

And Who Do We Say We Are?

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Leviticus 19:33-34; 1 Peter 1:3-9

There is a place where the border between the US and Mexico runs into the Pacific Ocean, dissolving into the water like a line drawn in the sand. It is called La Plaza de Paz – Peace Park. I stood on the Mexico side of that border when I took part in an immersion experience organized by Centro Romero, a United Church of Christ center for education and social transformation located in San Ysidro, California. You can see Tijuana from the front steps of the Center. We watched as families gathered on the beach to picnic and visit with each other. Family members were gathered on both sides of the barrier erected along the border. I watched as a baby was passed through a hole in the wall literally from one country to the other. Food was exchanged. Hands were held across the border. Lives were shared. The US Border Patrol kept their distance.

The area on the US side of the border at this place is called “Friendship Park.”

That was five years ago. When I visited again two years later, a barbed wire fence had been built on the US side 100 yards back from the actual border, a fence that prevented families from contact with each other. Friendship Park was no longer so friendly, nor was it accessible. Last fall when I was there at the same spot, I saw that additional fences on the US side had been erected - pushing people even further back from the border. The Border Patrol was actively monitoring the area from the ground and from the air. It broke my heart as I stood there, wondering why. What are we afraid of? Family picnics?

I don't think there is any other issue that we are currently dealing with in the US that causes us to be as schizophrenic and inconsistent as immigration. Policy is generated by fear, hatred, racism and xenophobia. Laws are enacted based on protectionism and a false sense of identity. Businesses often remain mute because of their reliance on cheap labor to make a profit. Politicians test the winds of public opinion rather than the moral center of their souls. Those who have come to this country and have jumped through all the legal hoops to become citizens are targeted by narrow minded protectionists, especially if they are people of color, or come from a predominantly Muslim country. Even President Obama has had to suffer repeated questions about his birth certificate – again!

Nothing pushes us more into the question of deciding just who we are, and who we say we are, than the complexity of immigration.

As people of faith, we are caught and confused, too, says Roman Catholic priest Daniel Groody. We are caught weighing the relative values of national security with those around human insecurity. We are confused about national sovereign rights and human rights. We are conflicted about citizenship and discipleship. In this season of Eastertide, when death has been overcome by resurrection and new life, when crusty, old, grungy despair has been replaced by fresh hope, and when – at least in my part of the

world – the grass is finally green again and not covered with snow, who is it we say we are? People of the resurrection? Believers who see a new horizon of possibility? Or Doubting Thomases who demand an explanation and who want to see proof?

Immigration. The rights of immigrants. Of human beings without government issued documents of identity. Of so-called “illegal aliens.” Of immigrants who have citizenship yet who are brown or black or don’t speak English. Of children born in the US of parents who do not have the appropriate papers. What about the educational opportunities for children raised in this country since their early years yet who do not have those papers? Who do we say we are in relationship to our brothers and sisters, and to the families who have to gaze through border walls and fences to glimpse their kinfolk?

I don’t often turn to Leviticus as a source of inspiration, but what we heard this morning is one of the clearest statements in the Bible about extravagant welcome. Listen again:

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 a 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.

When we hear the term “illegal alien” being used to describe our brothers and sisters, what should we do? Is this loving them as ourselves? Is this making them citizens among us, with the same rights we enjoy as citizens? Have we really gone beyond the “us and them” view of the world?

Those are rhetorical questions, but they are also the ones we need to ask ourselves because we, too, as altruistic, good-hearted, kind and resurrected as we believe ourselves to be, as much as we are and want to be all that - each of us must dig deep inside to truly make space in our hearts for all of God’s people. If we are being honest, isn’t this the case?

Take our extravagant welcome. We in the UCC tend to go to the default understanding of this welcome and think about how we have opened the doors of our hearts and churches to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities, how we have become Open and Affirming in so many ways. This is all good and to be celebrated, but we have to acknowledge that sometimes we are more challenged when we seek to be extravagantly welcoming of people from different races, countries, cultures and socio-economic strata than where most of us come from in our predominantly Euro-American, older and middle class denomination. We are challenged by diverse theological perspectives and biblical interpretations, and by different opinions about the state of the world, even, sometimes, by how communion is conducted, or which translation of the Bible is used.

