

August 2, 2009

Park Road Baptist  
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Text: Leviticus 19:33-34, Matt. 2:13-15  
Hebrews 13:1-2

Subject: Communion; Immigration

## **Is Everyone Included at the Table?**

On the altar table is a communion plate and chalice that are very important to me. The chalice I bought from a Jewish Israeli in Jerusalem. The plate I bought from a Palestinian Christian in Bethlehem. Two cities physically separated only by a few miles and yet politically separated by so great a distance that is difficult to measure. I bought this cup from Jerusalem and this plate from Bethlehem, in hope and prayer that one day, Israelis and Palestinians will be able to break bread together.

The second communion plate and chalice on the altar was given to me at my ordination by Tim. If you look at it closely, you will see the plate has been broken in half. There are fissures in the cup where it was shattered into many pieces in the Northridge earthquake. Both have been glued back together and are powerful reminders to me of Jesus' body that was broken for us, as well as how broken each of us are as we come forward for holy communion to be put back together again, forgiven and made whole by the grace of God.

Every time I serve communion, I always say, "This is the Lord's Table. Jesus invites everyone. You do not have to be a member of this church. Everyone is invited." The question I want us to ponder this morning is this: "Whereas Jesus invites everyone to the table, do we include everyone at this communion table? Are there people with whom we are not comfortable sharing this meal?"

How many of you saw the movie, "The Graduate," starring Dustin Hoffman? Do you remember the wedding scene at the end of the movie when they have locked him out of the church so he cannot disrupt the wedding? That church is in LaVerne, California. In fact, it is the LaVerne United Methodist Church. I've preached there. I was even asked to play my guitar and sing for a wedding in that church – now that is a scary thought! I lived in LaVerne, CA when I was chaplain for the David and Margaret Girls Home, a home for emotionally disturbed and abused teenage girls. Many of these girls had been gang kids. Most all of them knew too well sexual and physical abuse, if not prostitution and prison.

I took the girls who were interested to church on Sundays. The very first church I visited with the girls was LaVerne UMC. We sat on the front row. After worship that Sunday, the President of the United Methodist Women came up and whispered in my ear, "You really shouldn't bring those girls to our church. They just don't fit in. And the might be a bad influence on our teenagers." To be sure, these girls were not your "typical teens." They were all colors (Latino, Asian, African American and Caucasian) and tough-looking (one of them had six holes pierced in one ear with long, metal safety pins for her earrings.) They had been abused and it showed in their dress, their attitudes, their language...and their hope for the future. They were part of who Jesus called, "the least of these," (Matthew 25:31-46). That woman was right, these girls would not "fit in" easily. But they were beautiful children of God with open hearts, once you gained their trust. LaVerne UMC didn't just lock Dustin

Hoffman out of the church in the movie, “The Graduate.” It locked out these girls, who so needed to know the love of Jesus. What an indictment on the church.

Is there anyone that would feel “locked out”, or not included, at Park Road Baptist? I am so inspired by how Park Road Baptist Church led Charlotte in welcoming people of other races. Back in 1972 your congregation was the first church in this queen city to begin an interracial Child Development Center, opening your doors to White and Black children. Our Black brothers and sisters are most definitely included at this communion table. But what about our Brown brothers and sisters from south of the border? Those who mow our lawns, take care of our children, pick the tomatoes for our spaghetti sauce, clean the hotel rooms in which they cannot afford to stay, paint and dry wall houses even though they cannot afford a home.

On this hot day in August I want to consider the hot topic of immigration. Let me begin by asking you to consider if you have heard more preachers address the topic of immigration or homosexuality? I’ll wager most of us are much more aware of sermons by conservative Christian clergy condemning homosexuality than sermons by any Christian clergy condoning immigration. However, the ratio of scriptures which instruct us to welcome the immigrant (alien/stranger) compared to those which mention homosexuality is 50 to 1. How easy it can be, as Christians, to ignore the scriptures that judge us and name our sins, and instead to focus intensely on passages by which we would judge others. But friends, scripture is not to be used as a weapon but as a mirror.

I do not want to consider immigration this morning from a political standpoint, as I know there are many varied and valid different perspectives on this complex issue. I want to consider this issue from the standpoint of our faith. Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches said, The Bible is the “ultimate immigration handbook.”

The litany refrain we hear over and over again from the Hebrew Scriptures, “A wandering Aramean was my father” (Deuteronomy 26:5), reminding us that the foundational faith story of Abraham, who is claimed as the spiritual father for Jews, Christians and Muslims, is one of pilgrimage. The Old Testament tells us never to forget that our spiritual ancestors were once aliens in the land of Egypt. In the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, we are told 36 times to remember we were slaves in Egypt. “When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34). You see, the Hebrews knew well what it meant to be exploited, to be the “alien”. Now that they had some power and wealth, they are admonished not to forget they were once immigrants themselves. Does that sound familiar? Because all Americans, except for the only true “native Americans” (who were robbed of their land) are descendents of immigrants. We must remember.

