



“Seeking the Common Good: IMMIGRATION”

Sunday, February 2, 2020

Matthew 25:34-40

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, WI

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Our Seeking the Common Good series continues today, looking at the issue of immigration. Listen for God’s word from Matthew 25.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’



I want to introduce you to Captain Edward Louis Berthoud, a distant relative of mine. He became a little bit famous in Colorado in the mid-19th century, as an explorer and an engineer, working on railroads. There is a town and a mountain pass named for him, although in Colorado they say “BER-thud” while we have kept the French pronunciation, “bear-TOO.”

Edward was an immigrant from Switzerland. He came to the United States at age two.

We have a couple of posterboard displays about Edward at our house, done by our two teenage sons when they were in 9th grade at Memorial High School.

Every year Memorial has an immigration-migration night, when all 9th graders display a report on the ancestry of a family member.

It's fascinating to see the gymnasium filled with posters with stories of journeys to America from all over the world.

That night at Memorial reflects our fundamental reality: Unless someone in this country is 100% Native American, we're all immigrants, or descended from immigrants.

Immigration is a hot-button issue in our country today, but it's not a new issue. Over the history of our nation, at various points immigrants have been welcomed with open arms, and at other points, immigrants have been shunned.

At times of economic downturn or social change, we tend to look for someone to blame, and the immigrants are a common target.

- In the mid 19th century, there was fear of the Irish and of Roman Catholics, and the nativist Know Nothing party emerged.
- Later on in the 1800s, there was fear of the Chinese, which led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.
- In the early 20th century, with turmoil in Europe, there was fear of Russians, Italians, Greeks, among others.
- During WWII, there was fear of Germans and Japanese, which led to internment camps for Japanese Americans.

Of course all through our nation's history there has been fear and mistreatment of African Americans.

Looking back, historians now see how the fears of immigrants in these contexts were exaggerated, often for political gain by elected leaders.

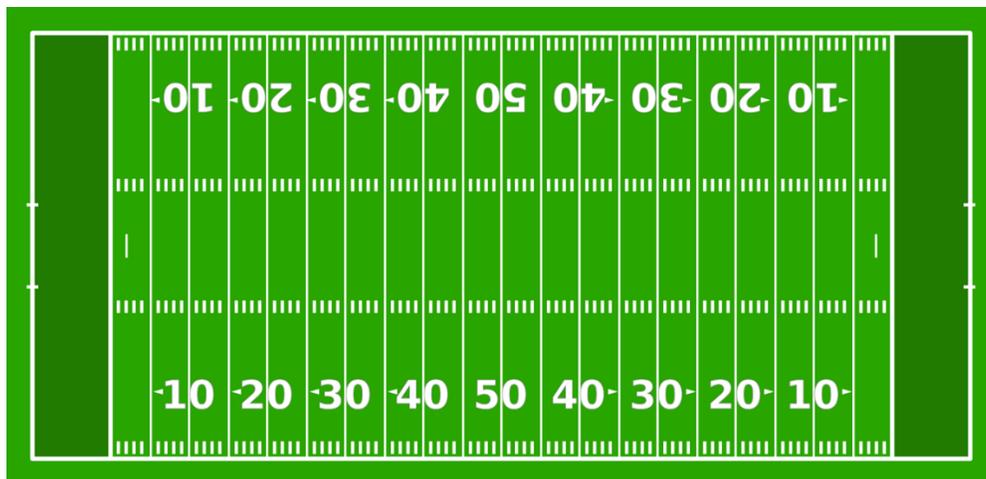
The vast majority of immigrants have been and continue to be good and decent hard-working people. And the vast majority of citizens are eventually grateful for Irish, Chinese, Russian, German, and Japanese immigrants, among others.

In our current era, we are living in a time when many people are led to be afraid of all Muslims, with the implication that “they are all terrorists” and many are led to be afraid of all Mexicans and Central Americans, being led to believe “they are all murderers and rapists and gang members.”

This fear has led to rather drastic policies including wide-ranging travel bans on people from certain countries (with some new bans this very week), and construction of large, expensive engineering projects of questionable effectiveness.

And stoking this fear has encouraged hateful people to do hateful things to immigrants and to anyone who might be perceived as an immigrant, with a surge in hate-crimes in recent years.

It’s important to acknowledge those voices of fear, but the majority of people know that the immigration issue is much bigger.



If we think of various positions on immigration as a football field, we may recognize that we hear a lot from the extremists in the two endzones, but the reality is most people are somewhere in the middle of the field, between the 20 yard lines.

