

Immigration & Inhospitability: Facing Ancient Morality and a Modern Tragedy

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A Story for All Ages

[See this story—the Good Samaritan—
in the Gospel of Luke [10: 25-37.](#)]

Sermon

Who is my neighbor? The Good Samaritan of Bible fame is from a hated and misunderstood group, yet he shows neighborly concern better than anybody else.

A Good Samaritan of our own time and place is Antonio Diaz Chacon, a young man of 23 in Albuquerque. He chased down a man who had abducted a six-year-old girl, and saved her. His heroism brought him national attention. This brought out the fact that he is an illegal—or undocumented—immigrant.ⁱ He's been here four years and is married to a legal resident, with two children. He told the media that he had “abandoned [his] attempts to get legal residency [here] because the process was difficult and expensive.” He had given up.

New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez honored Diaz Chacon's heroism. Yet she still wants her legislature to deny driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, including him.

Controversy over immigration is not new; nor is hostility against immigrants. In the 19th century, on the East Coast, establishments put signs in store windows: “No dogs or Irish allowed.” The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 forbid any new Chinese immigrants, and kept existing ones from owning property here. This law didn't end until 1943. In the coastal farming town of Watsonville, in 1930, mobs rioted and attacked Filipino farm workers.

As in those times, we hear the assertion that immigrants “take our jobs.” The counter-assertion is: new immigrants take the jobs that Americans aren't willing to do. This may have some truth to it, especially regarding farm labor,

which pays below minimum wage. In 2009, as enforcement against undocumented workers stepped up in Idaho, Arizona, and Colorado, farm *owners* feared a labor shortage. They pressed their states to provide a new source of cheap labor: prison inmates.ⁱⁱ

This past summer, thousands of Latino workers in Georgia avoided taking available farm jobs. They feared deportation under that state's tough new laws. Again, farm owners about a lack of workers as the berry and cucumber harvest approached. State probation officers tried to fill the jobs with unemployed ex-convicts. The unemployment rate is high for those on probation. They are expected to look for work, but cannot be forced to stay in any job. After the first day of hard labor, bending over to harvest in the heat, most of the ex-cons didn't have the energy to go back to work. I wouldn't either.

In our history, new immigrants have built railroads, given child care, cleaned bathrooms, and tended lawns and gardens. Many American jobs *have* indeed been lost, not to immigrants, but to other countries. American stores now stock products made in China. Even California is importing enormous segments of the new Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge from China.ⁱⁱⁱ

Low wages in Asia and Latin America, plus weak protections for workers and the environment, have made it cheaper to move jobs overseas. American tax policies have even encouraged it.

We hear the argument that illegal immigrants are criminals—law breakers—and should be arrested for it, and sent home. Yet with an estimated 12 million men, women and children who are undocumented, it seems neither feasible nor affordable to deport everyone. Why go after low-wage immigrant workers?

As offenses go, being here without a visa or green card is a mild one. In fact, it's a civil violation, not a criminal one, to be here without authorization. This is why it's not accurate to call someone an *illegal* immigrant rather than *undocumented* one. It's not a criminal violation, but a civil one.^{iv}

I've been thinking about the laws we have: Lots of Americans use "radar detectors" in their cars, including some of my relatives and friends. This device tells you if a cop is nearby, so you can slow down to the speed limit. Hence, if you own one, you're either hoping to get away with breaking the law, or you don't trust yourself to stay at the speed limit. I do understand the convenience of getting someplace faster. Yet if this is an acceptable violation of the law for so many, how can we be so harsh about one who crosses a border out of desperation?

How did so many undocumented immigrants get here? Some immigrants are brought here as kids, by their parents. They grow up here, never getting documents or knowing they need them. Most of them go to school. This country is the only home they know. I can't see it's worth the cost of deporting someone who has proven they are motivated to contribute to their community.

Most immigrants start out here on tourist, work or student visas. They may be unable to get an extension before their visa expires. Suddenly, they're undocumented. One day they're documented, the next they're not.

