

Tom Coop
Matthew 25:31-40
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Philoxenia

In 1938, a Polish Jew, Zindel Grynszpan, was roused from his home by Nazi police, dispossessed of everything, driven across the German border and incarcerated in the stable of a military camp.

One of 12,000 Jews beaten and deported, he managed to let his son Paris know what had happened.

The angry son took a gun to the German embassy. Planning to shoot the ambassador, he ended up shooting a diplomat named Ernst von Rath instead.

Now in the meantime, Adolf Hitler was upset with the passivity of the German people.

He felt he needed a crisis to wake people up and a Jew shooting a German diplomat provided just that crisis.

Joseph Goebels, Nazi propaganda chief, arranged anti-Jewish demonstrations to be held all over the nation. On November 9th, the following order was sent to all police stations:

“At very short notice, actions against Jews, especially against their synagogues, will take place through the whole of Germany.

“They are not to be hindered. Preparations are to be made to arrest 20-30,000 Jews - wealthy Jews in particular.”

That night riots inflamed Germany. So many windows were shattered that the night became known as “Kristallnacht”, the night of shattering glass.

76 synagogues were destroyed; another 200 set afire; thousands of homes and shops were burned down. 20,000 Jews were arrested.

And Adolf Hitler had both his crisis and his scapegoat. Onto the Jews, he heaped all blame for Germany’s economic problems.

People accepted that, and we all know of the holocaust that followed.

Today it is refugees and immigrants in our world who are the scapegoats blamed for economic and social problems everywhere.

There are 65 million refugees throughout the world. They are mostly fleeing war and famine, with as many as 65% of them children.

In addition, there are millions of immigrants simply seeking a better life in a different country. And both refugees and immigrants face hostility in many, many places.

Here in the United States we continue our conflicting tradition of hospitality and hostility toward the stranger.

As Benjamin Franklin noted, “America has hailed newcomers to its shores as the bulwark of democracy; however, in times of crisis, it has also used the foreign born as a scapegoat for unsolved social problems.”

For the first hundred years, the United States welcomed immigrants with open arms.

In 1819, Congress encouraged immigration by setting standards for passenger ships to make the voyage to America more comfortable.

Only after the frontier was settled in the late 1800's did limits on immigration begin.

Ironically, just as the Statue of Liberty in 1886 began welcoming immigrants into New York's harbor, the United States began turning them away.

The first immigration limits applied to types of people; not numbers.

In 1875 Congress said "no" to immigration for convicts and prostitutes. In 1882, pressures of racism led to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Even as playwright, Israel Zangwill in 1908 coined the phrase, "Melting Pot", Congress kept adding to the excluded list: paupers, polygamists, epileptics and the mentally ill.

In a Time survey, most Americans today think immigration was a good thing in our nation's past—it helped make us what we are. But, 60% of the people in that survey said immigration is a bad thing now.

In the Bible, the word hospitality in the Greek is *philoxenia*. Philo meaning love, xenia stranger, love of the stranger. That's hospitality.

Hospitality in the Bible is less about entertaining friends and more about welcoming outsiders and making room at the table for those who haven't belonged before. An enemy to *philoxenia* is *xenophobia*, a fear of the stranger.

In the Old Testament, we read of God leading the Israelites out of exile.

When God finally brings these immigrant people to their promised land, he gives them all kinds of instructions of how they're to behave, how they're to worship, how they're to set up their society, how they're to organize and especially how to care for strangers in the land.

There are three key things that I think summarize these instructions on strangers.

The **first point** about how to care for strangers in the land is to love and like them.

In Deuteronomy 10:18, it states, "God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow. He loves the immigrant and he loves the alien and you are to love the immigrant and the alien, too."

And then God says, "Love them, because you were once an alien in Egypt."

Then in Leviticus 19:34: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born."

Get that? Must be treated the same as a native-born person. Love him as yourself. Sounds like the golden rule, doesn't it? Love your neighbor as yourself. Love and like outsiders.

The **second point** gives justice to outsiders. In Deuteronomy 24, God says, "Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice."

Immigrants and refugees are not exactly in the strongest position to advocate for laws for themselves.

Their focus is on survival, not on advocacy or law change. This means that our job is to advocate. Our job is to speak up. Our job is to make sure that the alien is not deprived of justice.

This falls on us. In fact, God goes so far in Deuteronomy 27:19 as to say, “Cursed is the man, cursed is the person who withholds justice from the alien.”

Third, we care for strangers in the land by providing them food. By providing basic needs.

Leviticus 23:22 talks about when you reap your harvest, don't reap to the very edges of your field. Leave some gleanings around the edges of your harvest so that the poor and the immigrant and the alien can come in and get food.

In ancient Israel, it was clear that the wealth they had was God's wealth meant to be shared with poor strangers, immigrants, migrants in their midst.

Now, think about it. Can you imagine a large corporate American farm inviting immigrants from Mexico to share in the harvest?

Or Nordstrom's holding back a portion of their fall collection to give to recent immigrants from Haiti?

This biblical stuff is challenging, not easy. And it often doesn't mesh with our affluent 21st century lifestyle.

