



What Does the Bible REALLY Say About Immigrants, Refugees and the Resident Alien in our Midst

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I begin this morning with two true stories and a brief discussion of our gospel lesson. After that, I'm going to address the question many people have been asking recently, "What does the Bible really say about immigrants, refugees and the resident alien in our midst?" Finally, I'll close by sharing the official policy of the Episcopal Church on immigration and refugee resettlement.

THE FIRST TRUE STORY

The first true story is a particularly emotional one for me because it happened to my family a number of years ago. I was home alone with the kids - our son was only a few weeks old and our two daughters were five and seven. My husband had gone out for the evening to enjoy a well-deserved break with his friends.

It had been a difficult day to say the least. We were dealing with a challenging situation. Our seven-year-old daughter's best friend had been killed in a car accident the day before. She, herself, was only seven years old.

I was in the bedroom feeding and caring for the baby. My daughters were in the living room watching TV. Every few minutes Catherine would walk in and ask another question. "Mom, why did she have to die?" I'd hold her and answer the best I could, and, when she needed to process or have some space, she'd walk back out and sit with her sister.

Every few minutes she returned, "Why couldn't they save her?" "Will that happen to me?" "Where is she now?" "She's too young to be away from her family. She shouldn't be alone. Should we go to the morgue to be with her?" Our precious 7-year-old child was struggling with the loss of her friend and suddenly coming to realize that there is no real assurance of safety in this world. She always counted on us to keep her safe. Now, she began to understand that there are some things in this world from which even we can't protect her.

My mom called to check in and see how we were doing. And that's when it happened. The first few shots were loud and made me jump! They weren't in the house but outside and nearby. My daughters raced in and jumped in my arms. The baby started screaming. Mom was shouting, "what was that!"

What happened over the course of the next 45 minutes was terrifying. The first few shots were followed by an eerie quiet, then the screeching of tires, then more gunshots

than anyone could count. It turns out two rival gangs were driving through the streets of our lovely, quiet neighborhood shooting at each other.

We called the police – they said there was no way out. And there was no way for them to get in either. It was just too dangerous!

They advised us to get to the back of the house, stay down on the floor and, if possible, pull heavy furniture around us. We could hear glass breaking, cars racing, people screaming, and every gunshot made us jump. We huddled together, waiting, crying, praying.

After almost an hour, the police secured a few of the streets. My dad was on the outside waiting. He and the police made a plan. They called and told us to be ready. When he was cleared to enter, he would drive in, the kids and I would jump into the car, and we would speed off to safety. The plan was a little dangerous, but so was staying in that house. Thankfully, it worked.

Once outside the perimeter, we stopped to put kids in car seats. I remember being upset with myself that I didn't think to bring diapers for the baby. I just grabbed the kids and ran – no shoes, no extra clothes, no blankets, no diapers, nothing. My dad reassured me that we could get diapers and anything else we needed. The most important thing was that we were safe.

From that time on, the gangs became active in our neighborhood. We knew we had to get out. It took two months to sell our house, and it was several more months before we would move into our new home far away from the shootings that became a frequent occurrence in the place we left behind.

We were lucky. We had family. We had friends. We were able to sell our house without lying about the reason we were leaving. We were able to buy diapers that night and get to safety. And most importantly, we had each other. Not everyone is so lucky.

THE SECOND TRUE STORY

This second story comes from June Taylor, one of the members of St. Paul's who is living in Ecuador. She shared with us about a family who had to flee when pursued by Columbian drug lords.

One day when their son was in class in their home country of Columbia, the school was raided by men from a local drug cartel. They came in with guns and compelled the children to join their forces. The little boy in this family was lucky that day. Though he was absolutely terrified, he was able to find a hiding place in time and escaped the fate of the other boys. His family knew the drug lords would return, and they knew that, if it was discovered that their son had escaped, the whole family would be murdered. They had no choice. They left their home, their friends, their lives and almost everything they owned and ran for their lives.

This family of four suffered more loss in short time than most of us will in an entire lifetime. After a challenging and dangerous journey, they arrived safely in Ecuador. There, they heard about Crea tu Espacio, CTE, the organization that we are working to support

over the next six weeks. CTE helped the family to secure an income and a place to live. They assisted in getting the children into school. They provided professional counseling to help them cope with the trauma and educated them about their rights as a migrant family.

My story is nothing compared to theirs. I share it only because, sometimes it's easier for us to have compassion about things that effect people we know and care about. My children and I tasted terror that night. My husband and I committed ourselves to doing whatever we had to do in order to get our children to a safe place again. That's what this Columbian family did as well.

For them, the challenges were much greater and the losses much more severe. Still, some people in our country find it difficult to have compassion for people like them. My family is no different from this Columbian family. In the eyes of God, we are all loved and treasured. So, if we can have compassion for my family, surely we can have compassion for theirs too.

TODAY'S GOSPEL LESSON - MARK 4:35-41

In our gospel lesson this morning, darkness is gathering all around Jesus and the disciples. Jesus says, "let's go to the other side." The other side? Why would he want to go over to the other side? What's over there? Gentiles, people who look different, sound different and have very different cultural and religious practices.

The Bible often uses the word "darkness" is often a metaphor. The lesson today teaches us that Jesus is not afraid of the dark, nor is he afraid of the storm. I find comfort in this because when I've needed him most, when I've found myself in the midst of a terrible storm, in a time of deepest darkness, Jesus is has been there for me. When people have no other choice but grab their children and run, when they endure dangerous journeys and flee to a foreign land, Jesus is there with them too.