But God’s extravagant welcome is not limited. It is not defined just by sexual orientation or gender identity. God’s extravagant welcome is for all because the holy

memory God holds before us reminds us that in some way, every single one of us bears the legacy or the reality of having been aliens in another land. That “land” may have been another nation state, or it may have been a state of mind with a set of assumptions about who or what is normal, normative, acceptable, desirable, and right.

I gained a different sense of this four years ago when my then 90 year old mother, my niece and I traveled to Germany, the land of my mother’s ancestors. On our first morning there, while having breakfast in our hotel in Frankfurt, a woman approached our table and said to us, “Oh good, you’re American. I thought when I first saw you sitting here, ‘What a nice group of German ladies!’”, and then I heard you speaking.” She was looking for directions to some place but given that we had just arrived and had our own noses buried in the guide book, all we could do was offer her a look at the book.

During the next 10 days, I became increasingly aware of – almost to the point of discomfort - looking so much like the vast majority of people around us. And not just looking like them – realizing how much behaviorally we were similar. My mother’s mother was born in Berlin before the turn of the last century to German parents who had immigrated to and settled in Canada but were in Germany for business when my grandmother was born. My mother’s father was born in what became East Germany. He eventually left Germany for Regina, Saskatchewan, where he met my grandmother among the large community of German émigrés there. They married and moved to New York City where my mother was born.

I indeed could have been a nice German lady sitting at that breakfast table.

My family history is a story not unlike many of us in the US – a particular story of immigration that became either the Mayflower or Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island version for many coming to this country from Europe. Assimilated within a generation and relatively successful, in control of defining who and what was normal, normative, acceptable, desirable, and right. Not only were we in denial about many other parts of our country’s history – the genocide of the first peoples who lived here before our ships arrived, the legacy of the institution of slavery, the fluctuating border between Mexico and the US which was settled to where it now exists by those with the biggest guns – but we, the European Americans, controlled the story line of this country.

We forgot the holy memory of God, of once having been strangers in a strange land. We forgot that the reasons we had for leaving our homelands to come to these shores were often the same reasons people now seek to come to this country – to flee poverty or war, lack of opportunity, famine – or even for the sheer adventure of it all.

We cannot be God’s people - and people of the resurrection - if we think we have a grasp on what or who is normal, normative, acceptable, desirable and right. The continuing testament of our Stillspeaking God pushes us out of our comfort zones and into a place of actually listening to and learning from each other’s stories. The life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ is for us, as Christians, the good news that God is not done with us yet. And never will be.

When policy and laws are discussed and debated about the rights of immigrants, we as people of faith must bring to that conversation this holy memory of who – and whose – we are. When our sisters and brothers are dehumanized by politicians or public officials or the unspoken assumptions of our neighbors, we must be the ones to lift up their humanity and the common bonds between us. We must be the ones to force the conversation deeper, into a consideration of what national security needs are really about, and how are they best achieved.

We must be the ones, for example, to wonder out loud – what would it be like to use all those billions of dollars being spent on building a border wall that keep people out of this country (which, ironically, also keeps people in this country), and to arm the Border Patrol like the military – what would it be like to invest those dollars in economic development initiatives in the towns and villages from which people come, to help make them vibrant communities capable of sustaining themselves? We should be the ones who lift up the reasons why people are leaving home and work to seek humane, just and fair solutions to those problems and to promote the possibility of a “civilization of love” – as Pope Paul VI called it - and of justice.

Daniel Groody concludes his article by saying, “From a Christian perspective, the true aliens are not those who lack political documentation but those who have so disconnected themselves from their neighbor in need that they fail to see in the eyes of the stranger a mirror of themselves, the image of Christ, and the call to human solidarity.”

And who do we say that we are? I hope that part of the answer to that is, “I don’t know. I’m still figuring it out.” We should never be people who know it all, for everyone and for all time.

And I also hope part of the answer to that is – “I know who I am. I am a child of God.”

May God’s holy memory be your own. Amen.