

March 8, 2020

Matthew 2:13-15

I am well aware of the controversy we face, if we want to live into being an immigrant welcoming congregation. Do we really open the doors wide and let any and all into our country? If not, who are we to let in? How do we decide? And presently there are laws about this, which means some people are in our country illegally; illegal because of how they arrived or stayed breaks a law. Are we to welcome both legal and illegal immigrants?

As people of faith, the place to begin for guidance around an issue like whether or not to be immigrant welcoming is the Bible. What does the Bible say about welcoming immigrants?

One truth to recognize is that both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures do not deal with the question of legality. While there were different countries, there was really no official border crossing. People knew where other people were from, but the idea of an illegal immigrant is a non-starter. There were just “strangers” or “immigrants” or “aliens” among the population.

The Bible does have a lot to say about strangers and how we are to treat them. Abraham warmly welcomed three strangers, fed them royally, and housed them, only to learn they were God’s messengers, bringing good news of a future off-spring. In Hebrew Scriptures Israel is told to welcome and care for the immigrant, as in Leviticus: “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 the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” (19:33-34)

In the Christian Scriptures we find much of the same. The writer of Hebrews said: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The Bible story that is often lifted up by immigrant welcoming congregations is the Escape to Egypt story in Matthew’s Gospel. Had Mary, Joseph, and Jesus met the same kind of welcome at the Egyptian border that families fleeing violence meet at our southern border, we would not be talking about Jesus today.

From what some theologians speculate about the Escape to Egypt story, sadly we learn how some things about human society never change. One German Jewish New Testament scholar, Pinchas Lapide, has speculated that Joseph and Mary landed in Bethlehem, because they were fleeing persecution in Galilee. We know Galilee was a hotbed of zealots; those seeking to militarily push Rome out of Judea. Dr. Lapide speculates that Joseph was at least a zealot sympathizer, who left Galilee for fear of violence against him by the Roman occupying force. Lapide comes to this conclusion based on the very Jewish names of Jesus’ brothers. The point is, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are on the run, and seeking refuge, from the state-sponsored violence in Galilee and Judea.

We know that many of the refugees at our southern border have left the land they love, because the violence – state-sponsored or otherwise – has put them and, more importantly, their children in danger. So they flee, escaping, they hope, to the United States. Looking for a better life? Maybe. Looking for a violence-free life, especially for their children? Certainly. Congregations asking “how many

Jesuses have we separated from Marys at the border” are asking a legitimate question.

There are, however, “economic immigrants”; immigrants who come just to work, which some believe takes jobs away from other US citizens. This is a complicated issue, but one we must wrestle with. For many people work is not available in their own country, because the economy is so terrible. We, in the US, have been quick to point a finger at Latin American countries, for example, whose economies are in shambles. We accuse their government leaders of being backward or unscrupulous. Too often we are unprepared to see our own government’s intervention in these countries’ affairs as the cause of the present-day chaos.

Suketu Mehta begins his book, This Land Is Our Land: An Immigrant’s Manifesto, with this very telling story:

One day in the 1980s, my maternal grandfather was sitting in a park in suburban London. An elderly British man came up to him and wagged a finger in his face. “Why are you here?” the man demanded. “Why are you in my country?”

“Because we are the creditors,” responded my grandfather, who was born in India, worked all his life in colonial Kenya, and was now retired in London. “You took all our wealth, our diamonds. Now we have come to collect.” We are here, my grandfather was saying, because you were there.”

I will not lay out the history of our country’s involvement in the internal affairs of other countries – both positive and negative, but it is important to recognize that much of the chaos at our southern border is a direct result of our long history of involvement in Central and South American

countries’ political and economic affairs. The USA has always put the interests of our multi-national corporations above the interests of the peoples in other countries. From a Christian and justice perspective, do we not have an obligation to help, rather than vilify, those who have been so harshly treated by our government’s policies?

It is not my job or Amiable Church’s job to come up with a comprehensive immigration policy, but it is our job to welcome, warmly and unconditionally, all God’s children. This includes immigrants, legal and illegal. After all, how can a human being be “illegal”?

If, in time, Amicable Church chooses to be an Immigrant Welcoming congregation of the UCC, this will happen because we have decided to reach out and in love offer a helping hand to those at the border fleeing violence, as Joseph, Mary, and Jesus found themselves, as well as reaching out to the immigrants living among us, as God in Leviticus commands us.

We can begin this process of living into an immigrant welcoming just peace life by intentionally seeking to be in relationship with the immigrants living among us. Taking time to wonder about them, to learn their stories, to hear why they are here and not in the homeland they love. Our taking time to wonder, to listen, has the potential not only to make those strangers in a strange land feel welcomed, but it will change us.

All of us have borders that need to be opened, if we are to grow into the beloved community God desires for all creation. May God give us wondering minds, listening ears, and loving hearts as we seek to welcome the immigrants in our midst. Amen.