

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

When Memory Fails
Leviticus 19.33-34, 24.22; Matthew 25.34-45
Russ Dean, May 30, 2010



Some things in life we never forget. The home run you hit in Little League. Your first kiss. Your baptism, your wedding, a family funeral... seared into our souls, forever. Sometime we never forget. But sometimes we can't remember yesterday. Someone recently commented on a hymn, which we had already sung this year. Most of the time I can't remember what I had for breakfast, much less hymns from a prior worship service!

Which reminds me of the three old ladies... The first said, "I'm getting really forgetful. This morning, I was standing at the top of the stairs, and I couldn't remember whether I had just come up or was about to go down." The second said, "I was sitting on the edge of my bed this morning, and I couldn't remember whether I was getting up or going to sleep!" The third replied smugly, "My memory is just as good as it's always been, knock on wood. [knock on pulpit] – Now, let me see who's at the door!"

Baptist Historian Walter Shurden has said, "Tell me what you remember, and I'll tell you who you are." Who are you? Do you remember? You are an immigrant. So am I. When Memory Fails, so does faith. When Memory Fails, so does compassion. When Memory Fails, so does our most basic humanity.

We are immigrants, so the Leviticus text reminds us, for we were *aliens in the land of Egypt*. Hear the text as theological affirmation rather than historical reflection.¹ *Aliens in Egypt*... or in America... or in our own home or office or school... or within our very own

¹ It is not important to enter the theological/archaeological debate about what, if any, mass-scale slavery the Hebrew people endured in Egypt – but that debate is alive and well in pockets of biblical scholarship. Even for those who maintain the most literal take on this issue recognize there is a multi-layered meaning to the Israelites' "bondage in Egypt," and that is the more important message for today.

skin... “aliens” – the affirmation of faith is that we have been rescued from that alienation as recipients of a love and a welcome that bespeaks a grace we cannot deserve. It is a grace that should lead us to responsive living. That is, life as response to that which has been given us. If we are not living in response, in some way repaying all that we have received, we simply do not remember.

In college, after a mournful three-month hiatus from Pastor #1 (or maybe it was three years... I'll spare you the details!) – when we finally resumed dating, and life returned to my face and spring to my step, my friend Randy Morris, the 6'8" African-America basketball player and preacher who was my friend, would remind me anytime he saw me on campus and I seemed down about anything else... “Remember Egypt, Russ!” “Do you remember Egypt!?” If we don't “*remember Egypt*” our Memory will Fail us, and the consequences will be much worse than becoming the punch line of a silly joke. For we are immigrants. It has not been so long ago.

I heard several stories this week²... From the Irish potato farmers in search of fertile soil who became Kentucky tobacconists... from the Italian Fioris who inexplicably became the Theo family at a desk on Ellis Island, and ended up prosperous vineyard owners in South Carolina... from the two brothers, horse thieves, each, who sought exile far from the long arm of French justice... from the Scotch-Irish tribe who staked their new claim on soil still damp from the tears of the Cherokee, whom Andrew Jackson marched on a westward trail into nothingness... Immigrants. You and me. We each got a start here because of the daring offer of a new land.

Standing in New York Harbor, Lady Liberty, speaks those words which we have all known, intimately, even if we have forgotten the generous sound of their life-giving welcome:

² Apparently I failed to make it clear to the congregation that these are their stories, which they shared with me during the week in response to a church-wide e-mail request. I also failed to mention the family whose Chilton ancestor was purportedly the first to step off the Mayflower and onto Plymouth Rock!

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores, send these, the tempest toss'd to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.³

It is our heritage in history, and the claim of our faith – our welcome to others comes as a result of the welcome we have known. *We love... because God first loved us* (1 John 4.19).

So much of our faith story is about the journey, the story of daring, brave souls who lived a life on pilgrimage. Following God, as did Abraham, “*to a land I will show you*” (said God, Genesis 12.1). Immigrants. Always. That is our story. The untold, but necessary counterpart to that story is the mercy of the stranger whose word of welcome, whose place of lodging made the difference in life and death. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Ezra... Jesus and his parents... immigrants, all.

When Memory Fails... so will our faith.

Justice for immigrants is amazing to find in the Old Testament. For in that culture, possibly even more violent than ours, more xenophobic (even more marked by the tribes and clans and territories that meant life and death) in that culture God issued a command to welcome the stranger in your midst. In that land, which still practiced the justice of “*eye for eye, tooth for tooth*” (Exodus 21.24), God says there is but one law. For the alien and the citizen, alike. One law.