As a people of faith, we need to have compassion, as Jesus has compassion. We need to reach out to those who are experiencing dark times in their lives. We must always remember that God loves us all. God does not love us only in the good times. God does not see with eyes that evaluate our privilege, God sees us all as beloved children. God calls us to have compassion and love one another, but compassion seems to have been in short supply lately.

SEPARATING CHILDREN AT THE BORDER

We recently heard Romans 13 quoted an attempt to justify the policy of separating children from their families at the border. This is an approach referred to as "the Romans 13 Defense." It has a title, because it is an argument that has been used many times throughout history.

It was used by loyalists who opposed the American Revolution. It was invoked by those who wanted to protect the institution of slavery in America. It is used frequently by those attempting to justify white supremacy and keep people who are oppressed from rising up.

Is that what God intended? Is that what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote it? No. Originally, Paul gave this, “clear and wise command,” in a letter to the oppressed minority of followers in Rome advising them to pay their taxes and avoid causing trouble with the government that would have loved to eliminate them.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY?

Which brings me to our question today. What does the Bible say about immigrants, refugees and the resident alien in our midst?

In his book, Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible, Daniel Carroll Rodas, challenges the Romans 13 Defense by explaining that Romans 13 is found on page 1100 in his Bible and suggesting that to focus on just this one passage is to overlook a thousand pages of important biblical teaching.

From the very beginning, the Bible tells us that everyone is made in the image of God, so everyone has incredible worth. The fact that we are to rule and subdue the earth and to be faithful stewards of it, tells us that humans have great potential, and that God believes in us...all of us.

So, immigrants, refugees and both so-called “legal” and “illegal” aliens are also made in the image of God and have all kinds of potential. Since that is what God tells us, what we need to do is honor them, respect their dignity and facilitate their contribution to the common good as image-bearers of God we love so much.

In Leviticus we read,

“When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. I am the Lord your God.”¹

We also find important instructions, citizens are told not to go back through their fields to glean what they missed when they harvest. They were to leave food for the poor and for immigrants.

“you shall not strip your vineyard bear or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.”²

Citizens are told to leave unharvested the crops that grow on the edges of their fields for the same reason.³

¹ Lev 19:33-34

² Leviticus 19:10

³ Leviticus 23:22

Why are immigrants given such consideration? Why are they allowed to live in a foreign land and harvest that which they never planted? The answer is simple, and important. It's because the land belongs not to the citizens. The land belongs to God.

Immigrants and aliens are among those most vulnerable in the Ancient Near Eastern world. Again, and again God's message is to protect and care for them.

In Deuteronomy, God instructs the citizens to use a portion of their tithes to take care of and even provide money for them,

*"...so that they may eat their fill within your towns..."*⁴

Psalm 94 defines the "wicked" as people who do not care for the orphan, widow and alien.⁵

In his article titled, Immigrants and Refugees in the Bible, ELCA Bishop Mike Rinehart, explains,

"immigrants are expected to obey the laws of the land and are subject to the same penalties as citizens. There are not to be distinctions legally between citizens and immigrants. Immigrants are not to be deported for breaking the law; they simply must be subjected to the same penalties..."

He explains, "immigrants take priority even to the last book of the Hebrew Bible. Malachi 3:5 says:

"then I draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress hired workers in their wages, against the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me says the Lord of hosts."

As we move into the New Testament, we must remember that Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus were, themselves, refugees. They fled into Egypt. They had to leave the country because it was not safe.

Jesus teaches us the importance of welcoming the stranger. He teaches radical hospitality as a sacred duty and says, "do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."⁶

What about the Apostle Paul and the Book of Romans? Before you arrive at chapter 13, you pass through chapter 12 which says,

⁴ Deuteronomy 26:12-13

⁵ Psalm 94:3-6

⁶ Hebrews 13:2

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”⁷

I could go on and on because the bible is full of information about how God wants us to treat people who come here from a foreign land. I encourage you to read up on this subject for yourself.

We started with the question, “What does the Bible really say about immigrants, refugees and the resident alien among us?” The answer is - it says plenty! Many of our ancestors in the faith and the very leaders of our faith were immigrants and refugees. Jesus, himself was a refugee.

So, after a careful reading of the Bible and it’s many, “clear and wise commands,” it turns out that God loves immigrants and refugees! Throughout the Bible, citizens are instructed to protect them, to feed them, to care for them, and to welcome them.

EPISCOPAL CHURCH POLICY

What does the Episcopal Church have to say about all this? Here’s our official statement on the subject.

The Episcopal Church is committed to welcoming the stranger and advocating for a humane and proportional immigration system. For more than a century The Episcopal Church has been engaged in the ministry of welcoming immigrants, walking with them as they begin their new lives in our communities and advocating for immigration policies that protect families from separation, offer meaningful access to citizenship, and respect the dignity of every human being.

WHAT ARE WE CALLED TO DO?

⁷ Romans 12:10-18

So, what are we called to disciples in Jesus Movement? We each need to think and pray about how we are called to respond to the challenges of our time. Whatever you do, please do it in love. Because, if it's not about love, it's not about God.

I'd suggest, among the many ways we respond, we each find some wonderful qualities to hold on to and exemplify in our lives. Rather than being self-absorbed with being "best", consider follow the many examples of Jesus himself.

Be amazing.

Be generous.

Be thoughtful.

Be kind.

Be considerate.

Be compassionate.

Be someone God can be proud of.

Be someone others can count on.

Be someone people would like to call a friend.

Be a great example.

Be an inspiration.

Be willing to sacrifice for the good of others,
and do it in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Resources

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The Episcopal Church Public Policy Network, <https://advocacy.episcopalchurch.org/>