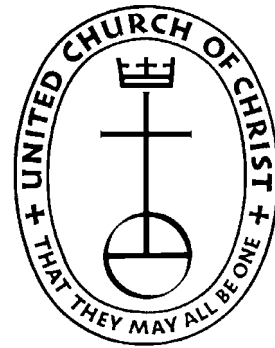


Biblical and Theological Affirmations in Relation to Immigration

A Sermon By —
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This sermon affirms that Christianity calls for genuine hospitality for all immigrants, that the earth is God's and we are merely stewards of its abundance, that we welcome strangers into our midst in order to grow and move forward in wisdom, experience and faith, and that we are all called to be agents of God's reconciliation and compassion.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Rev. Jerald Stinson
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First Congregational Church
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Robert Orr, Assistant General Secretary of the United Nations, was at First Church earlier this year delivering the first annual Romero Lecture. He talked about borders – the means by which we divide ourselves. He said over 75% of the world's borders are artificial constructions – not divisions resulting from lakes, rivers or mountain ranges. They simply divide people due to social, political and economic decisions.

Living in Africa, I saw the painful results of European colonists erecting artificial borders that throughout that continent split asunder tribes and traditional societies. I lived amidst the two million Tswana people. A border divided them, half lived in racist South Africa and half in free, democratic Botswana. At the Gaborone airport, I spoke once with a mother watching her South African refugee son board a plane for Sweden where he had been granted asylum. She was afraid she would never see him again, and said he wouldn't be a refugee had the border been drawn differently.

Likewise Israel's border goes right through the Palestinian village of Bartaa – half the villagers are now Israeli and half Palestinian, and they can't interact with one another – even though they are all members of several extended families. Borders are artificial creations.

Now Robert Orr said that modern globalization means money now freely and rapidly crosses borders. In tiny Palestinian villages ATM machines instantly converted my dollars held in an American bank into Israeli currency.

Goods cross borders. Every year global trade increases.

Ideas rapidly cross borders. When I lived in Africa, because an American naval ship was going around the Cape of Africa, on my shortwave radio I once got Armed Forces Radio coverage of a World Series game. But I lost reception in the ninth inning and had to wait almost a month for my father's airmail letter to tell me the result of the game. That information would be available instantly today everywhere in the world on the internet.

In the recent attack upon a Turkish ship seeking to take supplies to Gaza, Israeli commandos confiscated the cell phones of everyone on board that ship. But they must have missed one and the pictures made it to YouTube. Israel claims the soldiers did not

fire until they were attacked by people on the ship, but the videos make it clear they were firing on unarmed people before they even boarded the ship – firing from their boats and firing as they came down rope ladders from helicopters. Information crosses borders and then can reach virtually everywhere in the world.

But what about people? Robert Orr's boss, UN General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon says, "We are in an age of mobility, an era where people cross borders in growing numbers in pursuit of opportunity and hope for a better life." Today the number of international migrants is greater than at any time in history. 214 million people live outside their country of birth.

But Ki-Moon also points out that in this age of mobility, "migration is often the subject of shrill debate – a wedge to provoke social tensions, drive political extremes and fan the flames of discrimination and hatred."

And as we all know, that is what is happening in the United States today. But it is nothing new for us. In the colonial era, Ben Franklin argued that Germans would never assimilate into the American culture, that they were incapable of learning English or understanding freedom.

"Irish Need Not Apply" signs and anti-Catholic movements abounded in the mid-1800s. From the 1880s through 1965, Asians were virtually excluded from entering the United States. Italians were blamed when polio struck New York City in 1916. In the 1920s southern and eastern Europeans were prohibited from coming to America because they were thought to be "the wrong kind" of immigrants.

And today, incredible hostility is directed at Latino immigrants crossing the border from Mexico and Muslim immigrants from the Middle East.

