, even a foreign country. It can also reference a class of people, typically the poor and disinherited. Not having land is a common thread. Genesis tells us that the Hebrew people will one day possess the land of Canaan where their ancestors once “sojourned.” The book of Deuteronomy puts the *ger* in the same company of widows

¹ “The Wizard of Oz,” Screenplay by Noel Langley, Directed by Victor Fleming, Metro-Golden-Mayer, 1939.

and orphaned children as the objects of charity. The Law stipulates that God is the protector of the sojourner (Deut. 10:18) and insists that they must not be deprived of justice (Deut. 24:17). The Deuteronomist declared:

“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, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the stranger, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (10:17-19)

In other words, God calls God’s people to extend hospitality to the stranger, sojourner, alien, and foreigner.

The possibility of hospitality is starkly illustrated by the story that I read to you from Mark’s gospel. Mark tells us in three different ways that this woman was an alien: she was from the region of Tyre, she was a Gentile, and she was of Syrophenician origin. Never mind that Jesus was traveling in her region. To him she was foreign and represented the stranger. If that were not enough, she was a woman who had the audacity to approach the rabbi and insist on his generosity.

Mark informs us that Jesus had put in a long week of healing, walking on water, confronting the Pharisees, and teaching. He was tired and angry. He wanted to be left alone. Can’t a preacher get a day off? But this stranger breaks into his respite and asks him for one more healing. He snapped back at her and basically suggested that he only has enough resources for his own children, the Jews. They are the ones his mission is dedicated to and as a matter of fairness he can only minister unto them.

But this woman has a daughter to save. I can see her grabbing Jesus by the front of his robes and bringing his face right in front of her own. He could smell the oil in her hair, feel the hot breath of her words as she demanded, “Sir, even the dogs

under the table eat the children's crumbs." In other words, even in your own world you feed the dogs. Have you not enough generosity of spirit to care for this little girl? Is your God that small? Esta tu compasion tan pequena, Senior?

And the eyes of the Son of God were opened. The Savior saw before him a broader humanity and an expansive grace. I believe that such hospitality is the Way of the Cross in a world of migrating human beings. I am not so naïve to think that is what national legislation will look like. But in the words of Joshua, "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15). When all is said and done I am compelled by the love of God to treat the stranger with food, clothing, and protection.

When President Bush was trying to pass immigration reform legislation a passage of that law would made it a felony for any charitable organization such as a church to knowingly and willingly serve an illegal immigrant. I stated then that I would never comply with such legislation. You see, the federal government can legislate the rules for immigration and citizenship, can build fences, and return illegal immigrants to their native country. But the federal government cannot legislate the compassion of the Body of Christ. It cannot foreclose on the grace of God.

The anger and distrust that seems to overwhelm the nation at this time scapegoats those who are different and strange to us. Liu Xiaobo, Chinese literature professor and essayist wrote:

"For hatred is corrosive of a person's wisdom and conscience; the mentality of enmity can poison a nation's spirit, instigate brutal life-and-death struggles, destroy a society's tolerance and humanity. I hope therefore ... to counter the hostility of the regime with the best of intentions, and defuse hate with love."

Xiaobo is the recipient of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. He is in a Chinese

prison because he argued for political reforms such as the freedom of assembly, expression, and religion in a document he co-authored entitled "Chapter 8."

It is by the power of love that we will finally resolve the greatest issues that confront the world. Poverty, violence, and hunger will never be resolved by resolution and legislation. Only by hospitality will we overcome the fear and hatred. Be assured that if immigration reform is brutal, oppressive, and breaks apart families it will result in resentment, resistance, and perhaps even violence. If immigration reform is compassionate, liberating, and builds strong families it will lead to deeper respect within the community at large and will foster loyal citizenship. The immigration law may need reform. Our hearts need to be reformed. Everyone over the rainbow needs to risk the kind of hospitality that restores and nurtures human beings. We must all become like God's wife. Let me tell you a story about God's wife.

This story took place in New York City. It was a cold day in December. A little boy, about 10-years-old, was standing in front of a shoe store on Broadway. He was barefooted, peering through the window, and shivering with cold. A lady approached the boy and said, "Why are you looking so earnestly in that window?"

"I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes," was the boy's reply.

The lady took him by the hand and went into the store, and asked the clerk to get a half dozen pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked if he could give her a basin of warm water and a towel. He quickly brought them to her. She took the little fellow to the back part of the store and, removing her gloves, knelt down, washed his little

feet, and dried them with a towel.

By this time the clerk had returned with the socks. Placing a pair upon the boy's feet, they looked for a pair of shoes that would fit him. She then purchased the shoes, tied up the remaining pairs of socks in a bag, and gave them to him. She patted him on the head and said, "No doubt, my little friend, you feel more comfortable now?"

As she turned to go, the astonished lad caught her by the hand. Looking up in her face, with tears in his eyes, he asked, "Are you God's wife?"

Christianity is about the restoration and reconciliation of strangers, every kind of stranger you can imagine, from God to the imprisoned. The most basic tool of reconciliation is hospitality to every one of those strangers, foreigners, sojourners, aliens, and immigrants. Through the eyes of Christ their age, gender, gender orientation, ability, color, religion, and legal status is irrelevant. In fact, the eyes Christ are blind to such distinctions. Hospitality is the gift and method of God's reconciling work in the world. Hospitality might mean a pair of shoes, a shared meal, or a gentle conversation that reveals our shared humanity.

Hospitality will finally be the means of "immigration reform."

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