

**“Immigration Challenges:  
Welcoming the Stranger”**

**Sermon by the Rev. Jim Eller**

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## **Opening Words**

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the stranger. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you. You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in a strange land. (Leviticus 19:33)

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or saw you naked and gave you clothes? Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of the human family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:38)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

Serve God . . . and do good to orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, and those who have nothing. (Koran 4:36)

## Sermon

Issues concerning immigration policies in this country are complex and, for some, deeply emotional. It can mean a lost job for someone we know: a member of our congregation believes she lost her job because of the availability of a lower-wage immigrant worker. It meant that a member of our congregation was sent away, despite all our efforts to keep her in the country, because she was considered to be an illegal immigrant. It meant a dear friend was refused re-admission back into the United States, because his visa expired and has not yet been re-issued. For some, immigration politics are deeply enmeshed with institutional racism. It is about the state of our world. It can be about the validity of nation-states.

We can, and should, debate the critical issues relating to U.S. immigration policies and deeply consider the implications of our collective responses. Democracy is a practiced art. The more we practice the better we get at conducting our shared experiment in self governance. Moral questions fare best with frequent and thoughtful airing. With this in mind, I offer my perspective on our immigration policy challenges.

From the beginning, the U. S. has been ambivalent about immigrants. On one hand, George Washington favored restricting governmental service to native-born persons only. In a letter he wrote to John Adams in 1794 he wrote, "My opinion with respect to immigrants is that except for useful mechanics and some particular professions, there is no use encouraging it." On the other hand, people like Benjamin Franklin recognized the economic advantages and even necessity of immigration. Franklin wrote, "America hails newcomers to its shores as the bulwark of democracy."

In 1848 some 300,000 Chinese came to America to help build the railroads and harvest the fields, but in 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed preventing further Chinese

immigration. By the turn of the century Japanese immigration was also ended.

The largest increase in our U.S. ethnic diversity occurred with the annexation of half of Mexico in 1848. Yet, later in the mid 1930's, as the depression hit, there was deep concern about the number of Mexicans in this country. 500,000 were forcibly removed and relocated to Mexico, some of whom had been citizens for generations.

The Irish and the Jews were not always welcomed with open arms. In the battle of Fredericksburg during the Civil War the front lines of both the Union and Confederate forces were manned with Irish immigrants. The Irish were allowed to carry their flag into battle, where they served as cannon fodder and as the most expendable of soldiers.

Hostility toward Jewish immigration led to horrible consequences during the 1930's. In 1939 Congress defeated a bill that would have rescued 20,000 Jewish refugee children, on the grounds that their admission would exceed the German quota. This decision was made even though American families were prepared to sponsor or adopt these children.

During the 1960's, Americans became more aware of race issues. The Civil Rights Act was adopted as they became acutely aware of the racist nature of our immigration policies. Also, policies were changed in 1965 to allow greater immigration from Asia, Latin America and from Southern and Eastern Europe.

The inscription at the base of the Statue of Liberty says, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Religion calls us to welcome the stranger. The scriptures from both Judaism and Christianity make a rule of radical

hospitality. To love God and our neighbor as our selves is the great commandment. When asked "Who is our neighbor?" Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan and invites us to be neighbors to those that society would cast aside or make invisible.

I come to these issues already predisposed toward welcoming. I resist calls of fear and choose instead the ways of faith. I hear people preach scarcity and lost jobs, and what I see is stronger economies. I see immigrant workers doing the hardest and nastiest work, and I know that we have done much to create the necessity of immigration. I come knowing that the church has historically been a place of sanctuary.

I know that during the 1980's we had many immigrants, both legal and illegal, who fled from El Salvador and the death squads. To be returned to their country meant death. Many progressive congregations used their historic rights and made their buildings safe places. Some years ago, my neighbor was a Chilean who had been a supporter of President Allende, and was now a refugee fleeing the death squads of Augusto Pinochet. He and many of the Allende supporters had been placed in a large stadium and tortured. He escaped with the help of his family, but with the understanding that he would leave his country and never be politically active again. About 20% of our immigrants come to us as political refugees.

