

## **"Stranger in a Strange Land"**

**Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 10:19**

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"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!"

"The New Colossus" is a sonnet by American poet Emma Lazarus (1849–87), written in 1883. In 1903, the poem was engraved on a bronze plaque and mounted inside the lower level of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

It speaks of an ideal we hold about our nation welcoming immigrants to freedom. My German great-grandfather Elmer Bollwinkel celebrated that ideal. We have reason to believe that he immigrated to the United States embarking off a prison ship in New York City from Dresden in 1857. His family has been proud to be Americans ever since.

But Lazarus' poem is cruel irony for the millions of Africans who were brought here in the chains of slavery, or the Italian and Jewish people who could only find housing in the ghettos of our East Coast cities, or the Chinese who were brought to California as indentured laborers in the 1860's to build the Transcontinental Railroad and then banned from immigration in 1880, or the

indigenous nations in Florida, Georgia and Alabama which were uprooted by gun point and forced off their land to relocate to Oklahoma in 1838-39; their Trail of Tears left 30,000 Cherokee people dead along the way.

Except for the remnant of indigenous, we are a nation of immigrants. Most would agree that immigration has made the United States stronger...it certainly has been a blessing for the Bollwinkel family. Yet as mixed as our immigration past has been, the present and future seem even more conflicted. The only thing our elected leaders can agree on about immigration is that our current system is broken.

Today there are 11.5-12 million immigrants living illegally in the U.S. Five million of them are children. Not all of immigrants crossed the border surreptitiously -- almost half of them (4-5.5 million, 33-50%) entered the U.S. legally and overstayed their visas (Pew Hispanic Center). Twenty five percent of all undocumented immigrants live in California, 74% coming from Mexico and Central America (Office of Homeland Security, 2009).

A conversation I had with a good friend who lives and works in Southern California agriculture typifies the challenge of our current immigration system. My friend does not like President Obama. Before the 2008 election, my friend ranted and raved about our unsecured borders, illegal immigrants costing millions in welfare and taking our jobs. He was certain that if elected, President Obama would do nothing about it.

Last year before the election, my friend ranted and raved that the Obama administration's policies of deportation of undocumented workers had taken all the field workers away. The land owners

my friend was working with wouldn't be able to get their crops harvested and it was all the President's fault.

Since the beginning of the Obama administration in 2009 until July 2012, 1.4 million illegal immigrants have been deported, 1.5 times more than under President Bush (*Washington Post*, 8/27/12). Just in the first five months of this year, 246,333 illegal immigrants were deported by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Department (ICE), of those, 55% had criminal records (*Washington Times*, 7/8/13).

Yet, the majority of undocumented workers are doing work we consider essential in the service and manufacturing industries; 80% of agricultural field workers in the U.S. are here illegally ([huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com), 6/4/11). Many, if not most of the undocumented workers here are with family who are already citizens, brought children with them from their countries of origin, or have given birth to children who are now citizens according to the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. In fear of deportation many of these people avoid public services and face oppressive working conditions and unfair compensation.

Silicon Valley technology tycoons and Sacramento Valley farmers tell us they need a way to hire labor needed for their industries. That millions are willing to leave their homes and families, risk and suffer to find work here, suggests that there are workers willing to do the work available. There has got to be a way to bring logic and justice to this equation by creating a fair and manageable guest worker program. Yet, so far no one has been able to find it.

What does God have to do with all of this?

The three texts from our Hebrew Scriptures point to a long standing faith tradition of offering hospitality to the alien, the sojourner, the immigrant. A Bedouin people knew that such hospitality can mean life or death. They were required to offer it as much as dependent on receiving it. Of course, contemporary notions of national boundaries and citizenship were unknown three thousand years ago. But the point these ancient words can offer is to remind us that we must “welcome the alien for you were once alien.”

Remember that in times of famine the Hebrews traveled to foreign lands for work and food; this happened for Abraham, Isaac and the sons of Jacob (Genesis 12:10-f, 26:1-f, 43:1-f). There they would be aliens, asking for opportunity and protection from the host nation. Such moments were full of apprehension and the opportunity of disaster but in each case guided by God the Hebrews would survive and in some cases prosper.

The Biblical admonition regarding aliens is that when in our borders we are to treat them as we wanted to be treated when we were aliens. The essential Biblical ethic is the universal "Golden Rule" found in all religions, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" or as Jesus says it in the great commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Unless we come from an indigenous tribe of North Americans all our families were immigrants at one time or another. Our Christian ethic would demand that we have an immigration system that is just and guarantees the dignity of all involved. It doesn't mean an open border for the whole world to pour in or that our laws should be discounted or ignored. But our laws need to be reasonable and fair. And they aren't; both sides of the debate agree on that.

The recent Arizona law now under appeal allows law enforcement to arrest a person "if they appear to be undocumented". And how does one determine the appearance of an undocumented person? "By their shoes" according to the law's proponents!\*

When San Francisco Giant's pitcher Sergio Romo wore his now famous tee-shirt printed "I Only Look Illegal" it was a powerful reminder of the legacy of racism in our nation's history of immigration. The Romo family immigrated to the United States and settled in Brawley, California where Sergio was born, right in the heart of the agricultural Imperial Valley. He is the first baseball player in his region to play at the Major League level and has helped the Giants win two World Series. His victory parade statement at San Francisco City Hall was a pointed reminder for all of us, he said, "No human being is illegal."

In last fiscal year '12-13, 463 immigrants died along the southern border, that's 1.2 a day (Washington Office on Latin America, NY Times, 5/20/13). People who are looking for work that needs done in this country should not have to die to find it. I am proud that the United Methodist Committee on Relief has a program which leaves water, tents and shoes along transient zones of our border. Such a small effort in no way encourages illegal migration. But it can save a few lives.

Immigration was one of our hottest topics this summer. There are no simple answers to such a complex dilemma but as we take Holy Communion together this morning there is one compelling truth. The Jesus we worship as Lord and Savior spent two years of his life as an undocumented immigrant to Egypt with his parents in order to survive (Matthew 2:13-23). Unless you are indigenous everyone's families here were once immigrants. Jesus teaches us to treat each other as we would be treated.

Why shouldn't that ethic be the basis of our immigration system for after all we were once aliens too.  
Amen.

\*(Lillian Daniel, When "Spiritual Not Religious Is Not Enough": Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church, Jericho Books, 2013, p. 148).