

Immigration from a Faith Perspective

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Scripture: Exodus 23:9 (NRSV): You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Luke 10:29-37 (NRSV): ²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii,^[a] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The uncertainties related to the COVID-19 pandemic are having a huge impact on our capacity to think about anything else. Yet even as we focus on the immediate health crisis, and sometimes feel overwhelmed, we should be thinking about other concerns and considering our long-term goals. One set of issues our church cares about concerns immigration and the pressing needs of those who have recently arrived in our country and our community, which are now exacerbated by

the precarious medical situation. Now is actually a good time to consider the biblical and theological values that can help orient us when we turn to more practical responses to these needs.

A church task force worked for nearly three years to provide a space for Sanctuary for undocumented persons in danger of deportation. In late 2019 we decided to shift our focus to where needs were expressed by the people we want to help. We recommended that First United Church of Christ Northfield become an Immigrant Welcoming Church. In December the Church Council endorsed this proposal. It calls on our church to engage in a process of discussion, study, and reflection, and to commit ourselves to a number of activities that express our concern for vulnerable persons who recently arrived in the United States. This process is to be guided by our own deliberations and by resources provided by the larger UCC, which in 2017 declared our denomination to be an Immigrant Welcoming Church. We are working towards the goal of approving, at our annual meeting in 2021, a covenant that will define what this means for us.

As well as practical activities that express our concerns, the UCC asks us to learn about the biblical and theological roots of our commitment, and to integrate our concerns about immigration into our worship, sermons, prayers, and music. Today's sermon and worship are one expression of this commitment. What are the

biblical sources and theological principles that underlie our ministry and social justice activities in this area? I do not propose to define the one, true Christian position on immigration, which involves a complex set of issues about which Christians disagree. I'm just one member of this congregation, sharing not **the** but "a faith perspective" and inviting you to think about and discuss your own faith perspective on immigration, and to get involved in some specific activities that would express that faith.

In the Bible and in the Church's history, a concern with refugees and displaced persons is pervasive and deep-rooted. The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, is full of stories of people on the move and of God's care for them. Think of Noah and his family, the original "boat people," drifting with no sure destination in a time of natural disaster, a flood. Abraham leaves his home to move to a Promised Land that remained undefined for many generations. Think of the central event in Israel's history: the Exodus from slavery in Egypt to liberation in a new land. The memory of this event stayed with Israel and shaped the Torah, as it called for just and generous treatment of foreigners. In the book of Exodus, explaining the covenant just received at Mount Sinai, Moses tells the people: "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Leviticus 19 states: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you

as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” When the prophets criticize Israel’s lapses from the covenant, refugees and outsiders are among the vulnerable groups for whom God has a special concern and care. The tradition of sanctuary allowed temples and entire cities to declare themselves places of refuge for persons accused of crime, so that they could be protected from swift, harsh, and unjustified retribution. Later, exile was a crucial experience that shaped Israel’s identity. In captivity in Babylon, the people Israel yearned for their homeland, knew again the suffering of displacement, and understood the meaning of God’s salvation as including safety in a home. The reasons people seek a new home in the Bible are the same reasons why today people want to live in the United States. They want to escape famine, persecution, disease, war, and poverty. They want to live in peace and safety.

I am not just cherry-picking a few verses. This pervasive theme and orientation shape the whole Hebrew Bible. Seared into the consciousness and identity of Israel is the longing for home, the responsibility to help others make their own home, and the faith that God provides for the homeless and calls for a just society in which vulnerable displaced people are protected and cared for.

In the New Testament, too, situations involving vulnerable travelers are prominent. In the birth narratives of Jesus, we see a mother, father, and baby

making a perilous journey to Egypt to escape murder by agents of King Herod. Jesus's teachings emphasize loving that specific person who seems to us foreign, alien, even reprehensible. "Love your neighbor as yourself," he teaches. When asked "who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a man who was a foreigner in Israel, and who demonstrates the meaning of neighbor love by taking care of a wounded traveler with a different identity, whom he could easily have passed by, as did two other men in the story. Jesus doesn't give an abstract definition of "neighbor"; he tells a story about an individual who responds to the pressing need of a foreign person he encounters. He ends the story with this admonition: "Go and do likewise." The parable of the Good Samaritan, so well-known that it often fails to make an impact, takes on new relevance when considered in relation to today's challenges related to immigration.

