

Proper 10, Year C
Church of the Resurrection, Centerville, UT
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We just heard what is, perhaps, the most familiar story Jesus ever told: the parable of the Good Samaritan. That familiarity can prevent us from actually *hearing* the story, the way we might hear it if it was new to us. We may wonder, “Is there anything new in this Gospel that we haven’t already thought about or heard preached about? This is the challenge of these well-worn stories – it’s easy to believe there’s nothing more to learn from it.

Just to recap, this powerful reading reminds us of the essentials Jesus teaching:

- Avoid the hypocrisy of those who pass by on the other side
- Take risks for the sake of the Gospel
- Care for your neighbors
- Recognize that your neighbor includes everyone, everywhere
- Give of yourself for the sake of others
- Give with no strings attached
- Provide for those in need, whether they deserve it or not
- Love those different from ourselves, whom we may despise and consider unlovable and undeserving

Since you’ve all have heard this before, I suppose I *could* stop now and we could go home early. ☺ *But* maybe we can dig deeper into this story and learn something new about God, and perhaps about ourselves.

I don't have to tell you that we have tremendous conflict in our nation over *our neighbors*. Immigration, which is really a code word for illegal immigration from Mexico, which has now expanded to include Central America is the most explosive topic on our current political agenda. I don't know the opinions, or feelings, of most of you about this and, I admit, there are times I have to really drill down to find clarity about my own thoughts and feelings.

A few years ago I read the results of a study that concluded most faith leaders believed that the problem of illegal immigration was due to unrealistic limits on legal immigration in our country. It also said that most *clergy* believed that more immigrant workers should be allowed into the country to fill the need for workers in lower paid jobs in agriculture, hospitality and other unskilled jobs that Americans seem loathe to take. I also know that The General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the House of Bishops have called for comprehensive immigration reform, which would create pathways for undocumented immigrants to become legal, and a viable system for receiving guest workers. Other religions have made similar statements.

But I was shocked when I read the other conclusion of this study – that the majority of people in the pew believed there are already too many immigrants allowed into the country and felt that the lack of immigration enforcement was a major concern. I can't speak to the validity of this study – what questions were asked, how, and of whom, what

denominations were surveyed, etc? I'm not going to ask for a show of hands on your opinions about this, but I'll tell you what I think – *it baffles me*.

The first thought that came to my mind was to wonder how this disparity – if it does exist, could exist - and to wonder if I was really that out of touch with the thoughts and feelings of members of the Episcopal Church? Lacking the resources, or the time and energy, to survey everyone, I decided to retreat to the Gospel for guidance. Always a good idea.

The lawyer in this story, an expert in the interpretation of Jewish law, wants to know the cost of eternal life. “How much must I do?”, he asks. Jesus asks *him*, “What does the law say?” and the lawyer, good scholar that he is, responds with a verse from Deuteronomy, and another from Leviticus: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ Jesus affirms that he has given the *right answer* and replies, “Do this, and you will live.” At the time, Jews debated whether *all* fellow Jews were their neighbors, or just some. The lawyer tries to define the *limits* of his duty asking Jesus “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan, a *despised foreigner*, who has mercy on the wounded man. Jesus story clearly makes the point that who is or is not a neighbor in our commonly understood sense is irrelevant - the lawyer must see beyond the Law to *love for all*.

This is the crux of the immigration issue in our country. *The two most basic human emotions are love, and its opposite – which is not hate - but fear*. It's impossible for

these two emotions to exist simultaneously – whenever we live out of fear, we banish the possibility of love. What is it about immigration that engenders fear in so many? We hear a lot of things in the media– one of them is violence from the drug trade in Mexican border towns. And yet statistics show that crime is actually lower in American border cities and counties than in the U.S. as whole, and that these towns are among the safest places in the country to live.

Some say Americans fear that *jobs* will go to immigrants, yet reports show that employers advertise jobs for weeks before turning to undocumented workers. When U.S. citizens do take these jobs, they often quit after a few days of work.

Another common argument is that it's against the law. This is true – it *is* a *misdemeanor*, a civil, *not* a criminal offense, to cross a U.S. border without proper documents. It's *not a crime of any type to be living undocumented in the U.S.* Yet, as I'm sure you've heard, there are large scale ICE raids planned for today in 10 U.S. cities. Scheduled for today, Sunday, the Lord's day - to take undocumented immigrants into detention, instilling terror into immigrant communities. It's also important to note that anyone seeking asylum in the U.S. must be allowed to enter – this is also the law. The law, you may say, is a mess, as was the Law in Jesus time. In no way does it comply with the Gospel imperative to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

So, what is it that we are really afraid of? The above are all excuses we have made, I believe, to *justify our fear of the other*. Our fear of those with different color skin, who speak a different language, practice a different religion, have a different culture – you

name it. *Difference incites fear in us. But at level deeper than skin color, we are all the same.* “We are children of the one God who is the Creator of us all,” said Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. “(These) are our sisters, our brothers, our *siblings* who are seeking protection and asylum, fleeing violence and danger to children. searching for a better life for themselves and their children.”

Katharine Jefferts-Schori, when she was Presiding Bishop, gave a number of addresses on immigration reform. All Christians, she said, are aliens and sojourners, seeking our true home in God. As Americans we are *a nation* of immigrants. All of us, at some point came from “somewhere else” and “humanity has been migrating for tens, even hundreds of thousands of years...in search of food, shelter, safety, employment, even adventure.” This will never change as long as there are new horizons and hope for a better life.

Episcopal theology on immigration, as well as on pretty much everything else, begins with the Biblical injunction we heard today – love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Hebrew scripture directs that we “shall love the stranger for we were once a stranger in the land of Egypt.” (Dt.10:19).

We have all been aliens at one time or another in our lives – when we visited a foreign country where we didn’t speak the language, when we moved to a new town or enrolled in a new school where we didn’t know anyone, when driving through a section of a city where everyone is a different color or speaks a different language. Your ancestors and mine, unless you are Native American, were aliens in this country. The signs posted on

East Coast businesses the mid-nineteenth century, “No Irish need apply”, were directed at my ancestors who were fleeing starvation from the Potato Famine.

Our psalm today instructs us to “*Save the weak and the orphan; defend the humble and the needy...Rescue the weak and the poor.*” God asks, “How long will you judge unjustly?” Amos sees God holding a plumb line that he is using to test Israel. Will they follow the straight way or continue in their ways of corruption and materialism? Love of God and neighbor is the plumb line in today’s Gospel. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” (1Jn.4:18) Which will you choose?

Love or fear?