

OSJ



Office of Social Justice



IMMIGRATION SERMON - CHRISTY LIPSCOMB

There are many City Lifers [City Life is the name of our church] who interact regularly with immigrants and refugees. We have Rachel; she grew up with her dad who had observed migrant workers and noticed that migrant workers brought children with them. The children had nothing to do while their parents worked, and so Rachel's dad managed a summer camp for them.

There's Paul and Monica, here in our church, who have worked at a farm where they have assisted in building shelters for migrant workers. There's Abby, a social worker at a hospital, who often interacts with migrant children there. There's Josh and there's Elena, who both work with refugee youth—teens and children who've been separated from their parents and families often because of war and are here in the United States with other families. Then there's Riley and Herme, who find immigrants and refugees around town and make friends with them because that's just what they do.

We applaud these efforts and we applaud the compassion and the ability that some have just to simply connect and reach out to people who are different from them.

But there's another conversation out there in the political world, isn't there? There's another conversation in the political realm going on that asks questions like, "Why do "they" take jobs away from American citizens who need them? Aren't immigrants bad for the economy? Why don't they learn our language? It's a threat to the American way of life. Why do they use up our tax dollars and drain our systems?"

Others ask the question, "Why should I even care about immigration? After all, there are many political causes that I can get behind, or not get behind, and why should I care about this one? Why does it matter what Christians believe about immigration?"

When we talk about immigration, there's often a clear sense of rightness or wrongness and who gets to voice opinions about it. I think most of the time, American citizens will say, "Well, I'm an American citizen so I should have a say in this. I'm going to come to the table with my opinions, my politics, my culture, my ideals."

But when it comes to immigrants having a voice at the table, I think that society has set up a table kind of like this: It's the kids table. You might not have even noticed it over here out in the edge of the stage and in the shadows and so low to the ground. We all know what kids' tables are for, right? I mean, we say it's because we want to keep the kids in the place with the floor that's easy to clean. We say it's because we want to keep the kids all together. But really it's just the grown-up way of saying, "We grown-ups want to be able to have our own main conversation without being interrupted by the children."

I think that sometimes we do the same thing when it comes to immigrants and refugees. We marginalize immigrants and refugees by telling ourselves things like, "Well, it's okay, they will probably have more fun together if they're just with themselves." "It's okay, everybody's happier this way. Let's separate ourselves so that the conversation at the table doesn't have to include their voice." We relegate them to a separateness in a "less than" place rather than make room at the main table.

So what's a Christian response to immigration? Not just an American response, but what's a Christian response? What does the Bible have to say about it?

Last week we introduced the concept of Christian hospitality. We talked about how hospitality is different from community and how in the Bible the word hospitality in the Greek is *philoxenia*. *Philo* meaning love, *xenia* stranger, love of the stranger. That's hospitality. Hospitality in the Bible is less about entertaining friends and more about welcoming outsiders and making room at the table for those who haven't belonged before. An enemy to *philoxenia* is *xenophobia*, a fear of the stranger.

Let's look at hospitality and immigration and how they overlap in Scripture. Much of the material I'm going to share with you comes from Reverend Joan Maruscan in her online pamphlet called "The Bible as the Ultimate Immigration Handbook." We begin in the story of Scripture with the story that begins with Abram and ends with Joseph; this Genesis story.

There's a man named Abram in the Bible. God comes to him and says, "Abram, I am selecting you out of all humanity. It is through you that I am going to make you a blessing to all nations. I am going through you to bring the Savior of the world who will bring good news for all people. It's through your offspring, it's through your family, that I will set up my people who will be messengers of this good news. I will bless you," God says. "I will make you a great nation so that all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you."

Then the Lord adds on this additional information in Genesis 15:13: "Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain, by the way, that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and they will be enslaved and mistreated for 400 years.'" By the way, God says, your offspring are going to be taken into exile at some point and will be taken away from their land, but eventually, after 400 years, they will come back. It's a prediction that Abram's offspring would be strangers in a land that's not their own and then would eventually migrate back to the land that God would give them. Interestingly, much of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the first few books in the Bible, has to do with the land, the place where the people of God stay. The place where the people of God are together and find their identity. Abram sets out in pursuit of this blessed life that God has offered. In his pursuit of this better life, Abram leaves his country and emigrates toward the promised land. Eventually Abram has a son. It's a miracle birth, and his son Isaac carries on this family blessing.

Isaac grows up, then there's a natural disaster that comes to the land. There's a famine. Because of this natural disaster, Isaac does what most people do: he leaves where he lives and he emigrates to a new place. In fact, it was the land of Gerar, where Isaac went as an alien, as a stranger in a strange land. He then has a son, Jacob.