So, given all the complexities, how do we act? From what do we take our direction? I suggest we have one clear center, our spiritual knowledge that we are all one. We are all "our brother's keeper." We are sisters, cousins and neighbors to one another. This is a stance that emerges from faith traditions. This is a stance of faith.

Let me give an example ...

*Karen Musalo, while acting director of the International Human Rights Clinic at the American*

*University in Washington D. C. wrote to this issue and how we might best address it by telling the story of "a Japanese diplomat, Sugihara, who was assigned to his country's consulate in Lithuania in the early 1940s. Jews who fled from Poland into Lithuania needed permission to pass through the Soviet Union and Japan in order to continue to other destinations." One day not long after he took up his post he found three hundred desperate people, some who had walked all the way from Poland, standing outside his consulate, begging for his help.*

*He had already been officially forbidden to help any Jews seeking to escape the Nazis. He knew to act was to endanger not only his own life, but the lives of his family. And for what? He wasn't being presented with a chance to change the world. Rather he was given an opportunity to help a few desperate people. Sugihara decided what to do. He "made his decision after consulting with his family and listening to his five-year old son ask, 'If we don't help them, won't they die?'" Out of the mouths of babes.... Before his arrest and deportation Sugihara issued more than two thousand exit visas. At one point his hand was so worn from signing these documents he had to put on ice packs to continue. In fact, even after being dismissed from his post and the family was ordered to an internment camp, while riding on the train to his imprisonment he continued to write those exit visas. One small paper at a time.*

*Musalo summed her observation up with her own comment, about where Sugihara found the authority to do what he did. She wrote, "He listened to his own conscience." Today there are an estimated fifty*

*thousand people who claim descent from what are called "Sugihara's Jews." Perhaps we can never know what is merely some band-aid and what is in fact a revolutionary act on behalf of the whole world.*

Much of our national hysteria about illegal immigration seems like so much racism to me. We forget that most of the immigrants coming into this country are *not* from Mexico. We forget that most, the vast majority, of immigrants are here legally. We forget so many things when we focus only on the supposed horror of the "Mexican hordes" crossing the border into our country, but this fear is very much a hot-button issue in our country. So, I will focus on some of our confusion and try to bring some clarity.

There is much we seem to forget. Let us admit that much of the land that the immigrant Mexican population comes to occupy when they enter the United States, we took from them.

We forget that our country passed the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. We forget or may not know that NAFTA required Mexico to change its constitution so as to end Mexican agricultural subsidies, while the U.S. kept its own subsidies. U.S. farm subsidies run about \$10 billion a year. U.S. corn and grain exports tripled immediately after the passage of NAFTA, while Mexican corn and grain prices fell by 50-70%. By 2003, corn and coffee prices plunged, and threw rural Mexico into extreme poverty. Millions of Mexicans lost their farms and were forced into cities, where there were few jobs, and they had few marketable skills for the jobs that existed. Forced off of their farms, many of these farmers fled north in order to support their families or to survive. We reap the benefits of cheap food and cheap labor.

Some claim the Mexican illegals are damaging our economy. The facts make it look far more like our economy now depends upon this source of low-wage workers to maintain

our standard of living. Some say that these illegals are paying little taxes as they take much of our social services. The facts seem to be that most immigrant workers are paying taxes, including over \$500 billion in Social Security taxes. At the same time, most illegal immigrants, and many other immigrants, are not taking advantage of social services, being afraid of deportation or harassment.

These concerns are, in part, the bad news, but there is also good news. Here are three Unitarian Universalist responses to our immigration challenges.

As a member of the Unitarian Universalist Funding Panel for a Just Society, I have had the pleasure of learning about, advocating for, and helping award a grant to a central Kansas organization for migrant farm workers.