Think, too, of the parable of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25, when the supposedly righteous ones ask the risen Lord, "When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or *a stranger to be welcomed?*" Jesus replies: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (v. 40). This parable gave rise to a tradition of legends about Jesus returning to earth, so to speak "incognito," and posing a challenge for Christians to respond. We see the same idea in the book of Hebrews (13:2), which urges us: "Do not neglect to show

hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Who is the stranger today, whom Jesus calls us to welcome and care for?

In the history of the Christian church, in particular our own Congregational Church heritage and UCC denomination, there are vital traditions that should nurture us today. In Saint Benedict’s *Rule*, an important focus and a core practice of monastic life is providing hospitality to strangers. During the medieval period in England, churches offered temporary sanctuary to persons accused of crimes, like the ancient Hebrew practice. This tradition saw the value of providing refuge for persons accused of wrongdoing, thereby making a safe haven for someone who may have been wrongfully accused. In the United States, our forebears in the Congregational Church were highly conscious of being a pilgrim people, never fully at home in any one place in this world yet called to establish a more just society for others as well as themselves. They supported abolition and the Underground Railroad, helping slaves to flee the South and begin a new life, often assisted by local congregations. After World War II, Christian churches, including this one, assisted displaced persons from Europe as they made a new home in the United States. The tradition of welcoming strangers and seeking justice for them continues today. The resolution on being an Immigrant Welcoming Church passed

by the UCC in 2017 states boldly: “The UCC condemns the dismantling of families, the criminalization of the quest for freedom, and the caging of those whose only crime is to seek shelter from harm.” Both prophetic criticism and compassionate care are crucial expressions of United Church of Christ values.

Our church has, I think, a strong sense of being called to respond to the crisis of immigration. The details of how we will do this are still taking shape, and because of the pandemic, the timing is now uncertain. For some of us, moving from conviction to action is a challenge. There is room for different understandings of our task, and different actions to express our concern. Please consider taking part in the planned adult education series that will teach us about the immigration crisis and possible Christian responses. Detailed information about ways you might get involved in helping recent immigrants is provided on our newly created website about immigration, to which you will very soon find a link on the firstucc.org website.

Our responses fall in three basic areas: first, engagement with efforts to reform or intervene in the legal system and the policies that govern how our nation treats immigrants. For example, we might offer financial support to provide legal assistance for those caught up in proceedings they can hardly understand. We might lobby for passage of laws that provide a pathway to citizenship for long-time

residents who are undocumented. We can try to reform a system that deports noncitizen residents who have been here for decades for a misdemeanor as trivial as a traffic violation.

The second form our actions will take can be called humanitarian work. We will partner with local organizations that try to support the needs of families and individuals who have come to Northfield. Our current partnerships include the Community Action Center's Food Shelf, the TORCH program, Northfield Supporting Neighbors, the Healthfinders Collaborative, the activities of the Isaiah network, and others. We might create our own programs, too, such as trips we are planning to visit the Mexican border--next autumn for adults, we hope, and in spring of 2021 for the high school group.

Third, we will integrate our concerns about immigration into our educational programs and our worship. This church has always had a vital concern with issues of social justice. As Todd Lippert reminded us in his final sermon, a church is more than a social work agency or a political lobby. We are grounded in a faith tradition, an understanding of God, and convictions about how God wants us to live. We are a diverse community united by a Christian identity, a Church's history, and certain core values. Recalling this identity, celebrating it, and praying for God's guidance and help are crucial to sustain our practical actions. A theology

can ground us, orient us, motivate us, and inspire us, especially when our efforts don't produce immediate results and we are tempted to give up.

Our sense of being called to respond to neighbors in need is very strong. How we will respond to that call is up to each of us, as individuals and as we decide what we will do together. May God be with us, helping us to understand who we truly are, who our neighbor is, and what it means, here and now, to “go and do likewise” and love our neighbor. Amen.