Jacob grows up with Isaac and eventually Jacob too moves to another land, emigrates to another country. The reason for his move is he's actually seeking a wife and decides he's going to go back to the land of his fathers in order to find that wife. It's a reason for immigration that perhaps we don't have today. Later on in his life, Jacob has a threat of violence. His brother is threatening to kill him, and so he leaves his country, moves to Bethel, goes to a new place, starts over. Due to human trafficking then, his son Joseph is sold into slavery. We still have this problem in our world today. Joseph is then sold and taken to Egypt, a stranger in a strange land.

Now people today emigrate to different countries for all the same reasons that people in the Bible emigrated. Except maybe perhaps for wife-searching or husband-searching, but I don't know your story. Perhaps you've been there. Today people move from country to country because of natural disasters, because of threats of violence, because of human trafficking. We've all heard the stories about Syria in the news, and people who are fleeing because life is not possible in Syria anymore.

Now, with immigrants and refugees that we have in our community, many of them are not necessarily out to beat the system. I don't think anybody says, "Well, I would really like to risk my life and I really would like to live in fear of the government, and I'd really would like to break as many of the laws as I can and start over." Most immigrants and refugees that come here come with legal status. Many of the immigrants who are undocumented today came with legal status and then fell out of their legal status. There are lots of reasons for this. Sometimes they don't have enough money to pay the legal fees in order to keep their legal status going. Sometimes they didn't know that in some cases, every three years you have to renew or redocument your legal status. Some didn't know that because of language barriers and knowledge barriers.

Others know that they need to do it but they don't know how to find the services that they need. Others think they know how to find the services they need but are deceived and they go to notaries (or notarios) who are actually notorious for cheating people. This is a huge problem right now in our community. There are immigrants who will literally pay thousands of dollars to say, "Do this legal work for me." The notarios will say, "Okay, we've done this work for you. I'm going to take all your money, and actually it's going to cost you a little bit more." But then really they haven't done anything, and so the immigrant leaves thinking they have legal status when really they don't.

There are lots of reasons why we have undocumented immigrants here. This is one of the reasons why we have started an immigrant connection site. We have this ministry here at City Life, and the primary activity we do is help people keep legal status. We've introduced to you Katie White, who is our board of immigration appeals representative. She helps people keep their legal status and move on in the system. We also have affordable fees; we provide a clear fee schedule up front so that there are no deceptions and everyone knows what to expect.

We're honest, so it's a significant improvement over what people have had before. But people today are immigrants for the same reason they were in Bible times: war, violence, slavery, natural disasters, seeking a better life.

Katie told me a story about a 9- or 10-year-old boy who was told by drug cartels in South America that he needed to join their gang. They start with young kids so they can raise them up and indoctrinate them in their culture. The family said, "Oh, please don't do this." They said, "No, you will do this. Your son will join our gang." The family said, "No please, please don't." Within a week, they took this little boy's dad and killed him in front of the little boy just to make a statement. This stuff happens all the time to thousands of people. In Honduras, if a young child is conscripted for a gang and the child tries to escape and doesn't succeed and then gets sent back to the place he escaped from, the gang then will lie in wait in order to kill him. Happens all the time. For many in South and Central America, the question is whether you want your children to grow up to adulthood, because the murder rates of children and teens are that high.

It is desperation that is driving parents to send their children over alone to a different country. One of the things that Katie does as she works with people who come through our immigrant connection ministry is she helps those who are not eligible to gain citizenship. She'll tell them right up front; she doesn't deceive them like some of the notorios do. She'll tell them upfront, "You know, you don't have a legal pathway to citizenship, and it's just a matter of time before you're going to be deported. Are you prepared to deal with reality when that happens?" She'll counsel people and she'll say, "Have you prepared yourself? Do you want your wife and children to follow you back home if you're deported? You should tell them now, you should make a plan now. When you're deported, don't take money back with you, don't take any resources with you, because you will be jumped. Figure out now how you will wire back money to yourself at some point in a safe place. Do you know anybody?" Many immigrants have lived here for 30, 40, 50 years and if this is the life they know but if they're deported and don't know anybody. She says, "You need to have a safe people to go to, otherwise it's likely that you'll be held by drug cartels because they assume you have money and access to resources." This is the kind of work that we do.

