

“Foreigners In Our Midst”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on July 8th, 2007

*Thousands of feet below you
there is a small boy...*

These are the first lines of a poem by Alice Walker. She says she wrote the poem as a kind of “healing balm” after she learned that at the time we waged war with Afghanistan, it was a country with 700,000 disabled orphans. And when we began bombing Iraq, half the population was under the age of 15. Stunned that we were dropping bombs on countries with so many disabled orphans and teenagers, Walker was compelled to write.

Walker describes growing up in the south, in deep Georgia, in a small town with incredible hospitality. As a kid she never imagined there was any place where someone could go and not get fed and be welcomed with friendliness and generosity and a glass of lemonade. And it made her think of all the African American young men and woman from the south, from places like rural Georgia and Tennessee and Alabama and Oklahoma who are now caught fighting with people who, in other circumstances, they’d greet with hospitality. She wanted to create a poem that would be like a healing balm for the men, the bombardiers who have murdered people they would have otherwise fed. So that when they come home, they’ll be able to remember and rediscover where they come from, who they are, and who we are. The poem is titled: "Thousands of Feet Below You"

Thousands of feet
Below you
There is a small
Boy
Running from
Your bombs.

If he were
To show up
To your mother's
House
On a green
Sea island
Off the coast
Of Georgia
He'd be invited in
For dinner.

Now, driven,
You have shattered
His bones.
He lies steaming
In the desert
In fifty or sixty
Or maybe one hundred
Oily, slimy bits.

If you survive & return
To your island
Home,
& your mother's
Gracious Table
Where the cup
Of lovingkindness
Overflows
The brim
(& From which
No one
In memory
Was ever
Turned)

Gather yourself.
Set a place
For him.

It is not only war that can make us forget who we are and where we came from. In the wake of recent rhetoric about immigration in this country, I realize that many Americans have forgotten who they are and where they came from. I find it especially ironic that many politicians and citizens in Oklahoma are attempting to make this state's anti-immigration laws the toughest in the nation. Do we not refer to ourselves as "the Sooner state?" We glorify our Boomer and Sooner pasts. And, of course, who are the Boomers and Sooners but people who *illegally* crossed the border into Oklahoma Territory when it was unauthorized and unlawful to do so. So now, the state that venerates its own history of illegal entry, with great pride, is trying to become the state that is least hospitable to unauthorized immigrants.

It's easy to forget who we are and where we come from. Oklahoma also prides itself on being a Bible belt state. And our politicians regularly flout their Christian credentials. Yet, when we look at the Bible we find dozens upon dozens of examples of God commanding believers to treat aliens and foreigners who live among them well. These aren't esoteric or particularly complicated passages, either.

For example, in the book of Deuteronomy, 10:17-19 it says: *For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.*

And in Leviticus 19:33-34, we read: *When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.*

And in the Gospel of Matthew, verse 25 in the Christian scriptures, when Jesus said that when he was a stranger, we invited Him in – the word *stranger* there is the Greek word "xenos." It literally means a *foreigner* – an *alien* – an *immigrant*. And when the people ask, "When was it that we did that?" he replies: *I tell you the truth. Whatever you did for the least of these brothers or sisters, you did for me.*

Not only does the Bible instruct people explicitly and in plain language to be hospitable to strangers and aliens, but besides that, the Bible's prophets and heroes such as Abraham and Sarah were immigrants themselves, who journeyed to foreign lands and became resident aliens. Joseph, the son of Jacob, in the Bible was a detained alien in Egypt who eventually gained legal status, and through working there he was ultimately able to feed his family back home, and in due course he brought his family to become residence of Egypt with him.

Moses was also a resident alien from the time of his birth. Then Moses spent his adult life leading his people on an immigrant's journey across the desert to a new land of promise and hope. And, when we look at Jesus' genealogy we find Ruth the Moabite, Bathsheba the Hittite, and Tamar and Rahab the Cannanites – all aliens who are part of Jesus' family tree. Not only that, but as soon as Jesus was born, he quickly became a political refugee along with Mary and Joseph. They were forced to flee their homeland and seek asylum to avoid persecution by Herod.

