

“DOES THE BIBLE SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IMMIGRATION?”

Micah 6:8

We think of the topic of immigration, especially the question of how we respond to undocumented immigrants, as a political hot button issue that presidential candidates take a stand on in their platform. However, when we open Scripture, we find that immigration is a Biblical issue almost from the very beginning of our story with God. In Genesis 12, God says to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Thus begins an immigrant’s story, as Abram travels from his father’s homeland to the land of Canaan. Very soon afterwards, a famine strikes the land, and Abram travels to Egypt, where, according to Genesis 12:10, he “resided as an alien”. Abram enters Egypt under less than honest pretenses. He passes off his wife as his sister, afraid that the Egyptians will kill him if they know she is his spouse. Pharaoh becomes enchanted with Sara, Abram’s wife, and basically trades Abram cattle and slaves for her. When he discovers the false pretenses of Sara’s identity, the Pharaoh returns Sara to Abram and tells him to leave Egypt. And thus the immigrant’s story continues, as Abram’s descendents eventually leave Canaan again to go to Egypt, and then, centuries later, Moses leads another band of immigrants, the children of Israel, Abram’s descendants, out of Egypt back to the land of Canaan. Their journey was not easy. Pharaoh didn’t want them to leave; then, when they left, there were several kingdoms that didn’t want the Israelites to come anywhere near their borders. On at least one occasion, the Israelites, with God’s help, crossed through borders that other rulers explicitly closed off (Numbers 21:21-25). The early history of Israel is indeed a story of a migrant people, and not all of their migration was legal by worldly standards.

Of course, the issue of immigration today is not an issue of former Egyptian slaves in the midst of a 40 year journey in the wilderness. But the issue is not as different as apples and oranges. Perhaps more like squash & zucchini.

For obvious reasons, it is difficult to determine exactly how many undocumented immigrants are living in the United States. Some estimates go as low as 7 million, others as high as 20 million. Also for obvious reasons, it is difficult to know exactly how quickly those numbers change each day and each year. Whatever the numbers are, it is by most regards a significant enough number to raise several difficult issues. Are America’s borders secure enough? Are immigration laws too strict or too lax? Are undocumented immigrants in this country taking jobs away from those who reside here legally? Is our educational, medical, and welfare structure secure enough to meet the needs that these immigrants have? What is the proper legal response to undocumented immigrants?

Unfortunately, I do not have time enough or, most likely, intelligence enough to deal with all these questions. However, perhaps we can approach them with a broad brush by dealing with a seemingly inherent Scriptural dilemma

that pits a Biblical understanding of the rule of law against a Biblical understanding of the needs of “the alien among us.”

In 1 Peter 2:13-17, Peter writes, **READ 1 Peter 2:13-17**. In these verses, Christians are called to abide by the ruling authorities of the land in which they live. When we talk about undocumented immigrants, we are speaking of that which is a violation of the laws of the land in which we live. The intent of these laws is to protect the citizens of our country and to lay out punishments for those who violate the laws. Some would say that it is our country’s right to have such laws. Paul, in Romans 13, would say it is not a right but a God-ordained responsibility. Romans 13:3-4 says, **READ Romans 13:3-4**. The government and the laws of our land are a servant for our good. Certainly, our good involves insuring that the borders of our county are safe from the incursion of those who seek to do our citizens harm. And certainly it is for our good for our government to take steps to insure that the influx of immigrants to this country does not place an undue burden on the people and institutions of our country. These passages would seem to settle a great deal of the controversies surrounding our discussions about immigration in our country.

However, as noted earlier, Scripture has a great deal to say about this topic. In Exodus 22:21-23, God says, **READ Exodus 22:21-23**. These verses remind us that when we talk about the issue of undocumented immigrants, it is not just an item on an agenda. It is about people, people who often have already experienced numerous hardships. I once asked Miguel Gomez, pastor at Iglesia de la Comunidad, why so many people flee from Mexico and cross into our country. He began to tell me of life in Mexico. There are not enough industrial or factory jobs to support the population of Mexico, almost half of which lives in conditions of poverty. The depth of corruption in Mexico’s governmental systems not only leads to abuse of its citizens but also the loss of even more revenue and potential industry. Most people flee to America because of the promise of freedom and equality and the hope for a better life. They come to America to escape hopelessness. David shared with us last week Jesus’ words in Matthew about the Great Judgment, when Jesus will look at his sheep and say, “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, 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. 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.” Many of the undocumented immigrants who are entering and living in our country sound like the very people Jesus associates himself with. How can we turn them away? How can we shut them out? Will we not have to face judgment if we turn our backs to them?

