

The Alien in Our Midst

Scripture: Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:14-22

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Evening Service**

People of God: In my recent vacation to Texas, exploring the areas of Big Bend National Park and El Paso, it meant that I traveled along the US-Mexico border. That means seeing a very strong presence of the Border Patrol. After all, the Rio Grande, the river that separates Mexico and the US is easy to cross. It's not like the St. Lawrence or even the Ottawa river; more like the Nation river. In Big Bend Park I saw Mexicans wading across the river and taking horses across it—all to sell us souvenirs.

Since you can't put a fence through the middle of a river, you patrol the few roads that lead out of the area. As a result, even though I was legally in the US, I ended up going through three border patrol check points, within Texas. And these check points were more intimidating and thorough than when I officially crossed the border in Michigan.

I had mixed feelings about this experience. On the one hand, I recognize the duty of the Government to protect its border and control who comes in and out of the country. The issues are real: While it's unlikely terrorists would cross the border in this way, those involved in the drug trade certainly do. In addition, hundreds, thousands, ten of thousands of illegal immigrants do try to cross the border. The Government has the duty to protect the border.

On the other hand, if I was an American citizen, and would have to prove that every time I went through a check point, I would begin to question my freedom and liberty within my our country. (The spot checks being set up in Arizona raise the same issue). It felt like going through Venezuela, with all of its military checkpoints. And that's not a positive comparison.

In any case, the dominant presence of the border patrols point to one key problem in North America: illegal immigration. And that's the focus of this study going to Synod. The question arose when a church wondered what to do with worshippers who were illegally in the country. Could they partake of the Lord's Supper? Now that question was perceived very negatively, but it led to this broader study about the church's role in dealing with migrant workers.

Now the question studied was not so much about immigration policies, though these are significant questions, which Christians ought to reflect upon: Is immigration a good thing? How many immigrants should a country allow in? Which kind of immigrants? From what part of the world? These are questions, which the report does not deal with. Instead, its overall concern is with a certain type of immigration: illegal immigrants.

Now you might think that this issue is far removed from the Williamsburg CRC. And in a way, you are right. We don't have a lot of illegal Hispanic immigrants moving into the neighborhood—or sitting in the pew. But the issue of immigration should be one close to our hearts. After all, we are an immigrant church. Nearly all of us here tonight, either immigrated to this country or are children of those who did. As a result, we should be able to appreciate and sympathize with those who want to start a new life in a new country. North America is still seen as a place of opportunity for many in our world, whose lives in their own countries offer no hope for the future.

Now it might seem as if this issue is an American one, not Canadian. But we too face this issue though in a different way. In the US, they are facing large amounts (12-14 million people) of mainly Hispanic (Mexican) illegal immigrants, that have crossed over their southern border. It's changing the face of America. In Canada, we have issues with our refugee system. As a result, our "illegals" (about 200 to 300 thousand) tend to come from Third-world countries, bringing with them, their culture and their problems.

In dealing with this question of illegal immigration, does the church have anything to say, based upon what the Bible has to say? Should Christians get involved in these issues, or should we just let the government sort things out?

Yes, Christians and the church should be involved in thinking about these issues. After all, the Christian faith is more than simply a matter of personal salvation. It's far more than just having our sins forgiven. God's salvation involves redeeming the whole creation. Our faith is not merely a personal matter; it has public implications. Because the claim that Jesus is

Lord of all impacts social, political and economic matters. While many people may wish that religion and politics would be completely separate, they can't be.

But the church, as an institution does need to be careful about making statements on certain specific policy issues. The church is limited in what it can and should say. The church should raise basic questions and explain the biblical perspective on the broad issues, but it should be very careful about commenting on specific proposals. That's especially the case when Christians themselves have different solutions to the problems that we're facing.

On so on the topic of this evening, the church can lay out the basic biblical thoughts on this issue, as I hope to do shortly. But the church should refrain from advocating certain policy matters, unless they clearly derive from the Word of God. And so, the church needs to remind its members and the government about the need to be hospitable to the immigrant, but can't say how many immigrants our country should allow in.

Unfortunately, the church as an institution often does overstep its authority. Christians, as individuals and working together in other organizations, can offer more specifics. But the church as an Institution needs to know when to refrain from speaking.

And so, on this particular issue, what should we as Christians be thinking? What does the Bible say on this matter, recognizing the gap between the situation in the days of the Bible and our modern setting? Can we be indifferent to the plight of illegal immigrants in our country?