Many of the people working in the hog and poultry processing facilities are immigrant workers. Some of them have little, or inadequate, identification, which makes getting access to banking services very difficult. Also, most of the banks do not have bilingual staff. As a result most of these workers deal in cash. They get their checks and cash them as soon as they can, making themselves targets for assault and robbery. The Kansas organization wanted money to help promote the hiring of bilingual staff 16 banks in the central part of the state, and to have these banks require only worker identification cards, which are much easier to obtain than Social Security cards. As more and more immigrant workers put their money in banks, the U. S. Community Re-Investment Act requires the reinvestment of the capital into the communities from which the money came. This small investment will create a circle of mutually reinforcing economy, stability, and the possibility of entrepreneurial initiative. This investment is one act of UU neighborliness.

There is so much we can do, in small and large ways, to make life easier for those who only want a place to work, to build lives, and to raise families. Both justice and compassion can be served by acts of caring service. A few years ago I was the visiting minister at the Tucson UU congregation. Early in the service, a member shared his excitement at being involved in a humanitarian emergency relief facility that his congregation helped staff. Right on the border, they had created a safe house with food, water and a safe bed. They also placed water throughout the desert where those attempting to cross the border might die from dehydration. He shared with this congregation how important their work is for those who are hoping to cross the border and whose lives will be at risk.

Another act of compassion is coming from our own congregation. We are hosting a coalition that is monitoring local and national actions of the Minuteman Project. The Minutemen promote vigilantism along the border; it is considered a hate group. Our congregation supports efforts to reduce hate.

Truly we are all one humanity, and what happens to the least affects us all. As people of faith we are called to treat others as we would have them treat us.

# **Attachment**

## **Civil Rights for All Immigrants**

A Statement of the Gamaliel Foundation and Religious Leaders

### ***We affirm***

that all human beings enjoy an innate human dignity with the right to food, shelter, freedom and the opportunity to provide for their own good and the good of society;

that, historically, the United States “has consistently received immigrants, refugees, exiles, and the persecuted from other lands.

Fleeing injustice and oppression and seeking liberty and the opportunity to achieve a full life, many have found work, homes, security, liberty, and growth for themselves and their families”<sup>1</sup>;

and that in a world “in which global poverty and persecution are rampant, the presumption is that persons must migrate in order to support and protect themselves and that nations *who are able to receive them should do so whenever possible.*”<sup>2</sup>

### ***We condemn***

the harshness and inflexibility of many federal immigration laws; the prospect of detention of immigrants remote from legal representation and supportive community; the threat of deportation for minor offenses; the exploitation of undocumented immigrants, including their labor; the forced separation of immigrant families; and the punitive treatment, violence and death awaiting many immigrants who cross the borders of this nation by land and sea.

### ***We call for***

faith communities, people of faith and all people of good will to welcome, assist, and befriend immigrants;

faith communities, people of faith and all people of good will to speak out for just and fair treatment of immigrants;

public policy changes which secure civil rights for all immigrants, including:

- a broad legalization of undocumented immigrants who are contributing to the social and economic security of this nation
- full labor protection and labor rights for immigrants
- humane border enforcement policies that, while protecting the security of this nation, emphasize the safety and dignity of immigrants and offer a legal, safe, and orderly alternative for those seeking to cross our borders in order to work
- an end to the inhumane detention and warehousing of asylum seekers who have committed no crime and who have come to this country seeking freedom
- a reform of U.S. family-based legalization categories to encourage family unity in the immigration process
- an end to deportation for minor offenses
- protection of the civil liberties of all people regardless of citizenship

<sup>1</sup> *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope.*” A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, number 15. Issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, January 22, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., number 39.

## Readings

### "One at a Time," by Marge Piercy

It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act, it starts when you do  
it again after they said no,  
it starts when you say We  
and know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more.