The story in the Bible continues with Exodus. We have Joseph who has been sent to Egypt as a slave, trafficked there. There's another natural disaster, there's another famine. Because of this famine, his family back in the land of Hebron emigrate to Egypt—leave the place of Israel, emigrate to Egypt, and they settle there. They don't leave Egypt, they stay. In fact, they stay so long that 400 years pass, just like the prophecy to Abram said. In that 400-year period, they are enslaved. It is a story of oppression and persecution, a story of genocide. It's a story that includes genocide against newborn Hebrew babies, where the Egyptians say, "We don't like how many of those Hebrews there are. They are all having babies and we don't like it." They send out a murder verdict.

But one of those babies had a parent who wanted a better life for her son. She did what thousands of parents in Mexico and Latin America do today. She chose the heartbreaking decision to part with their child, cross their fingers and hope for a better life.

This particular baby was protected, hidden until three months old, at which time he was placed in a basket in the river. As Joan Maruscan points out in her booklet, "In today's language, he would be considered an unaccompanied alien child." That would be his legal status, unaccompanied alien child. Unaccompanied alien children are picked up at the U.S. border. If they're not returned to the country of origin, they are placed in juvenile detention.

In this case, this unaccompanied alien child was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter and adopted by her, and she named him Moses. Moses grows up as a stranger in a strange land, and he witnesses the injustice the Egyptians do to his people. He says, "I look like these people that are being mistreated, even though I am being raised in a palace." He becomes angry at the injustice, decides to do something about it. Kills an Egyptian. Moses then becomes a criminal alien fleeing for his life. He winds up in a place called Midian, and a man named Jethro gives him sanctuary.

Eventually, God calls Moses to return to Egypt to deliver the people out of slavery. God says, "Moses, I want you to go back." Moses says, "I'm not going back." "Moses, I want you to go back and I want you to lead my people out. Lead them in this exit out of Egypt." Moses says, "God, I don't know about this." God says, "I will be with you."

Joan Maruscan points out that the key phrase here is, "I will be with you." You see, in Exodus God migrated with the Hebrews. God is a migrant moving with his people. He's in the form in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, and God moves with his people as they migrate out of slavery into freedom. Exodus is the story of God's people on the move. It's the world's greatest and best-known immigration story. It is an illegal immigration story that is most certainly against the law.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has a phrase called "the quartet of the vulnerable." The quartet of the vulnerable talks about four groups of people that the Bible identifies as people that God has a special heart for: the resident alien, the orphan, the widow, and the poor. Here at City Life, we talk a lot about God's heart for the poor. We talk about God's preference and the way he gives preferential treatment toward the poor. We also talk a bit about orphans and widows. We've had lots of conversations about foster care in particular. We don't talk a whole lot about the resident aliens, the immigrants, the refugees. Somehow we've managed to silence that conversation a bit.

I found myself asking questions. Why does God love these four groups of people so much? What do we do with the fact that resident aliens, immigrants, and refugees are all throughout Scripture? As we continue to see, God commands us over and over again to love the stranger.

Why does God have that heart? We have a God who is gracious and compassionate, who abounds in love, and God seems to have a particular heart for the vulnerable. Immigrants and refugees are very vulnerable. There are language barriers that make it harder to find housing and work and transportation. There are fears, fears of being separated from family. There are so many stories of families that have been torn apart. So many are afraid to report crimes because of their legal status. Crimes don't get reported as often and people don't get in trouble, so crimes continue and get worse. Often immigrants and refugees get placed in poor housing and don't have the ability or resources or knowledge of the culture to advocate for themselves. Usually they have to take the low-paying jobs that nobody else wants, and low-paying jobs tend to be more dangerous and more physically taxing. It's a very vulnerable place to be.

Refugees with status are often still overlooked for jobs. I've known refugees who have come from Eastern European countries, people who are university professors and medical physicians. They come to this country, and for a variety of reasons cannot practice their vocation, and so they're working minimum wage jobs, if they're lucky. All of their knowledge and expertise gains no voice here. Often refugee children haven't had the ability to receive education. Sometimes years go by where children cannot go to school because it is dangerous and the country's at war. There are major gaps in education.

Katie shared with me a story about a man from Iraq who came to her asking her if she could help him with his legal status. One of the questions that she asked him was, "Okay, you have legal status so we should be able to do something. Now, do you have a police record? Have you had any sort of police involvement?" He says, "No, I haven't had involvement with police, but I have had involvement with the CIA." She said, "Well, tell me about that."

He said, "When I first came to the United States, my friends and I were looking for an apartment and everything was very expensive. We didn't know where to look, but we just kept seeing so many expensive prices. We searched online and we found one that was really cheap. We thought, let's check this out." They called the phone number and kind of stumbled through their broken English and the people on the other end of the phone kept saying, "Well, what is your rank?" He said, "I didn't know what they meant. What do you mean by my rank?" They said, "What is your rank? What rank are you?" Finally they said, "Are you a student?" He said, "Well, yes, I guess I'm a student."