And the anti-immigrant anger often spills over into the way Latino citizens and Muslim Americans are treated. Speaking about Arizona's new immigration laws, Felix Villanueva, a retired career army chaplain and our new Southern California/Nevada Conference Minister, wrote, "If my wife Sherry and I decide to visit Phoenix, I would need to carry a passport as, at any time a police officer could pull me aside and ask for proof of my citizenship – and he or she wouldn't have to have a reason for doing so. If I don't have my passport on me, I could spend six months in jail." He said, "So, you see, this law not only affects people who are here illegally, but also those of us who are born citizens of this nation, who happen to be of Latino heritage."

So my question today is, does our faith and our Christian theology have anything to say to us about immigration, about the construction of those artificial borders? I

think it does. Let me list four affirmations central to our faith.

First, I think Christianity calls for genuine hospitality for all immigrants. Christians have an ethical mandate to welcome and care for immigrants.

The biblical narratives are very clear in that regard. There are critical issues today that are not directly addressed in the Bible, for instance, abortion, cloning, marriage for those in loving same-gender relationships. But immigration is directly addressed and the biblical mandate is clear.

In Exodus, we are told that after the Hebrew slaves escaped Egyptian oppression and began to form a new nation, they said God wanted them to welcome immigrants into that nation. Today's text from Exodus reads, "Do not oppress foreigners, for you know what it is to be a foreigner – you were foreigners in Egypt."

And when those early Hebrews began to construct a law code, the Holiness Code found in Leviticus, hospitality was at the core of that code. Biblical literalists spend so much time on a few verses from Leviticus supposedly about homosexuality that they miss the fact that most of that code is designed to protect those who were vulnerable in the ancient world – widows, orphans and foreigners. So the law code in Leviticus reads: "Do not mistreat the foreigners who reside in your land. The foreigner who lives among you must be treated like one of your own. Love them as you love yourself, for you too were a foreigner in the land of Egypt and I am your God."

Maybe we ought to hear that addressed more specifically to us. "Do not mistreat the Mexicans and Salvadorans, the Sikhs from India and Muslims from Pakistan who reside in the United States. Those foreigners who live among you must be treated like one of your own. Love those documented or undocumented persons as you love yourself, for your American forebearers were foreigners themselves. And I am your God."

Now that law code continued beyond that general mandate to actually spell out practical dimensions of how people should care for immigrants. And when folks would forget this part of their tradition, prophets would arise to call them back to this quest for justice.

For me, the saddest period of Hebrew history took place in the 6th century before the common era. The Hebrews were finally allowed to return to Jerusalem after being held in bondage in Babylon. On their return, they retreated into xenophobia.

Haggai preached fiery anti-Persian nationalism. Zechariah developed a revenge theology that said the foes of their god Yahweh would be shattered. Obadiah offered a bitter cry against neighboring Edom.

Nehemiah, the Hebrew governor, erected a wall around Jerusalem to keep all strangers out – much like Israel’s Apartheid Wall or the one we are creating on our border with Mexico.

Ezra created an ethical framework to accompany Nehemiah’s wall, a theology of exclusion that led to the expulsion of all foreigners from Jerusalem, including all foreign-born wives of Hebrew men.

But that awful period of racism and separation also gave rise to some incredible prophetic voices of compassion which we find in the biblical books of Third Isaiah, Ruth and Jonah. All spoke positively of immigrants or people in other lands.

In the Christian scriptures, one of the birth narratives tells of Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus fleeing Herod’s wrath by crossing the border into Egypt. Perhaps we are to assume the Egyptians received them warmly? Perhaps they were regarded as political refugees and granted asylum?

Jesus himself, in his preaching, constantly affirmed the Samaritans who were seen by his Hebrew brothers and sisters as foreign pariahs.

So there is a clear biblical mandate to welcome and care for immigrants in our midst. Listen to some perhaps surprising words from Galen Carey, Director of Government Affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals. He said: “Evangelicals support immigration reform because we treat the biblical injunctions to welcome the stranger not merely as good advice but as divine instruction for our good. We recognize,” he said, “that human beings are unique and precious individuals created in the image of God, with great dignity and potential to bless their neighbors. We see the hand of God in the movement of peoples throughout history. The National Association of Evangelicals, representing 40 denominations with more than 45,000 congregations, has joined other faith communities in asserting the moral imperative of enacting meaningful immigration reform now.”

