



GOD'S HEART FOR IMMIGRANTS (LIKE US) - MIKE VANHOFWEGEN

Leviticus 19:33-34

God's Command: To Love Immigrants as Ourselves

A while back I happened to watch a TV movie on Hallmark Hall of Fame that presented a true story titled *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*. It was about a Polish woman who helped save the lives of 2,500 Jewish babies and young children by smuggling them out of the Warsaw ghetto during World War II.

There's a great line in that movie that comes from the wife of a Jewish rabbi. The rabbi had been arguing that they should not allow their children and grandchildren to be smuggled out of the ghetto to be raised by Christian families. But his wife, like many wives perhaps, disagrees and quietly says, "You knew me when I was 13, and we have been married for 40 years, and you should know by now that when I state an opinion, it is not a suggestion!"

The Bible passage I'm basing today's sermon on states God's opinion, and we need to be very clear that this is not a suggestion. God speaks to us through Leviticus 19:33-34, these words:

"When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

On this day when many churches throughout the world are observing World Communion Sunday, we see God's heart, God's desire, God's command regarding—what? How we treat foreigners, that is, aliens, immigrants, the non-natives who live among us, those who live among us here in the Bay Area. Today we hear a lot about immigrants, and quite a few of us either have strong opinions one way or another or we're confused and we don't know what to think. Especially today, when we feel compassion for others on the one hand but then we have deep concerns about the economy and about national security on the other.

But do we hear what God says? You see, with issues like immigration, what has to govern our thinking is not politics or economics or opinion polls. No, Christians start with what God says to us in Scripture. And while I don't have time to say everything the Bible says about this topic, I will speak clearly about this passage, Leviticus 19:33-34. Whatever our views, whatever our feelings, we need to take seriously this passage.

I always like to try to read different perspectives regarding a Bible passage, and I actually got a kick this week reading how a couple of authors try to suggest that this is only talking about certain groups of people such as refugees or, do I dare say it, legal immigrants. Frankly, that's preposterous. The original word in this passage is the Hebrew word *ger*, which means anyone who is a stranger or a foreigner, anyone who is from somewhere else.

And what is God's command? We are not to mistreat them, and we are to love them, we are to love specifically foreigners who live in our land, all those who are immigrants and refugees and non-natives among us, and we are to treat them as we treat everyone else.

God's Image and Holiness—in Us

Why? One quote I came across from an old All Nations Heritage Week bulletin insert emphasizes that it's because we are all born in the image of God. Listen: "God created all people in his image—including aliens or immigrants. Because of the image of God, the aliens among us are worthy of respect. Because they are precious in the sight of God, the aliens are no different from the native-born. Because of the gifts God has given them, they have much to contribute to the body of Christ—the church."

Actually, Leviticus 19 speaks even more strongly than that. The underlying theme, the dominant integral point of this section of Leviticus, is the holiness of God. What does the word "holy" in the Bible mean? Anyone?

That's right, the word holy means "set apart, different, not like any other." God is different than anyone or anything. God is holy.

So get this: in Leviticus 19, at the beginning of the chapter, God says to us, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." What's at stake here is the holiness of God, the reputation of God, and how we, like God, are set apart, not like everyone else. And one key way we are to show that is how? By how we treat immigrants, by how we show love to them.

What does it mean to love someone? According to the Bible, to love someone is to seek the best for them, not just to want the best for them but to seek it, to go after it, to do all we can to make it happen. That's love, isn't it?

Love is not the absence of hate, love is what? It is the action of seeking the best for others! Like what parents do for their little children, like what lovers do for each other! And what's interesting about this passage is that it isn't talking about people halfway around the world, it's talking about people in our communities, in our cities. To seek the best for them!

God's Love—for Us

Let's remind ourselves of something. It all starts with God's love for us. I like the way Tony Campolo puts it. He says God is like a grandmother or a mother who carries your picture around with her or who has it up on the refrigerator door. "Have I shown you a picture of my child? I love him so much. I love her so much."

God loves you and me, and because of God's love we love others—and that includes loving immigrants—not just a little bit, not just now and then, not just when we're up to it, but with the same love we have even for our families.

God's Interest—not our self interest!

I need to admit that this is a subject, like others, where my thinking has changed over the years. In my conversations with people about issues like immigration and health care and social services and so forth, I have found myself (and too often I still find myself) talking first of all not out of love, not out of what's best for others but out of what's best for me. It hit me, especially when living in Central America and really seeing how so much of the world lives, how my political and social views were governed by what benefited my pocketbook first of all. As if what I have does not all belong to God, to use for him! God says today, just like he reminds me every day, that if we are primarily motivated by our self-interest rather than by love for others, especially the vulnerable and the needy in our world, then we are wrong, then our heart is not in line with his.