They didn't know what the people were asking, so the Iraqi man and his friends said, "Let's drive down to this address, maybe we'll have better luck if we talk to them in person, because we can't beat the price. We just need to check this out. Maybe it'll be easier if we communicate in person." They drive down there, they arrive at the apartment area, they drive through the gates, and a fleet of military descend on them and arrest them.

Because they could not speak English or read English, they could not read the signs that said, "This is government property. Do not enter without permission." They had no idea they were on a military base. They had driven onto military property and couldn't communicate, so instantly the CIA is on them showing them pictures of various Iraqis, saying, "Do you recognize this person? They're like, "No, we don't know what you're talking about." This has gotten them into the system.

He and his friend eventually move to New York and the CIA follow him and question him, "Why are you moving? Where are you going?" Now he's in a position where every single time he moves, he has to notify the CIA that he's going to move, just because he didn't speak English. This may or may not affect his ability to become a citizen.

Immigrants and refugees are vulnerable. That's just one of the crazy stories. Some of the stories that Katie shared with me and that I've heard are honestly a little too traumatic. Horrible stories of abuse and violence that I just really didn't even want to go into today. The things people have gone through just trying to find a better life.

Like these people, Moses and the people of Israel are vulnerable. God has a heart for the vulnerable. 400 years of slavery, an additional 40 years of wandering in the wilderness as God is leading his people out of exile. God finally brings the immigrant people to their land. This next part of the journey is when they arrive in the promised land. God gives them all kinds of instructions of how they're to behave, how they're to worship, how they're to set up their society, how they're to organize. One of the things that he tells them is how to treat outsiders that they may stumble across on their journeys who may decide to join them. Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says, "For the Lord your God is God of Gods and Lord of Lords. The great God, mighty and awesome. Who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the alien giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt." Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and other books, but particular those two, give lots of instructions about how the Israelites are supposed to care for strangers in the land. There are three key things that I think summarize some of the major teachings. The first point about how to care for strangers in the land is to love and like outsiders. Love and like them. We just read in Deuteronomy 10:18, "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow. He loves the immigrant and he loves the alien and you are to love the immigrant and the alien." You say, "Well it's just not natural for me." It wasn't natural for the Israelites either, and God says, "Love them, because you were once an alien in Egypt." In Deuteronomy 23:7, "Do not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother." If you don't know what abhor means, it means "don't like." Do not abhor an Egyptian because you lived as an alien in his country. That's why I said don't just love immigrants, because it's easier to love sometimes than it is to like. He says like. Don't just foster that dislike in your hearts. Leviticus 19:34: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born." Get that? Must be treated the same as a native born person. Love him as yourself. "For you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." Sounds like the golden rule, doesn't it? Love your neighbor as yourself. Love and like outsiders.

The second point gives justice to outsiders. In Deuteronomy 24, God says, "Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice." Immigrants and refugees are not exactly in the strongest position to advocate for laws for themselves. Many don't even speak the language that the laws are written in. Most don't have the knowledge of our customs or even what the laws are. Focus is on survival, not on advocacy or law change. This means that our job is to advocate. Our job is to speak up. Our job is to make sure that the alien is not deprived of justice. This falls on us. In fact, God goes so far in Deuteronomy 27:19 as to say, "Cursed is the man, cursed is the person who withholds justice from the alien." Our blessing, the ability for us to live a life that is blessed by God, is in part dependent on our participation in justice for the vulnerable outsiders.

Third, we care for strangers in the land by providing food to outsiders. By providing basic needs. Leviticus 23:22 talks about when you reap your harvest, don't reap to the very edges of your field. Leave some gleanings around the edges of your harvest so that the poor and the immigrant and the alien can come in and get food. In Deuteronomy 24:19, same idea. When you're harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, don't go back and get it. Instead, leave it there. Leave it for the alien, leave it for the immigrant, leave it for the refugee. Why? So that the Lord your God may bless you. Again, the blessing from God is directly dependent on if we do or don't welcome and provide for the stranger.

The Old Testament wraps up with the prophetic book of Malachi, the last words in the Old Testament. There's this admonition from God and Malachi that says this, Malachi 3:5: God says, "I will come near to you for judgement. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers against those who defraud laborers of their wages." Get that? Those who cheat the daytime labor workers. "I will come to you for judgement, those who oppress the widows and the fatherless, those who deprive aliens of justice." This is a strong statement against exploitation of undocumented workers. This is a strong statement saying, do not exploit them. Do not exploit the day laborers and speak up against the governments who mistreat strangers in the land.