Yet, Jesus never forgot where he came from. He spent his life and ministry preaching a message of radical hospitality to the outcasts, the poor and those who were despised and rejected by his culture. Yet, somehow, the politicians and so many of the citizens of this state who claim to be followers of Jesus and who declare devotion to the Bible have lost touch with who they are and where in spirit they come from.

Those who immigrate to the US today, even those coming illegally, are human beings. They are fathers and mothers and children. But you wouldn't know that listening to the AM talk-radio stations, and the people who like to wave the "family values" flag! Much like the heroes and heroines of the Bible and much like many of our ancestors, those who come to this country are often people seeking political asylum or a way out of a desperate situation. But their humanness is lost when we label them "illegals" and "aliens." Suddenly they are no longer mothers and fathers and children – they become "those illegals!" It's important that we remember the humanity of those we are talking about, those we are locking up, blocking out or even those we are bombing.

Here's a story, from a couple of years ago, about real people. Fifteen-year-old Jesus Dominguez was upset when his mom decided to go to the US. Like many teenagers, Jesus did not want to leave his friends. But being the "man of the house," he couldn't let his mother and seven-year-old sister Nora walk alone, so he went. As reporter Claudine LoMonaco wrote in the Tucson Citizen newspaper last July:

"I wanted to stay home," Jesus said, home being the village of San Martin Sombroterete in Zacatecas. But Jesus' father worked in Texas, and it was hoped the family could reunite. When Lucrecia Dominguez became ill on the third day of the journey, the group of village friends they were traveling with continued on with Nora. Jesus stayed behind to be with his mother.

"She kept begging me to go on without her, but I couldn't leave her," Jesus said. When his mother lost consciousness, Jesus set off alone to find emergency help. Three days later, Border Patrol agents found him, lost and disoriented, in the desert.

Vivian Pettyjohn wrote about Jesus's story for *ePluribus Media*:

"Although Jesus was dehydrated, in shock, suffering from heat exhaustion and terrified about his mother's status, the agents just gave him a little water and then left him at the federal line in Nogales, a practice known as "expedited removal. Once there, Jesus placed a frantic call to his grandfather for help."

Pettyjohn contrasts this story with that of 23-year-olds Daniel Strauss and Shanti Sells who, during the same month, she writes:

"Woke up in their camp on the dark desert floor in another part of the Sonoran desert, and prepared to face the dawn of a blistering July day. They conferred with another team in their open desert campsite and double-checked the communication equipment that linked them to a network of volunteer medical professionals. These teams work for No More Deaths, one of several humanitarian organizations committed to ending the suffering in the Sonoran desert.

"Strauss and Sells spent the entire day hiking in 115-degree heat through dry washes and trails in search of people who were sick, injured, lost, or dying of starvation, thirst or heat exposure – people like Jesus and his mom. When the teams find them, they call the emergency medical provider for instructions on how to proceed for treatment. This particular Saturday, Strauss and Sellz found a group of 3 migrants who were suffering from drinking stagnant cow tank water. Migrants who are literally dying of thirst often drink from cow ponds as they get desperate, and ingesting water contaminated with bacteria and cow dung causes severe vomiting and diarrhea that can be fatal. The on-call doctor instructed Strauss and Sells to take the vomiting migrant to St. Mary's emergency room.

"They were arrested en route by the Border Patrol, charged with transport of illegal aliens, and now face a 15-year sentence in federal prison. Local Arizona medical professionals and international humanitarian aid organizations expressed outrage that humanitarian aid workers were criminally charged for providing life saving help. 'Most kids their age spent the summer poolside or at the mall. Daniel and Shanti spent their summer saving lives. Daniel and Shanti are not criminals, they're heroes,' said Lea Hutchens, a local ER nurse."