This is the story of my nephew's new wife. She's 28 years old and from Brazil. I met her last month. A few years ago, she got a summer internship at an amusement park in New Jersey. She wore a large furry costume and waved at the kids all day. "I was Porky Pig," she said. "I'd wave and wiggle my rear end." The job ended, and she wanted to stay here. Her visa expired and she couldn't get one for a new job. So she found a job as a nanny. Living in Newark, New Jersey, she went into Manhattan every day to care for the children of a woman who spent her days... shopping. Then she and my nephew met online. They dated, fell in love, and she moved across the country to Denver. The marriage enabled her to obtain permanent residency from the government. Now she's working as a nanny in Denver for three kids. She's charming, caring and genuine—the best thing that's happened in my nephew's life.

But many immigrants get here the hard way, slipping across the U.S.-Mexico border. In recent times, the United States has built up its enforcement against illegal entry at the main cities along the border, with walls, armed guards, lights and cameras. This has driven the flow of migrants to the border's weakest links—in the middle of desert lands that straddle Arizona and Mexico.

Some leave their families behind in hopes of finding work so they can send money back home. Some bring their families along. They pay men called coyotes and chicken wranglers [*polleros*] to get them through the border, and to receive them when they get across. They demand a high fee from the migrants, whose families no doubt scrimp, save and borrow to pay.

Many of the people coming from Central America live in highland areas or wet tropical areas. Their homeland may be violent and poor, but it's nothing like an Arizona desert.

Some of them have never seen a desert. Never learned to look out for the cutting spines of the cactus in the dark of night or avoid the sharp rocks that will slice their feet. Never experienced temperatures as high as 110 degrees.

Hundreds of them die there every year: young men and women, children, parents. They die from heat and thirst, hunger, disease, and violence.

The word *hospitality* may bring to mind parties, weekend guests, clean sheets and "a cuppa tea." Yet in ancient days, the practice of hospitality was a matter of life and death. In the wilderness and the desert, villages were far apart, and journeys were dangerous and long.

If you were a good and righteous person, and someone was passing through in need of lodging, you were supposed to take them in. Even today, we can experience such eager hospitality in parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, where old cultures endure. Even in poor households, hospitality to the stranger is an obligation, and a source of honor.

In the borderlands of Arizona, American volunteers go into the desert and leave bottles of water for immigrants to find, so that fewer of

them will die of heat and thirst while wandering in the desert. For leaving the water, the authorities have cited the volunteers with littering or trespassing or both. Some critics claim that such acts of mercy serve only to tempt more people to cross the border into this country. Perhaps.

But I doubt that immigrants expect to find bottles of water. After all, they aren't expecting the dangerous heat and cutting terrain of the desert in the first place.

This year the state of Alabama, among others, passed legislation to forbid people from showing any hospitality to undocumented immigrants: You can't rent them an apartment or give them a job, you can't give them food or lodging. You even can't give them a ride.

I would think Alabama legislators would know their Bible better than this. The book of Leviticus reads: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt." This rule comes right after standing up to show respect for the elderly and right before not cheating someone when using weights and measures in commerce ([Lev. 19:32-35](#)).

The Book of Exodus says: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" ([Ex. 23:9](#)).

This land, the United States of America, is a land of immigrants. Except for Native Americans, we have all moved here, or have come from ancestors who moved here sometime in the last 500 years or so. Some came in chains, some came with dreams and hopes for prosperity. Many came to avoid starvation, persecution, religious intolerance, and war. We have foreigner's blood in us, stranger's blood, but we seem to act as if we do not know the heart of a stranger.

On a recent Thursday evening I attended a prayer vigil at a Contra Costa County detention facility in Richmond. In the crowd you could spot several UUs wearing yellow tee-shirts: [Standing on the Side of Love](#). Outside

the walls of the jail we sang and said prayers to remember the immigrants on the other side, held for lack of documents, waiting for processing by Homeland Security's agency called ICE. Two people told us their stories. A young man from Guatemala had come through Mexico, and into the United States. His Mayan village is one of several on the shores of Lake Atitlan, an enormous lake in the highlands. I've been a tourist there. It's magical. It's hard to imagine someone leaving such beauty for an unknown future, and leaving behind family and friends. Yet in sight of that beauty are people living in grinding poverty and in fear. While there in 2001, I saw memorial stones for civilians killed in a government massacre during Guatemala's long civil war. That war was fueled in part by American taxpayers, in support of military rulers whom we called our friends.

