

Immigration Reform and the New Sanctuary Movement

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If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will. —Frederick Douglass

Ancient Witness: Luke 4:28-30

Modern Witness: from “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” by Martin Luther King, Jr.

You may well ask: “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? ...Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word, “tension.” I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.

This morning I ask: As people of faith, what do we have to say about immigration?
For me, how does my Christian faith inform my perspective on immigration?

In Luke’s story of Jesus, he returns to the area of his up-bringing. And so here’s the scene. Jesus goes to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, and he is acting the part of a rabbi. He gives his first sermon. And right away we see that he is a radical. He reads from the prophet, Isaiah about the year of jubilee:

*The Spirit of God is upon me,
because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
God had sent me to proclaim
release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (jubilee year).*

What is the year of jubilee, and why is it so radical? Every seven years, according to Jewish law, all debts were forgiven and all servants were to be released, and after 49 years on the “year of jubilee,” all property that had been in anyone’s family was also returned to them.

What you had in the ancient world was money becoming concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, and people who lost their money and property—through a very regressive tax system (hardest on the poorest) to support the kingdom. Jesus, it seems, carries forth this jubilee principle of redistribution of wealth. Good news, indeed, for the poor! And those who are in servitude, enslaved and oppressed by debt are set free!

He then tells them that “Today is the time for this to happen. As you hear this, it is starting to be fulfilled.” So this is a jaw-dropping sermon that Jesus is giving. Revolutionary. And they were amazed.

In addition, I want you to see that Jesus stops his quote of Isaiah 61:2 after the first part of the verse. And it is very interesting that he left off the second part of the verse: “the day of vengeance of our God.” *There is a pattern for Jesus to portray God not as violent and vengeful but as gentle and loving.* Perhaps this is why they were taken aback and surprised by “such gracious words.” They were expecting to hear about divine retribution of bad news for the rich and powerful but heard only good news for the poor. And so they were astonished, but not in a positive way.

Sometimes the graciousness of God is offensive. And it sparks anger. Jonah was so offended and angry that God would be gracious and loving toward his dreaded enemy, the Ninevites, that he couldn’t stand it and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

And here’s where Luke’s story starts to get good. Jesus says, “You will probably say, ‘Do here in your own country what we have heard you did in Capernaum.’”

There seems to be some kind of jealousy going on here. They resented Jesus’ good deeds toward those who lived in Capernaum. It was, after all, a largely non-Jewish town, filled with foreigners. “They don’t deserve it. Jesus, you should be looking out after your own kind. They are not part of us.”

So Jesus zings them. He goes right after their attitude, quoting from the Jewish scriptures:

“I can assure you, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens were stopped up for three and a half years and a great famine befell all the land; yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but rather to a widow in Zarephath near Sidon.” (see 1 Kings 17:9ff.)

Now if you take a look at the map of the time when Elijah was alive. You can see the northern and southern kingdoms of the Jewish people, Israel and Judah. And you will notice that Zerephath is by Sidon—outside the country and over the border into Phoenicia. God’s grace extended to those who were in a different country.

And then Jesus continues:

“And there were many lepers in Israel, when Elisha was the prophet; yet none of them was cured, but only Naaman of Syria.” (see 2 Kings 5:1ff.)

Syria is to the north, again a totally separate kingdom and country than Israel. Again, God’s love does not stop at the border.

If you look at a map of Jesus’ time you can see that Nazareth in Galilee is up in the north, and Jesus would cross several borders, going through Samaria, in order to reach Jerusalem in Judea. Jesus, himself, was a border-crosser.

He embodied the biblical principle of hospitality to the migrant, the foreign traveler. He embodied love for the stranger and sojourner. And he, himself, was one. His message: All people are deserving of care and respect.

But this is a threatening message at its core. People sometimes think that if we care for others, there will be less for care and opportunity for me. And so we have the response of the crowd when they realized what Jesus stood for (today's ancient witness):

When the people in the synagogue heard this, they all became furious! They took him to the edge of the cliff on which the town was built, to throw him over it.

So from the very beginning of his ministry the die is cast, and we can see that Jesus' message of justice and fairness for all people will enrage the good religious people of his day. Filled with righteous anger and indignation, they ground their teeth at him. "Who *are* you, anyway?" they thought. "The carpenter son of that *nobody*, Joseph?"

So Luke sets the stage, and we see that from the beginning Jesus would meet his end for standing up for the outsiders, the excluded, the exploited and the powerless, challenging tribalism and nationalism. We can see the reasons why there were those who wanted to kill him. It reminds me of that pithy truth written by scholar, John Dominic Crossan:

*Those who live by compassion are often canonized.
Those who live by justice are often crucified.*

What did he mean? Well, Crossan reminds us that good, compassionate people are not a threat to the empire and the powerful. They work within the system and don't try to change it. He says,

It is impossible to have justice without compassion, but it is possible to have compassion without justice.

Jesus was in the first group; he was compassionate *and* lived by justice. He challenged the system, the laws, the rules. Jesus died, it seems to me, not because God wanted him to die or needed him to die, but because he would not back down from his commitment to justice. He was a threat. He enraged those who lived entitled lives of privilege, those who benefited from the status quo. They might have even been good, compassionate people, but they had not justice.