The Biblical mandate, certainly out of ancient Israel is clear. Accept and even more than accept, care for foreigners in your midst.

And then, of course, there's Jesus himself. Jesus saw no difference between people: Greeks, Romans, Samaritans, it didn't matter.

Now, think about Jesus, the immigrant refugee child.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, fleeing from political violence like so many refugees have done before and so many refugees do today.

They crossed borders without travel documents. They sought safety. They sought sanctuary.

But get this: They were never stopped at a checkpoint. They didn't have to prove by the scars on their backs that they were indeed real political refugees.

No, they simply crossed the border and found sanctuary in a foreign land.

And when they finally arrive in Egypt, although they are strangers, someone must have taken them in.

Someone must have welcomed them and helped them. I mean, Bible scholars believe Jesus was in Egypt for around three years or so.

Don't you wish we knew the name of the person who first welcomed Joseph and Mary and Jesus?

Then, I wonder if when Joseph, who was a carpenter, when he started looking for work, I wonder if the other carpenters said things like,

“Here comes that foreigner. He’s going to take away a job from one of our own Egyptians.”

Or “Here’s Mary and that baby, I wonder if this woman and child are going to burden our welfare system. That family, they just do things differently.”

It makes you wonder why it is that we struggle so much with questions like these.

And then we have our text from Matthew 25, where we are told we will be judged, not by our church attendance, nightly prayers, or daily bible reading...

... but whether or not we fed the hungry, and gave water to the thirsty, and welcomed the stranger, and clothed the naked, and cared for the sick, and visited the prisoner.

When you find yourself doing something for an immigrant, feeding a hungry person, visiting a sick person, practicing hospitality, you are showing that you belong to Jesus.

And Jesus lists activities that are accessible to everyone in the world.

You don’t need special training to feed someone who is hungry. You don’t need a seminary degree on your wall or a year of leadership training to feed a hungry person.

All you need to do is give your lunch away.

That's pretty simple. You've got a lunch, you see someone who is hungry, and you give them your lunch. No training class in the church is required.

You don't need to be a millionaire or get a grant to go into McDonald's and purchase a couple of burgers for a man who is standing on the street corner, hungry.

You don't need amazing spiritual gifts to sit with someone in a hospital room who is sick.

Anyone of any age can visit with an elderly relative in a nursing home. You can be a three-year old and visit your great-grandmother.

You don't need a Ph.D. to visit a prisoner.

One day we are going to stand before Jesus our Judge and we will have to give account for the grace we claim was at work in our lives.

At that time Jesus will ask for evidence of his grace.

All this is helpful to know, but as Christians the primary reason we are to love immigrants is not just because we fear being judged.

As people of God, we love because he first loved us. As people of God we love because of philoxenia.

We love because God tells us, "Make room at your table for the outsider."

And remember, as people who affirm human compassion, advocate for human rights, and seek justice, we must never make the mistake of confusing a legal right with a moral right.

The forced removal of Native Americans from their land and onto reservations was legal.

The importation and sale of African slaves was legal. South African apartheid was legal.

The confiscation of the property of Jews at the beginning of the Nazi regime was legal.

The Spanish Inquisition was legal. Crucifying Jesus was legal.

The fact that something is legal does not cut much ethical ice. The powerful have always used the legal system to oppress the powerless.

It is true that as citizens we should respect the rule of law. More importantly, though, our duty is to create laws founded on our highest sense of justice, equity, and compassion.

Loud voices urge us to choose fear, denial, reactionary nationalism, and racism. We must resist and choose the better way.

We must choose the path of compassion and hope. We must choose a path that is founded on the recognition that we are connected, that we are all in this together.

All that being said, I'll be the first to admit that I do not have all the policy answers on immigration or the related issues of public education, health care, and the economy.

But, I do know this: Breaking up poor working families who have lived among us for years does not feel like justice, equity, and compassion in action.

Refusing minimal health services to young children does not feel like the way we should treat members of our human family.

Having our police forces profile brown people does not feel like breaking down the walls of tribalism.

Creating a huge wall, complete with barbed wire, across hundreds of miles of border does not feel neighborly.

There must be a better way, and you and I must help build it. Barbed wire is not the answer.

More border guards and more deportations are not the answer. Paranoia and panic will solve nothing.

We must remember that we all come from immigrant stock, every single one of us living on this continent. Even Native Americans at one time immigrated here from Asia.

We need not be afraid of that multicultural society. Fear leads to violence and repression.

Instead, let us embrace the possibilities before us. Let us be guided by love and hope.

In a day of scapegoating, of fear, of what to me is clearly racist immigrant bashing, I think we need a bigger vision and deeper hope.

We must defy logic and realism in order to declare ourselves a haven for economic and political refugees alike.

Remember that symbolic imagery of Jesus that on a final day, God will ask each of us: when I was hungry did you feed me, when I was thirsty did you give me drink, when I was naked did you clothe me, and when I was a stranger did you welcome me.

The spirit of God dwells in each person seeking to cross our border, whether from Mexico or Haiti, from Syria or Vietnam.

Do we dare look upon those strangers and not welcome them? For remember,

“Truly I say to you, just as you did not do to one of the least of these, so you did not do it to me.”

Amen