This man came to California and found a job in grounds keeping work. He enjoyed getting paid for good, hard work. But one day he was picked up for a lack of legal documents. He was transported to Arizona, and held there. Though some of his friends were deported, he was released. Now he was back in California, talking to us, taking a risk by speaking at a prayer vigil just outside the walls of a jail.

After singing a song and hearing a poem, we heard next from a young mother of two. She also came from Guatemala. One day, she was riding in the car with her husband in the Bay Area. A police officer stopped them, saying the windshield had a crack in it. The officer grabbed her husband through the open window and yanked him roughly until he got out. The wife pleaded: "You could have just asked him to get out. Why didn't you ask him?" The officer said he had a new officer in training with him and wanted to show him some of his available techniques.

She has papers, but her spouse did not. They processed him for deportation. He begged not to go back, asking not to be separated from his wife and kids. He tried to explain that his father had once worked for the government there. Because of this, if he went back, he was sure he would be killed. He was sent back to Guatemala anyway. His wife got word that he

was in fact, killed. “Now,” she said through tears, “I am caring for two children, with no husband.”

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My friends, we need to appreciate the situations that lead people to desperate measures. We must look at the economic, trade, and military policies of other countries and our own, and see their impacts on the lives of ordinary people. To be sure, immigration is a complex issue. This is why we have offered an Adult Religious Education series about it.

Immigration is a complicated mosaic of policies, laws, economic trends, and social problems. It’s a mosaic of stories about courage, loss, new beginnings, and rich memories.

We need comprehensive reform of this country’s immigration laws and practices. I think it’s wrong to tear apart families when one member is here without documentation and has not been arrested for a serious crime. I think it’s unrealistic to expect that we can deport 12 million people, and unwise to spend money on it. And it’s cruel.

There are a few signs of hope, in my view. Last month the federal Department of Homeland Security announced that it would ease up on its pursuit of undocumented people “who pose no threat to national security or public safety.” The government will now focus on those who have committed serious crimes.^v

A federal judge temporarily has blocked the Alabama law that forbids the show of basic hospitality to undocumented immigrants.

Some undocumented children grow up, apply to college, get accepted, and graduate with good skills. Some immigrants join our military. The California law known as the DREAM Act will allow them to go to college, even to obtain scholarship aid for which they would otherwise qualify. Similar DREAM Act legislation is now under consideration at the Federal level, but Congress and the President need public pressure to move it forward.

We hear the assertion that every immigrant, or potential one, should get in line. “Go back to the end of line, like everybody else!”

However, the problem is that we have no clear end of the line for immigrating to this country. When the process is so costly and complicated and frustrating, people give up on it. We need reforms to make this line clear and our procedures fair and humane.

I don’t have an answer for all the complexities of this issue, but we must talk about it. Immigration is a social issue, a legal one, and economic one. And it is a moral issue.

We all must learn how to talk and listen about it, and not to scream and shout about it. Let us begin to talk by asking a question: What are that values that we are bringing into our conversations? We need not only information, and we bring not just our opinions and experiences, we bring our values.

For me the values for this conversation include those embodied in the practice of accepting the stranger, and in the challenge to treat our neighbor as ourselves—including those neighbors whose opinions we don’t agree with and whose fears we can’t understand.

The values for this conversation include not only compassion, but also curiosity about the lives of all those involved in the issue—and *all of us* are involved in this issue.

Let us remember to ask the question, over and over:

Who is my neighbor?
Amen.

ⁱ “New Mexico hero who saved girl from abduction says he’s illegal,” Associated Press, August 19, 2011.

http://blog.al.com/wire/2011/08/new_mexico_hero_who_saved_girl.html

ⁱⁱ “Facing Illegal Immigrant Crackdown, Farms Look to Inmate Labor,” ABC News, July 25, 2007.

<http://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=3409570&page=1>

ⁱⁱⁱ San Francisco’s Bay Bridge Gets 5,300-Ton Steel Span Delivery from China <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-07-11/sf-bay-bridge-gets-5-300-ton-delivery-from-china.html>

^{iv} “Why immigration is a moral issue,”

by Daniel Stracka, *UU World*, Winter 2010.

<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/172730.shtml>

^v “U. S. Will Ease Its Illegal Immigrant Deportations,” by Robert Pear, *Sacramento Bee*, Aug. 19, 2011, p. A1.