Organizations such as Amnesty International issued statements supporting the couple's work on the border and calling for the dismissal of all criminal charges. This past October after 15 months of fighting the charges, a judge in Arizona District court acquitted them.

These stories beg the question of what drives people to take such drastic actions. What propels people to risk their lives in search of a better future? And what compels others to devote themselves to humanitarian efforts to rescue strangers in need? We must keep in mind that many of the people who flee South America across the desert are led to believe it is a much less dangerous trek. There are people, known as coyotes, who actually profit from leading South American immigrants across the desert. Many of them are unscrupulous, and take advantage of these poor folks. They make promises about the length of the trip (often saying it can be done in 1 day) and tell of water stations and supplies that never materialize.

Hundreds of people have been dying each year caught in the desert unprepared. But more than that, most of these people are not putting themselves and their children at risk just in hopes of making a little extra money. Usually the motivation to leave everything and risk everything comes out of desperation.

A Sunday sermon is obviously not the forum to go into all the economic and social factors that cause people to immigrate illegally into the US, but let me just say that there is a lot more that our country can do to alleviate the need for illegal immigration, besides building fences and arming border patrols and arresting humanitarians.

The need for a more sensible and humane immigration policy in this country should come from an understanding that: "no one should receive the benefits of the global economy without also taking responsibility for the global community." No one deserves to go hungry or to endure inhumane living conditions just because they were born on the wrong side of the boundaries that make up, what is by all accounts, an unjust world order. And since this country has an insatiable desire for inexpensive labor, it is not right to force people to live in the shadows of our culture so that we can maintain this system.

The fact is, many immigrant families in America and Oklahoma live in constant jeopardy and fear. Many immigrant workers are being exploited. And our economy needs them, but we still don't have an adequate way of managing immigration. A need for inexpensive labor combined with no system to procure it legally, keeps people living in the shadows of our society and it's a recipe for oppression and injustice.

Of course, it's easier to point our fingers at these mostly hard working people and their children, than it is to address the larger issues of globalization, multi-national corporatization and

outsourcing of jobs. Huge issues like globalization and outsourcing are quite abstract for most Americans, so undocumented workers have become the scapegoats that fuel outrage among many Americans who are feeling financially vulnerable. And pointing at undocumented workers gives politicians easy cover for their lack of adequate economic and social policies. There is no way that we're going to ever send back the 12 million undocumented workers who live in the US today, so we need to find ways to allow them to come out of the shadows. And creating laws that intimidate these people, and those who would help them, is certainly not the answer.

As a church, we are called to advocate for those who live in the margins of society. We are called to treat every human being with respect and dignity. Without a doubt, creating humane immigration policies for the US is not simple. It will require politicians with real courage and integrity. And it will require an American public who can remember who they are.

America is a justice centered and humane nation. Although Langston Hughes reminds us in his poem, that: "America never was America to [him.]" European ancestors on this land came seeking a better life for themselves, escaping persecution or following a dream. America has come to be that for many, but not for the Native Indians who were already here, and not for the African slaves nor the immigrants and workers who were exploited. Hughes' poem goes on:

*O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath-- America will be!*

*Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,*

*We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.*

*The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!*

Our job is to remember who we are and what America is and has been. And then to make America, America again. Let ours be a church that remembers who we are. That makes hospitality central. Too often religious institutions have been inhospitable. They were to Galileo, to Wagner and even to Jesus. Remember, Jesus' religious community rejected him too! Today religious institutions are still too often inhospitable especially to gay and lesbian people.

Our job is to proclaim that all are children of God. All deserve to be treated with dignity. May we welcome the stranger. May we be a place that offers courage to those who are crossing frontiers in their own lives, and a place where we can come to remember who we are.

As we think of the undocumented persons living in the shadows, the people feeling alone in their religious doubts, those who feel rejected by the church and their families, those who are returning from war... As we gather ourselves, let us remember – let us *always* remember – to set a place for them!

Amen.