And so there's a lot of rage out there even today—rage against those who would suggest that we should care about the migrant in our midst. Rage against those who want to change the rules and make them more humane.

There are over 12 million immigrants without documentation working in the United States—on farms, in hotels as maids, as janitors, as domestic workers, in construction, in meatpacking. Many of these are jobs that no one else will do. Many of these workers pay into taxes but are afraid to receive services. Many pay into Social Security and will never claim those benefits. Because they have no documents, these workers are easily exploited. When this happens it hurts all American workers, driving down wages and worsening conditions.

It is a myth that they take jobs from citizens. Economists tell us that they help the local economies grow, that they contribute to the tax base and that they bring in as many jobs as they take.

Outdated laws have driven too much immigration into the black market and not enough immigration through legal channels for those who want to work in this country. Many families have been separated from their loved ones for years and are blocked from being united. Hundreds of thousands have been detained or deported, and thousands have died in the desert, trying to cross over to provide a better life for their families or simply to survive.

It seems to me that the call for hospitality to the migrant in our midst in my own Christian tradition is not conditional. It is not predicated on documentation. It is a call to treat them with respect, dignity and compassion. It calls us to care about their struggle, their suffering. And it calls us to evaluate our laws in light of these realities.

Jesus himself would never take the law as the final word. He challenged and even broke the law whenever it conflicted with compassion

- breaking purity laws by caring for lepers and eating with the outcasts and unclean,
- breaking Sabbath laws by healing and caring for the broken, the destitute and the lame whenever they needed it, and
- breaking the laws of the empire by denying them ultimate authority and proclaiming that there are things that belong to God and not to Caesar.

Jesus proclaimed that boundaries and borders are not the final word when it comes to God's grace and compassion.

Look, as a Christian I'm not saying that we should have totally open borders and let everyone in. But neither should they be virtually closed as they are now. I'm suggesting that based upon our faith tradition we should be more open than we are by

- creating a pathway to citizenship or legal status for the millions who have been working here for years, and
- bringing the quotas into line with the current economic realities by increasing the number of temporary and seasonal work visas, increasing the number of legal residences and increasing the number of green cards for those to be citizens.

People are told to "come through legally," but unless one is a professional athlete or has advanced academic degrees in specialty occupations or has a spouse who is a citizen or legal resident, it is virtually impossible to do so. What does it mean to say, "Come here legally," when it is impossible to do so?

Jesus, the prophet, is speaking to us. Jesus, whose words both comfort and infuriate is calling us to change the status quo, to be a voice for the powerless and outsiders, and to work for greater justice in our land.

I am heartened and touched that there are some folks in our congregation who are helping us consider becoming part of the New Sanctuary Movement. The original Sanctuary Movement in the 1980's was a response to the violent and oppressive regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador, and the support of those regimes by the U.S. government. Families fleeing that violence were given sanctuary and sheltered by a network of houses of faith. Today, congregations are again providing sanctuary to those who are trying to provide for themselves and their families, but who have been denied legal residency.

Those undocumented folks who choose to be part of this program are taking a big risk, because this is not about hiding and shielding themselves; it's about drawing attention to an immigration system of laws and policy that is inhumane and broken. The congregations and the families are totally open about what they are doing as a way of bearing public witness to injustice.

I see this kind of action to be solidly in the tradition of Jesus, Gandhi and many others, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "one has a moral obligation to disobey unjust laws," laws that "degrade human personality." King wrote, "One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly and with a willingness to accept the penalty." One does this not just to follow one's own conscience, but "in order to *arouse the conscience of the community.*"

And friend, it is clear to me that the conscience of our communities and the conscience of our nation need to be aroused! For too long we have been stuck in neutral. For too long the powerful and the fearful have held us back. For too long millions have suffered—their labor exploited, their dreams shattered, their families torn apart. For too long we have “passed by on the other side.”

It seems to me that *nothing will change unless the conscience of the nation is aroused*, unless this nation is forced to confront this issue, unless it can no longer be ignored, unless the injustice is exposed, unless the people of this nation stand up and demand justice, fairness and humanity.

For as Frederick Douglas famously said, “Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and never will.”

Look, I’m not saying that there’s a one-size-fits-all strategy for social justice. I’m not saying that direct action and civil disobedience is for everyone. But *I am* saying that *if some do not agitate, it’s not going to happen!* It’s not. If some don’t openly challenge the injustice of our laws, it’s not going to happen. If some are not willing to take direct action, demonstrate and dramatize the issue, the conscience of this nation will not be aroused, and change will not happen.

I know, we have so many intractable problems that we are facing:

- Global climate change, the unrestrained consumption of fossil fuels and the destruction of our planet,
- Growing disparity of wealth, decline of the middle class and dwindling resources for the poor,
- An emerging oligarchy and captivity of this nation’s government to corporate wealth and power,
- Unrelenting gun violence in our city streets exacerbated by a misreading and misused of our Second Amendment.

I could go on.

But friends, I believe we have the power to solve all of these, including the current catastrophic immigration law, if the conscience of the community is aroused, so that we may no longer ignore but engage our reality, and that together, as a single body, we will rise up and make it happen.

May it be so.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: (from “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” by Martin Luther King, Jr.)

We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already there. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.