### "Patriot," by Alice Walker

If you  
Want to show  
Your love  
For America  
Love  
Americans  
Smile  
When you see  
One  
Flowerlike  
His  
Turban  
Rosepink.

Rejoice  
At the  
Eagle feather  
In a grandfather's  
Braid.

If a sister  
Bus rider's hair  
Is  
Especially  
Nappy  
A miracle  
In itself  
Praise it.

How can there be  
Homeless  
In a land  
So crammed  
With houses

&  
Young children  
Sold  
As sex snacks  
Causing our thoughts  
To flinch &  
Snag?

Love your country  
By loving  
Americans.

*Love Americans.*

Salute the soul  
& the body  
Of who we

Spectacularly &  
Sometimes  
Pitifully are.  
Love *us*. We are  
The flag.

"Nativism in the U.S.," from Project Aware, Hutchinson, Kansas

"Nativism" or the idea that only U.S. "natives" really belong here, is not new to this country. Nativism is a thinly disguised form of racism, in which "natives" are tacitly understood to be people of European descent – a category that has expanded since the end of World War II to include southern and eastern Europeans, Catholics, and Jews, although it originally applied exclusively to northern and western European Protestants.

For the past 150 years, attitudes towards immigrants have changed cyclically, often undergoing rapid shifts in response to economic or political conditions. In periods of social and economic turmoil, such as the years following World War I or the post-World War II McCarthy Era, anti-immigrant sentiments tend to flare up as people look for someone to blame. During times of economic growth and social stability, nativism tends to die down. As always, it is difficult to tell to what extent media and political figures reflect public attitudes, and to what extent they create them.

Politicians have often turned waves of nativist feeling to political advantage, voting in policies that penalize immigrants. Two particularly clear examples are the Chinese Exclusion Act of the late 1800s, which banned Chinese-born laborers from entering the country, and "Operation

Wetback,” in which more than 500,000 people of Mexican descent (including numerous U.S. citizens) were rounded up and deported during the Depression of the 1930s.

Anti-immigrant feeling ran high in the early 1990s – partly because the country faced a prolonged recession, and partly because of the marked growth of immigration, particularly in California. Some observers believe that the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment in that period was also a reflection of racial anxieties among the white population, as it became increasingly obvious that white Americans would eventually cease to be the majority – a shift that has already occurred in California and is projected to occur by 2050 for the country as a whole.

Anti-immigrant politics have also given rise to an increase in vigilante activity, particularly in the U.S.-Mexico border region. Vigilantes have vowed to stop “illegal” immigration by patrolling the border with binoculars and guns, “arresting” at gunpoint anyone they presume to be an undocumented immigrant. Despite the threat of bloodshed, several political figures have defended such vigilante activity, including former INS Commissioner Doris Meissner, who has said that ranchers near the border “have legitimate concerns about the trespassers on their property.” In one 17-month period in 1999 and 2000, at least 30 incidents of vigilante violence were reported in a single section of the Arizona-Mexico border. Other ranchers, by contrast, have installed humanitarian aid stations on their land to assist border crossers who might otherwise face sickness or death due to dehydration.

Some vigilante activity is supported by white supremacist hate groups. A recent report by the Southern Poverty Law Center

(SPLC), which monitors the activity of hate groups, describes organized anti-immigrant networks on the radical right. Groups such as the National Organization for European American Rights (NOFEAR), formed by former Klansman David Duke, and the council of Conservative Citizens overtly promote racial hatred, using vicious language to attack immigrants. The SPLC report describes their views as follows:

*In the eyes of most of these groups, immigrants (typically, nonwhite immigrants) are responsible for nearly all the country's ills, from poverty and inner city decay to crime, urban sprawl, and environmental degradation. Many of them also believe there is a secret plot by the Mexican government and American Hispanics to wrest the Southwest away from the United States in order to create "Aztlan," a Hispanic nation.*