So liberal and evangelical Christian leaders often come together on this issue; Catholics and Protestants work together for immigration reform; Muslims, Jews and Christians all see the need to care for the immigrants in our midst.

The second affirmation: the earth is God’s and we are merely stewards of its abundance. How often have we heard worship services begin with these words from the Psalmist “The earth is God’s and all that is in it; the world and those who dwell therein.” If that’s true, how can we justify building artificial walls around what is supposedly “our” land so that we can hoard incredible amounts of the earth’s wealth and

its resources?

What makes this our land? Not only is it God's land, but the Native Americans were here before we were. In California, our forebears violently took the land from Mexico in the Mexican War of 1846. By what right is it ours? We are not the owners; we are merely God's stewards.

The third affirmation: we welcome strangers into our midst in order to grow and move forward in wisdom, experience and faith. Bob Orr said UN statistics are clear – nations that welcome immigrants thrive and nations that close their borders eventually struggle and fall behind. It is in our national interest and in our individual interests to welcome immigrants. Rabbi Haim Beliak, a close personal friend, is one of the leading lights in progressive American Jewish thought. Haim was born in a resettlement camp for Holocaust survivors in Germany – we are fortunate his parents were allowed to settle here. Milia Islam-Majeed is doing a fantastic job directing the South Coast Interfaith Council – we are fortunate her parents were allowed to settle here from Bangladesh. That list could go on and on.

The presence of immigrants in our communities enriches those communities. Our diversity is part of what makes this a great nation. There is a wonderful tale in the Torah about Abraham and Sarah offering hospitality to two strangers passing through their land only to discover those strangers were angels with an important message. Another biblical tale has two of Jesus' disciples walking toward Emmaus, insisting that a stranger allow them to offer hospitality and welcome, a stranger who turned out to be the risen Christ. When we welcome strangers into our midst we are almost always enriched by that experience. We grow because of what we learn in communities of diversity.

Now the final affirmation: we are all called to be agents of God's reconciliation and compassion. I think we must recognize how hard it is for folks to uproot themselves and move elsewhere. For Iranians seeking political freedom, Palestinians seeking an end to their oppression, Mexicans seeking funds to support their families at home, or Koreans seeking a better life – it is difficult for people to leave their own homes and cultures and come to a strange new land. We must greet them with open arms and compassionate hearts.

If people in Oaxaca or Chiapas are mired in poverty, compassion dictates that we share our affluence with them. And sometimes, even though people of faith fight it, sometimes we must choose compassion over our own self-interest.

Korean theologian Chung Hyung Kyung says the church must be a community of resistance and hope, even though it may not be easy and may cost us something, I think we must be a community of resistance opposing the racism and xenophobia of our day, and we must be a community of hope holding a vision of pluralism and diversity.

Prophetic evangelical leader Jim Wallis says hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change. I think we can live as a single global family. I think we can eliminate global poverty. I think we can treat the riches of the earth as God's creation to be shared by all. And I am willing to live in hope working for that day, and watching the evidence change.

Let me end with a quotation I have used several times before from Brazil's brilliant theologian Rubem Alves: "Living is like dancing. As you dance you move your body according to a rhythm and harmony which fills the space. You may dance to the tune played by the present reality [hostility toward immigrants] and your style of life will be realistic and pragmatic.

"Or you may choose to move your body under the spell of a mysterious tune and rhythm which comes from a world we do not see, the world of our hope and aspirations. Hope is hearing the melody of the future, faith is to dance to it."

It is that hope and that faith that compel me to work for genuine hospitality, for compassionate immigration reform, seeking a day, using Bob Orr's imagery, when our borders, instead of being walls to keep people apart, become bridges to bring them together.