I'm talking about what motivates our thinking and our actions, I'm talking about what is in here [point to my heart]. We are to love the immigrant. No options, no discussion, no getting around it. The role of politics is to consider how we are to love them, how as a society that law of love is to be applied to foreigners and immigrants, but the starting point, the litmus test, the main motivation, needs to be love. But too often, what happens? A conservative evangelical pastor named Isaac Canales says this: "Throughout our history there have been times when non-Christians see through our hypocrisy. They recognize that not everyone is truly welcome in our churches (and in our lives). These are times when we've worried about being politically right when we should be focused on being biblically correct." So what do we do with people who are not here legally, who are not documented? That's a dilemma. Richard Cizik puts it this way, "Most evangelicals are caught in between wanting to have a responsible border policy with compassion for the alien. It makes coming up with a fair balance here very difficult." This is a huge issue and I certainly don't have all the answers, because the Bible talks about both loving the immigrant and obeying the laws of our country. But let me ask you a few questions:

- What if the law is too confusing for people to maneuver and what if the law separates parents from their children?
- And what is it in the home economy that causes people to cross a border that has killed 2,000 people in the last five years? How much more do their wages need to drop relative to ours for them to risk their lives? What more can the richest nation on earth do to help them over there?
- And how is it that the immigration doors are often closed to unskilled workers while at the same time there's a huge demand for low-paying unskilled labor here in our country? A demand that is constantly communicated in other countries, crying out that work is available to people who have absolutely no work where they live?

No wonder people are confused, no wonder people are being exploited.

And what about the economics?

- How many billions of dollars are undocumented people paying in income taxes and sales taxes and Social Security that they are not able to benefit from? (And how many extra billions of dollars are their employers making that is going back into the economy?)
- A 2009 study by the conservative Cato Institute (did you hear that, a conservative group) found that legalization of low-skilled workers would boost the incomes of American workers and households by \$180 billion over ten years.
- And a New York Times editorial went so far as to suggest that undocumented immigrants are saving our Social Security system by paying 15% of the system's long-term deficit while not receiving any of the benefits.
- I know there are also huge costs involved, especially at the state and local levels. There are two sides to this issue, and we'd probably all agree that reform is definitely needed, but the point is this. Whatever its impact on our economy, what does God say? Do what's good for us, put ourselves first? What's our motivation? What's our concern? Is it love? Is it God's interests or our interests?

God's Reason—We're All Foreigners

You see, God commands us to specifically love the immigrant for this reason: because we're all immigrants, we're all foreigners, we're all vulnerable. Again, Leviticus 19 says: "The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

I'm going to highlight this when we celebrate communion in just a few minutes, because this applies to Christians today just as much as to the Israelites back then. We are citizens not of a particular country but of God's kingdom first of all, and we need to remember that. We're all sojourners, we're all immigrants, we don't really belong. So why do we so often act like we do belong? Why do we too often forget that we're set apart by God, why don't we more often treat others who are different from us the same as we want to be treated?

You see, when we're seized by an immigrant who came from heaven, an immigrant by the name of Jesus, that's exactly what happens. When we're touched by him, when we see what he has done for us, when we experience his love, that's what happens.

We are then able to love, we are able to move out of our comfort zones, we're able to be holy, set apart, not in the sense of having a nonexistent halo over our heads but in the sense of rolling up our sleeves and joining in with what God is doing in the world.

God's Work – Loving Others through Us

This is more than God's wish or opinion. This is God's command. This is the way God works in the world – through us. And so, when we leave here today let's resolve to take steps during the next three months to obey. Turn to your bulletin insert to where it says Question to Ponder (or write down somewhere this question): How will you love immigrants in the next three months? And let's take a couple of minutes to think about this. I suspect for some of us that looks one way and for others it looks quite different.

For some it may mean simply to confront your own attitudes, your racism, your selfishness. To spend time thinking and praying about where your heart is, and why you make the decisions you make and live the way you live.

For others, it may mean simply to learn the names of immigrants you've met, to come to view them as people rather than as aliens or foreigners. As a school teacher once said, "The best gift you can give someone is to remember his or her name."

For others this may mean inviting an acquaintance over to your house, getting to know them, where they're from, what's their history, what's been their experience here in the U.S. It means to build a relationship with them and to appreciate them and their culture.

For others it may mean to get involved with a missions group, or in disaster relief somewhere, or with a community development or skills training organization (like Monument Impact). God is already at work throughout the world and he invites us to join with him in what he is doing.

Whatever it is, God loves you and me, and he makes it possible for us to share his heart and to love immigrants as ourselves. Amen.