The history of immigration in the United States has been difficult. Consider this quote from a well-known American, “Few of their children in the country learn English....Unless the stream of their importation could be turned, they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious.” (Kenneth C. Davis, *The Founding Immigrants*, *New York Times*, July 3, 2007). Guess who said that? Benjamin Franklin spoke these words about German

immigrants in the mid-1700s. The story of the economic exploitation of groups of people is as old as the people of Israel being subjugated and oppressed in Egypt. Africans were kidnapped and forced to work as slaves on plantations; Chinese were brought in to build our railroads; Western European immigrants were essential to sustain the Industrial Revolution; Latino immigrants today maintain American agriculture. Yet we have so often vilified these immigrants as we see in the Japanese internment camps in the 1940s. We have allowed others to foster our fears and promote our prejudice. Think of the impressions you had of Cuba before you learned the stories of Pastor Yurelis and Resurrection Baptist Church, or your fears about low income teenagers in our city until you began your ministry with Hyatts. How quickly minds and hearts are changed as relationships are formed. As Christians, we are to be people of faith, not fear. The scriptures command us to welcome the stranger.

The greatest migration was when God sent his Son, Jesus, to be incarnate in human flesh. When he is still a baby, Jesus and his parents become refugees when they are forced to flee political persecution and escape to Egypt. (Matthew 2:13-15). Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus so identifies with the “least of these, our brothers and sisters,” that Jesus said when we meet the basic human needs of the least, it is as if we were doing it for Christ.

How are we to respond as Christians to our newest immigrants? First of all, we are to respond not out of fear, but out of our faith. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven,” we are to remember that these immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, are our brothers and sisters, created in the image of God.

We are also to know the facts: undocumented workers do pay taxes as their employers make deductions just like for you and me. According to the “U.S. Social Security Administration, it is estimated that “undocumented immigrants pay approximately \$8.5 billion in Social Security and Medicare taxes annually” (For You Were Once a Stranger, Compiled by the North Carolina Council of Churches, 2009, page17), even though they can’t benefit from this when they retire like you and I can.

Do you know these words?

*“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breath free,  
The wretched refuse from your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest –tost to me,  
I lift my lamps beside the golden door!”*

This moving poem was written by Emma Lazarus and is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. However, like the moving words of Leviticus we heard in our scriptural text this morning, they are easier to read than they are to heed.

Park Road Baptist Church, you have led the way on race relations in this city. Thank you. May God give us the courage, the chuptzah, to also be the first to welcome our immigrant brothers and sisters to the communion table, to Wednesday night suppers, to our churches and into our homes. While we might disagree on immigration policy and its complexities, let us agree on offering hospitality to our immigrant brothers and sisters as our Scriptures command us, whether they are documented or not. One of my Board Members at Mecklenburg Ministries, Sister Andrea Inkrott, says, “The Church does not need to look at

papers to see whether someone is a member or not – their being a human being and in need is enough to be a neighbor.”

I end with a story told to me by one of my dear friends, Rabbi Judy Schindler. There is a modern legend in which a rabbi asked his disciples the following question about the darkness of our world. “How do we know that the night has ended and day has begun?” the rabbi asked. One of his students responded with confidence, “You know that the night has ended and day has begun when you can distinguish a goat from a sheep.” A second student suggested that night has ended when you can tell the difference between an olive and a fig tree. “Those are all good answers,” said the rabbi. “But I believe that when you see white, black or olive skinned women walking towards you and you say these are my sisters; and when you see Islamic, Christian and Jewish men walking towards you and you say these, these are my brothers, then the night has truly ended and the day has begun.”

**Let us pray:**

God of the VIP and of the least of these, thank you for loving us. Thank you for our nation, for this land that values liberty and justice for all people. In humility, we realize that people in many nations do not have the same advantages that we have. Help us to remember that when we speak of immigrants and refugees, we speak of Jesus. Loving God, open our minds and hearts to welcoming the stranger, the immigrant, in our schools, in our church, in our neighborhoods. For in welcoming the stranger, indeed, we are welcoming you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

**Homework:**

1. Listen to a Spanish radio station for a little while (try WNOW AM 1030.) Imagine what it must be like for a new Spanish speaking immigrant not to understand the language of the culture. OR
2. Rent the movie, *A Day Without Mexicans* (2004) – a light-hearted but reflective movie that imagines what one day in California would look like if all Latinos disappeared.
3. Extra Credit: Mecklenburg Ministries has a Bible study, *Beyond Hola*, which we make available at our cost of \$5.00. Get one and use it for your personal Bible study, for your Sunday School group or small group discussion.