And both sides of midfield have legitimate concerns.

On one side people are concerned about public safety, about not unlimited public resources, and about fairness, waiting in the proverbial line, about the rule of law.

On the other side, people are concerned about human suffering at the hands of gangs and terrorists, along with the tragedy of children being separated from their parents. Just this week, another report about the migrant children separated from their parents being sexually abused.

And people on this side are deeply concerned about prejudice and violence directed toward immigrants.

A recent study from Pew Research reflects a variety of opinions on immigration, but overall, I see general consensus of compassion and safety and common sense:

- 67% Allow most immigrants in country illegally to remain here legally
- 68% Increase security at US-Mexico border
- 73% Take in refugees escaping war and violence

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/12/americans-immigration-policy-priorities-divisions-between-and-within-the-two-parties/>

It seems to me that most people want some sense of fairness, safety, compassion, and common sense with immigration policy.

As you may have seen in our weekly CONNECTIONS email, I visited the Community Immigration Legal Center last month and met with Attorney Aissa Olivarez. They work with immigrants to provide legal representation. The CILC is part of a network called SAFE—Safety and Fairness for Everyone.

When an immigrant has legal representation, they are much more likely to establish a right to remain in the US. This suggests to me that a lot of people who don't have resources are unfairly getting deported.

In cases where someone goes through the process with the CILC and ends up getting deported, the staff is grateful to be able to explain the reasons and the process to the people.

Immigration is a hugely complex topic, with no easy solutions. Every case is different, which makes simplistic answers evasive.

One case which reflects the various forces at play: Betty Rendon, a Lutheran pastor was deported to her native Colombia last year.



Betty had been serving as a part-time Lutheran pastor in Racine. She fled her native Colombia in 2004, where she had been serving as a principal. When she resisted guerrilla efforts to recruit her students, she fled, fearing for her life.

<https://sojo.net/articles/ice-detains-pastor-leaving-wisconsin-community-reeling>

So yes she was in the country illegally, and by the letter of the law could be deported. But she hardly seemed like a threat and was a well-loved member of the community.

That said, we also have to be mindful that Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers have a very hard and dangerous job. The vast majority of immigrants are good and decent people like Betty, but there are violent criminals among the immigrant population.

Some people look at this and think, “Well she was here illegally so she should be deported.” Others would say “She was here for 15 years, working hard and doing good. There was no reason to deport her.”

Immigration is hard.

In the midst of this complicated and divisive issue I think we need to go back to the basics.

How many people have been to the Statue of Liberty?

Set in harbor of New York City in the 1880s, it wasn't there when my ancestor Edward made his journey from Europe. And in the early 20th century the words of Jewish poet Emma Lazarus were added, including these famous words:



*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Those are high and challenging ideals. That vision of freedom has been at the core of our national yearning since day one. We as a nation haven't always lived up to it. But we need to keep trying.

As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote

The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.

Trying to repair our faults is what we do as Christians, with our regular prayers of confession and seeking God's will.

So we need to go back to the basics as well. We need to hear the the unrelenting message of Scripture, to care for widows, orphans, outcasts, and foreigners.

Leviticus 19 reminds God's people of their identity and responsibility:

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: I am the Lord your God.

--Leviticus 19:33-34

Deuteronomy is the sermon Moses gave the people before they entered the promised land. He wanted them to remember where they had come from.

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.... You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

--Deuteronomy 8:12-14 and 10:19

Essentially, he is saying when you're all comfy and cozy, fat and happy in your new land, don't forget that once you were strangers and needed the help of other people.

The New Testament echoes this theme in various places:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it

--Hebrews 13:2

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another.... extend hospitality to strangers.

--Romans 12:9,13

Throughout the gospels Jesus commands his followers to love one another, to love neighbors, to even love enemies. He makes that love very concrete in Matthew 25, saying "I was hungry and you gave me food.... I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

The Greek word for stranger here is XENOS, which we sadly know mostly from the word xenophobia, fear of strangers.

As Christians, we're called to love the strangers and to love one another.

We have a high calling as a nation, to ensure liberty and justice of all.

We have a high calling as Christians, to welcome the stranger, to serve God's Kingdom, to love our neighbors, and to work for the common good.

Let us pray: Dear God thank you for the gift of life, for the gift of this great country, with our wonderful and rich immigrant history. Show us anew how to love one another, how to welcome the stranger, how to listen to each other, how to work together for the sake of your Kingdom and f the common good. Amen.