The issue of undocumented immigrants, when looked at from a biblical perspective, would seem to put at odds two ideas that the prophet Micah joined together as requirements of us from God: the requirement to do justice and the requirement to love mercy. But where do justice and mercy meet, when, in this case, they seem to pull in different directions?

If you turn in your Bibles to Micah 6:8, you will see that there is a third expectation God has for His people: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” I would put forth for your consideration this morning that, on the issue of undocumented immigrants, these three requirements must be held together as God desires. What more, perhaps a Biblical response to the issue of undocumented immigrants requires us to start with the requirement listed last by the prophet.

When we walk humbly with our God, we are forced to ask the question, “Whose justice are we seeking?” While there are certainly valid arguments for stricter immigration laws and more secure borders and stiffer penalties for those who break the law, there are also many ideas and attitudes in the public square that are based on bias and bigotry. Immigrants are, to many, “those people” who aren’t like us, who don’t speak our language, who don’t look like us or live like us. Many folks have other names for immigrants, derogatory names that I won’t give any room to here in this pulpit. There are many who use the issue of undocumented immigrants as a cover to insult anyone whose skin is a different color or who speaks a different language. Their call for justice is really a call for hatred. When we walk humbly with our God, we hear the voice of Paul in Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ.” Notice that the first distinction Christ does away with is the one that we sometimes have the hardest time letting go of: the distinction of ethnicity. That is the foundation of God’s justice: all His creation, all His children, are equal in His eyes. To walk humbly with our God is to submit to His justice.

However, to walk humbly with our God is also to submit to His mercy, and that means recognizing that we are as much in need of His mercy as anyone else. Perhaps America is a better home for many of the undocumented immigrants who come to our country, but we are not perfect. Many undocumented immigrants are hired by companies and individuals who feel they can pay them less money with no benefits without facing any repercussions. These employers take advantage of the situation for their own profit margins.

We must insure that “a better life” is not just the same life with a different address. Even more than that, to walk humbly with our God will take us outside of our homes, our lands. He will send us from our father’s house, just as He did Abram, to see that there are many others still in their native countries, still suffering. As we deal with how undocumented immigrants affect our country, our hearts should see beyond our borders to the needs that drive people to risk their lives to get here. When we encounter these needs, there should be a prophetic voice within our hearts that cries out like Isaiah, “Here am I, Lord, send me.” Stricter laws, harsher punishments, and more secure borders will not change the needs of those who suffer. The suffering people that Jesus calls us to serve are running to our door step. Either we open the door and let them in, or we need to go out the door, to where they are, and serve in the name of our Lord.

Perhaps most importantly, to walk humbly with our God is to recognize that, in opposition to our assumptions, we share something in common with the

millions of undocumented immigrants in our country today. In Ephesians 2:17-22, Paul says, **READ Ephesians 2:17-22**. As Christians, we are citizens of the kingdom of God. However, this citizenship was not gained by any laws. In fact, under the law, we are all judged unworthy, unfit to be citizens. We would seem, by some, to be “undocumented aliens” in God’s kingdom. However, we have the assurance that our citizenship in the kingdom has been obtained not through the courts or legislature. We have been naturalized instead by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is His kingdom, not ours. We do not determine the borders or the size. There was a time when we were far off from this kingdom, in another country. It is only by grace that we are here. Our status, our citizenship in the kingdom, was in someone else’s hands, and those hands took nails to bring us across the border.

The communion table is where we are reminded that God, in His justice, could not let our sin go unpunished. The communion table is where we are reminded that God, in His mercy, could not leave us to die. The communion table is where we are reminded that God humbled himself to bring those of us who were aliens, those of us who were immigrants, into the Promised Land. If we are to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, the table of the Lord is where we should start.

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