In their statement on immigration, the United Methodist Church summarizes this way:

*The Bible is full of stories of sojourners, strangers without homes, whom God called people to protect... God did not let the Israelites forget that they had been without a homeland for such a long time; the ethic of welcoming the sojourner was woven into the very fabric of the Israelite confederacy. It was more than an ethic, it was a command of God... Jesus embodied the love of God to the world and modeled how we are to act with love and compassion for the sojourner.*⁴

³ The poem by Emma Lazarus is entitled, “The New Colossus,” and the quotation which is engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

⁴ United Methodist Church, “Immigrants and Refugees: To Love the Sojourner,” <http://gbgm-umc.org/mission/resolutions/3-biblic.html>.

This is a divisive, thorny issue, the ground of much political maneuvering, for both principled cause and partisan expediency. In this atmosphere “immigration” has become a curse word of sorts to some people. For people of faith, it should never be. Our history is clear. Our faith heritage is unwavering. Even though our stand on policy issues, specific details regarding immigration decisions can vary, our basic posture cannot. As people of faith, specifically, those trying to follow in the way of Jesus, we are called to welcome the stranger. Period. *For whatever we [do] for one of the least of these, [we do] for [Christ]*. If your chosen political platform can be made to conform to this position of welcome, you will have no problem with Jesus. If not, you may need to rethink your party affiliation – or calling yourself a follower of Jesus!

As to the issue, in its current, ugly, divisive, political form, let me first suggest to you that much of the language we hear needs to change. As it was succinctly put on someone’s Facebook page last week, “When you think of the word ‘immigrant’ do you automatically think ‘illegal’?”⁵ The first change that many people need to make is to personalize “them.” They are not “illegals” – even if they are undocumented.⁶ And though it echoes an ancient biblical usage, because it has a different connotation today, they are not some sub-human species called “aliens.” They are mothers and fathers, brothers and daughters, sisters and sons, who have come to this country for the very same reasons we came. They deserve the dignity of humanity. Jesus would have no less.

⁵ This was pure coincidence – the writer is not a member of our church. His comment was in no way related to today’s sermon.

⁶ A clarification should be made here. Some undocumented workers are those to whom the derogatory epithet “illegal” is aimed. If you enter the country illegally you will obviously have no documentation. Information from the NC Council of Churches, however, explains that there are many undocumented immigrants here who are not “illegal,” per se. The violation of a student visa, for example, which may result in a person living in the U.S. for many years (undocumented), is a violation of policy – but not breach of a law, so this person would be “undocumented,” but technically not “illegal.”

And after we have personalized the immigrant community, we need to question the bitter rhetoric that is freely filling our airwaves and emails, denigrating virtually everything about “immigrants.” If you only listen to Fox news or MSNBC, let me suggest that you find another source. Or that listen to both. And regardless, you need to read something that offers a voice or reasoned faith, which you will not find on either of those extremes. “Facts” are easy to come by these days, which means we need to choose carefully whose facts we will allow to influence our thinking, whose facts will set the course for our “responsive” living.

There are a number of myths about immigration that are often presented as facts.⁷ The sources I have trusted for my facts are the North Carolina Council of Churches⁸, whose 75-year history of ecumenical work for justice speaks for itself, and the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops⁹, whose opinions I trust as carefully considered biblical interpretation. So, a few facts that may have influenced your thinking:

1) According to a 2008 study, undocumented workers (note, not “illegals”) contribute more to the economy in taxes, economic growth provided through their labor, and consumer spending than they receive in benefits. “Both the CATO Institute and the President’s Council of Economic Advisors reveals that the average immigrant pays a net 80,000 dollars more in taxes than they collect in government services.” All undocumented workers pay sales and property taxes, and may also pay income and social security taxes. A study in 2006 showed an annual net gain of \$7 billion to the Social Security system – this is money paid in that will not be returned.

⁷ It goes without saying that those whose “facts” differ from the ones I quote will disagree with my usage of the term “myths” here.

⁸ Information from the NC Council of Churches is found on two fact sheets, which I have included as appendices in the printed copies of the sermon. For further online help, see: www.welcometheimmigrant.org/toolbox (click “Fact Sheets” if you are reading the sermon online.)

⁹ Justice for Immigrants, but US Catholic Bishops www.justiceforimmigrants.org/myths.html.

2) English proficiency with immigrants is roughly equivalent to the Italian, German, Eastern-European immigration of the 18th and 19th centuries. Like other immigrants, today's first-century immigrants are slow to learn the language, but second-generation immigrants are 91% fluent, and third-generation immigrants are 97% fluent in this nation's native tongue. I understand principled positions on immigration and English. I do not understand the anger.

3) Immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans. While the undocumented population doubled from 1994 to 2005, violent crime dropped by 34% and property crimes decreased by 32%. A Harvard study found that "first generation immigrants are 45% less likely to commit violent crimes than Americanized, third generation immigrants."

4) Studies have shown that increases in immigrant populations do not negatively impact the employment of native-born workers. A study by the Urban Institute recently estimated that between 2000 and 2005 the number of low-income workers declined by about 1.8 million. Immigrant labor offset that total decline by about one-third.

This is an issue of importance especially in today's economy. Jobs are important. But if Charlotte area construction firms are advertising for jobs in newspapers in Mexico City, can the workers who come here really be considered un-invited? And if they've been "invited," how "illegal" should we really treat them?¹⁰ They are here doing jobs that American employers cannot fill with American workers – either because American workers will not work for the wages employers are paying, or because American employers will not pay livable wages. Much like the Walmart-ization of America, we cannot decry the outsourcing of American jobs while at the very same time demanding such low prices as to make Walmart the King. We cannot have it both ways. "The American Farm Bureau asserts that without guest workers the U.S. economy

¹⁰ I have not personally seen an advertisement as such, and have no independent verification for this claim, though I have no reason to distrust the statement made by the Chair of the Mecklenburg County Commissioners, Jennifer Roberts, in a Mecklenburg Ministries program about a year ago.

would lose as much as \$9 billion a year in agricultural production and 20 percent of current production would go overseas.”

In a fascinating but disturbing interview on N.P.R. radio last year, a Californian entrepreneur decided she had a landscaping hook that was going to make her rich. The rhetoric against “illegals” in the landscaping business was at a then-all-time high (though it is even higher now), so she created a business using only documented workers, paying livable wages. Her pitch to would-be clients was her “pro-American” approach: only documented workers; fully legal landscaping services. “Yes, you’ll pay a little more,” she’d say to them, “but isn’t this really what you want?” Apparently not! Unable to compete with services basing their prices and their profits on undocumented labor, her business failed in less than a year. It is simply unconscionable to invite workers (either explicitly or implicitly), allow them to prepare our foods, build our homes, manicure our lawns... and then criminalize them for doing what we’ve asked them to do – for doing what we will not do for ourselves.

5) Finally, claims that illegal immigrants are a burden on the healthcare industry need to be carefully considered. “Federal, state and local governments spend approximately 1.1 billion dollars annually on healthcare costs for undocumented immigrants... approximately \$11 in taxes for each U.S. household.” This equates to about 1.25% of the spending for non-elderly American citizens. Since foreign-born individuals tend to be in better health than native-born Americans, their needs tend to be less.¹¹ So, yes, you are spending about \$11 of your money each year to provide health care for undocumented workers. All things considered, and with Jesus’ call to

¹¹ This sad fact is deserving of it’s own sermon!

take care of the last and the least among us, I believe this is a price the followers of Jesus should be willing to pay.¹²

We need immigration Reform. There is no doubt. And there will be difficult decisions to make as we wade through those waters. But we cannot make our decisions on how to respond to immigrants and immigration based on email “forwards” making false claims that impugn all immigrants, nor on the hostile rhetoric of radio talk show hosts nor on the tirades of misguided, so-called patriots. Any policy or law that creates or encourages an atmosphere of fear and hatred and animosity between citizens and immigrants is not only un-Christian, it is fundamentally un-American. Built into the framework of both of those systems, into the founding documents of each, is a fundamental welcome. We are not living up to our creed, in either Church or State.

I cannot speak for the State, but you have called me to speak for the church (this church). So let me suggest that we move forward by recognizing that today is Trinity Sunday on the liturgical calendar. Though this doctrine deserves the controversy that has always encircled it, maybe today is as good a day as any to affirm it. To be clear, God is who and what and where God is – our beliefs and theologies will not change that. But because language is essential to our communication, and because language shapes the images that determine how we “see” the world, the language we use of God – that which represents our highest value – is utterly important. Conceptually a Unitarian God has its benefits. But how much more influential to our thinking might it be if God, the very nature and person and character and life of God, is not Solitary – One, some Unified Dominating Aloneness – but if the very nature and person and

¹² Much more needs to be said about this (and has been!) than this sermon would allow, but given the facts quoted above, and the obvious fact that when un-insured individuals do end up in a hospital (whether citizens or immigrants), charges are many times higher than for insured individuals, doesn't it make sense – even from a purely selfish motive – to insure as many people as possible!?

character of God is, in fact, a community!?! Diverse (Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer), yet One (in wholeness and character, in sharing and in love).