When God established his system of laws for his people in the days of Moses, God had a concern for the "alien" in the midst of his people. The alien is often mentioned along with the fatherless and the widow. A classic example of that is Psalm 146:9: "The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow." So just we should show compassion to the widow and orphan, so we should show compassion to the alien.

But who is this alien? In the days of the OT, the alien was the foreigner living in their midst. He didn't belong to the covenant community. He didn't have the sign of the covenant. He was the outsider. Someone, then, who probably did not worship the Lord.

Yet, the alien was the under the protection of the law. He received the same rights as the Israelite. He enjoyed the same protection as a covenant member. And so for example, the Sabbath commandment also applied to the alien. He too was given a day to rest from his labor.

And as a vulnerable member of society, like the widow and the orphan, the alien was to be cared for by the community. The passage we

read from Deuteronomy speaks about providing him food and clothes. Now we can understand why the widow and the orphan would need help, but why the alien? Why would he end up being among the poor? Because as an alien, he would have been separated from the rest of his people, who lived in a different land. He would not have access to land, as that was given to God's people. And in the days of the OT, if you didn't have land, you were poor. And so, the alien needed help.

It's interesting to note why God's people should help the alien. It's because they too were once aliens. Deut 10:19 puts it very clearly: "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt." Just as we, who were immigrants or children of immigrants should be able to sympathize with those who want to make a new start in Canada. We know what they are going through.

Now, there is a danger posed by the alien. The OT was also clear on that, as well. The alien often brought with him the worship of other gods and pagan ways of doing things. But this tended to be the case when the alien was part of a larger community, all made up of foreigners. That's the danger posed in the books of Judges, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Intermarriage posed a particular spiritual threat. And so, God's people were warned against such practices.

There are those today, who are concerned about the danger posed by today's immigrants. Some are worried about the economic burden they are placing upon our educational and health care systems. This is a legitimate concern. Others argue that, despite that burden, immigrants actually add to the economy because they tend to be hard working and willing to do jobs North Americans aren't willing to do anymore.

Besides the economic concern, others are concerned about the spiritual danger recent immigration represents. But in the US, that really shouldn't be the case, since nearly most Hispanics are either Catholic or evangelical Protestant, bringing a religious vitality that strengthens both groups. In Canada, the situation is different. With our recent immigration patterns, we have seen an increase in Muslim, Sikh and other religious communities. The mission field is, now, at our doorstep.

The OT, aware of the danger posed by the alien, still calls for God's people to protect and care for the alien. The classic story of an alien, brought into the covenant community, is the story of Ruth. She ends up in the genealogy of Jesus.

When we come to the NT, we see Jesus as a refugee, faced to flee to Egypt from the threat posed by Herod. We see Jesus reaching out to the outcast of society. We hear Jesus tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan,

challenging us to become a neighbor to others. And so the themes of the OT continue into the NT.

But we also reminded in the NT about respecting the lawful authorities. Romans 13 teaches us to respect the law. The government has been given authority to protect its border, to establish immigration laws, and to enforce it. While Christians can push to change laws, they feel are unjust and unworkable, they cannot take matters into their own hands. At the same time, we still have a duty to care for those who find themselves in our midst, whether legally or illegally.

As I read this report, I found myself to be personally challenged in my thinking about immigrant issues. I sympathize with those in Europe who feel threatened by the increasing radical Muslim communities living in their midst. I sympathize with those in the US, who feel their country is run over by illegal immigrants. I see the diverse neighborhoods of Ottawa and wonder what will hold us together as a nation.

But in this report, I was reminded of the compassion we are called to show to the stranger in our midst. My parents uprooted themselves from one country to come to this land and so I should be able to sympathize with those who want to do the same. Thankfully, Canada can still be seen as a land of opportunity and freedom in the world, a place where others want to be.

On many aspects of immigration, Christians can legitimately disagree. How many immigrants? Where should they come from? What skills should they have? How do we make the refugee system work better? When Christians can legitimately disagree, the church as an Institution should be careful to respect that freedom of disagreement. The church needs to respect the government's power and authority to establish policies on immigration, to defend the border, and to look after the interests of its citizens.

But when the church sees the government abuse the basic human rights of anyone—citizen or illegal immigrant, then she should speak up, as we do in defending the rights of the unborn. When the church sees employers using migrants, whether legal or illegal, as virtual slaves, then the church should speak out. And when people come to church ministries, like food banks, shelters, and other means of assistance, we shouldn't treat illegals any differently than others in need.

“(The Lord) loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens.” Applying these biblical words to our modern setting is not easy. But however challenging it may be, it is part of our Christian calling to become neighbor to those living in our midst. Amen.