

Loving Our Neighbors (in 2010)

A Pastoral Meditation on Immigration

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*For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. **He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.** Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky. (Deuteronomy 10:17-22)*

Our nation is engaged in an intense debate over immigration and the status of millions of non-documented people in our country. As American Baptists in New Jersey and throughout the country consider all the proposals being debated, I would like to ask us all to reflect upon a number of points. These remarks will not be politically partisan, but rather, I hope, reflective of our ministry situation in light of Jesus' mandate to love our neighbor (Matthew 19:19; 22:39).

Tens of thousands of our ABC members are first generation immigrants to the United States. They have arrived from countries such as Burma, Cuba, Mexico, Brazil, Haiti, Korea, the Philippines, Jamaica and Liberia (as well as many other countries), and they have become valued participants in our ABC fellowship. Accordingly, in 2006, I wrote to our political leaders, asking them to address immigration issues in a compassionate and fair manner so that this century's current wave of immigrants may experience the same kind of American welcome that my Jewish grandparents received when they arrived from Europe some one hundred years ago.

I intend to write to them again this year; perhaps you might feel led to do so as well. I plan to lift up the following principles advanced by Church World Service and other Christian organizations:

- Provide an opportunity for undocumented immigrants, who are contributing to this country, to meet reasonable criteria and, over time, pursue a path to legalization and citizenship (earned legalization - not amnesty).
- Reform our immigration system to significantly reduce waiting times for separated families who currently wait many years to be reunited.
- Create legal avenues for migrant workers and their families to enter the United States and work in a safe and legal manner with their rights fully protected.
- Develop policies that are consistent with humanitarian values and that treat all individuals with respect.

- Allow the authorities to identify and prevent terrorists and dangerous criminals from entering the country.
- Bolster our national security through enhanced border security and effective enforcement.
- Protect individuals and organizations that act as Good Samaritans by offering help to persons in need without regard to their immigration status.
- Safeguard asylum seekers and assure them an opportunity to prove they deserve asylum.

These specific principles flow from a more generalized Biblical perspective that arose from the experience of the Israelites from Abraham's day to the Exodus. God declared to Abraham: "the whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:8). Moses named one of his sons Gershom, because he had become "an alien in a foreign land" (Exodus 18:3). God commanded the Israelites to identify with aliens in their land: "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). Leviticus 19:33-34 clearly depicts the attitude God's people should have toward non-citizens: *"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."*

The Psalmist writes, "The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked" (Psalm 146:9). This reminds me of Ruth, a Moabite who follows her mother-in-law to Israel. This turns out to be a decisive milestone in the unfolding of the Messianic theme. Just imagine if Boaz had not welcomed her – there would have been no David and no Jesus!

Jesus was himself an alien resident in Egypt during his childhood. Joseph was a "guest worker" there, with uncertain status. Nevertheless, God watched over Jesus' family, blessed them, and when circumstances were better, they returned to Israel (Matthew 2:13-20).

As American Baptists, let us minister with love and compassion to all the immigrants in our localities and regions, and let us encourage our country to treat immigrants with love, justice and fairness.