What difference would it make, today, if we could begin to conceive of the community-which-is-God, as Sender, Sojourner, Sponsor... Three In One? The one who sends forth... the one who walks the sometimes-lonesome road... the one who welcomes and receives...¹³

The bottom line is this. Immigration is not an issue. Immigration is people. Pure and simple. And When Memory Fails those people cease to be people who are just like us. May the God who is a Community of Diversity and Unity and Welcome, “Sender, Sojourner, Sponsor,” help us to remember that we, too, were *aliens in the land of Egypt*...

May it be so!

¹³ Later in today’s service LeDayne McLeese Polaski spoke of her family’s experience as official U.S. “sponsors” of an immigrating family from Sierra Leone, Africa. You may read LeDayne’s powerful story in another appendix, below.

A Call to Action

In Sunday's worship LeDayne McLeese Polaski addressed the congregation in a "Call to Action" regarding her family's decision to "sponsor" the Sam family, now part of Park Road Baptist Church, who are immigrating from Sierra Leone, Africa. LeDayne began by suggesting that her words were more a "Call to Education" – that any real "Call to Action" would be ours to discern, individually. The rest of her powerful and poignant remarks follow.

The McLeese brothers from whom I inherited my first last name immigrated to the US from the British Isles in the early 1700's. They settled in upstate South Carolina --where the rolling green hills reminded them of home.

Charles Polaski from whom I inherited my other last name immigrated to the US from Poznan, Poland in 1861 – just in time for the US Civil War. He fought for the Union, thus earning his citizenship and then inexplicably moved South – first to Mississippi and later to Florida.

Both sides of my family and my husband's mixed and mingled and married with other immigrants in their chosen homeland – mostly with folk of Scotch, Irish, and English stock.

Only one of my ancestors – a Cherokee grandmother several greats over would not have a story of immigration to tell.

I have always had some vague sense of admiration for these people without whom I would not be who and where I am – but only recently have I realized the full extent of what they did for me – their barely imagined but surely hoped-for descendent.

Since October of 2009, we have shared our home and our lives with a newer immigrant family – the Sams from Sierra Leone, West Africa. Standing alongside of them throughout the years-long process of applying and waiting and planning and arriving, I have realized something I had never fully grasped before. When my ancestors braved the waters of the Atlantic to journey to a world distant and New, they did it not for themselves – but for their children – and their children's children -- and eventually for me and for my daughter Kate. Because let me tell you – immigration is hard!

First, the process is hard, long, expensive, and essentially random. The Sam family (Brickson, Annie, Annette, Brickson, Jr, and Jan) came to the US through what is called the Diversity Lottery. When Brickson first wrote to me about it, I thought it sounded like an Internet scam. But it is actually true – the US actively recruits immigrants from countries (like Sierra Leone) with low immigration rates. The process to qualify is grueling – most people who attempt to enter the process are rejected. Once you are accepted as an applicant, there is a long and expensive process to prove that you are worthy. And – if you make it through that round – your number is fed into a computer and – voila – the computer spits out a decision about the rest of your life -- you either get a visa or you don't. If rejected, you may not ever apply again. The process from beginning to end for the Sams took well over two years and by the time you factor in the application costs,

the medical exams, the visas, and the plane tickets, cost over \$10,000. That's a pretty high mountain for a family that was making the equivalent of about \$100 a month.

I know my ancestors went through a very different process. But in another way the process is the same. Once the decision has been made, you begin the process of saying goodbye – to every place, every thing, every person you have ever known. The most poignant email I got from Brickson before his family came said, “My mother is here to say goodbye to the children.” Imagine. You say goodbye to your church – your neighborhood – your friends – your family. You say goodbye to a job you know how to do – a language you know how to speak – a culture you know how to navigate. You say goodbye to the position you hold in society.

And then you arrive. Brickson says that USA stands for U Start All Over. And what a demanding task that restart is. The kids start new schools. You look for a new job. People turn you down because you have “an accent.” You look for new friends – a new community – a new identity. I think that Brickson and Annie would tell you that it is exhausting. And truly they have every advantage – they came with educations and experience, fluency in English, emotional and spiritual strength, and they came to the immensely supportive community that is Park Road Baptist Church. I cannot begin to imagine what the journey is like for the ones who come without any of those assets. I cannot imagine the strength and courage and desperation that impels them to come.

I can say this –I am extraordinarily grateful to and in absolute awe of the ones who did it for me.