Then we bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament. We come to the birth of Jesus. If anyone can ever be described as an alien, it would be Jesus. Coming from a different universe and entering into our world as a stranger. Not known, not with a resume, not with a pedigree. When Jesus is born, look who some of the people are who come see him. There are shepherds, people on the low social scale, probably migrants who moved seasonally with their flocks. And Magi. Foreigners from the East, some eastern country who left their country to come and worship.

The visit of these Magi instigated interest by the Roman government, and then the Roman government determines to kill all the Jewish babies under age 2 because it becomes a political threat. When this becomes known to Joseph in a dream in the middle of the night, Joseph jumps up. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus all become refugees like the children of Israel, packing up their things in the night, making haste, throwing their things together and running from the country. Fleeing from political violence like so many refugees have done before and so many refugees do today. They cross borders without travel documents, they seek safety, they seek sanctuary. They arrive in Egypt, the strange land. Although they are strangers, someone must have taken them in. Someone must have welcomed them and helped them. Don't you wish we knew the name of the person who first welcomed Joseph and Mary and Jesus? Think of their contribution to the kingdom. Bible scholars believe Jesus was in Egypt for around three years or so.

I wonder if when Joseph, who was a carpenter, when he started looking for work and looking for work in his trade, I wonder if the other carpenters said things like, "Here comes that foreigner. He's going to take away a job from one of our own Egyptians." "Here's Mary and that baby, I wonder if this woman and child are going to burden our welfare system. That family, they just do things differently." Why is it that we struggle so much with questions like these? Today it's Latinos and Asians. In earlier generations it was Italians, Polish people, and Eastern Europeans. We said things like, "Well, they won't assimilate, they just stick together. They won't learn our language." With time assimilation has happened, it's just taken time. Some of you here are Italian or Polish, and no one thinks anything of it now. It wasn't always that way. We have so many worries and so many fears that immigrants will take our jobs, that they will overload our system. That they benefit from our government but don't pay taxes and give back. See, we love being in power and we're threatened by the thought that another group might take that power from us. We like the privilege and security that our position of authority gives.

I have some statistics to share with you from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. This is not a political organization or a partisan organization that's giving these details. It's not a Republican or Democrat or a party thing, this is from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce says that immigrants, both documented and undocumented, are actually an incredible asset to our economy. Our economy is actually better because of immigrants, both documented and undocumented. In fact, we'd be in a world of hurt without their economic contributions. Researchers found that there is no correlation between immigration and heightened unemployment at regional, state or county levels. Isn't that amazing? Immigrants actually give a slight boost to the average wage of Americans because they tend to take complementary jobs and not jobs that compete. That's a nice way of saying that they take the jobs that citizens don't want or won't take.

We need immigrants in our labor force, the Chamber of Commerce says, because we need them to replenish the labor force when all the baby boomers retire. Immigrants actually account for 18% of new business startups. Great entrepreneur levels. 18% higher than the actual rate of population that they're bringing.

Have you heard of sanctuary cities? I know I'm dumping lots of information on you, but have you heard of sanctuary cities? A sanctuary city is a city in the U.S. where the local law enforcement says, "We're not going to enforce federal laws about immigration. So ICE, if you want to come in and catch undocumented immigrants, you can do that, but you're going to have to do it yourself. We're not going to do that." Maybe some cities are doing that because they just have a good heart or because they are more liberal in their politics. It's actually very, very good for their economy, and I think that's probably the main reason why. In Michigan we have two sanctuary cities: Ann Arbor and Detroit. In Ann Arbor, maybe it's because they tend to lean politically left, I don't know, but maybe it's also because they need non-academics to do the work that the academics won't do.

In Detroit, they just need people. They need living, breathing bodies.

Another thing that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce tells us is that regarding taxes, everyone is paying sales and property taxes. Immigrants, documented, undocumented, everybody is paying sales tax. Everybody is paying property taxes. Doesn't matter if you're documented or not. When it comes to other government things, over half of all undocumented immigrants actually also have deducted from their wages federal and state taxes, Social Security, and Medicare. Over half are paying into that system. Because if they're undocumented or using a Social security number that is not their own, they're not going to be eligible to receive any of those services. They are actually making enormous contributions into the Social Security system. In fact, in 2010 there was a \$13 billion contribution from undocumented immigrants into the Social Security system. Benefits they'll never be able to use. Regarding welfare, undocumented immigrants are not eligible and even those with legal status can't receive welfare for five years. Those are good things to know, aren't they? We have so much fear, but we follow a God who says love overcomes fear. A God who says perfect love casts out fear.

All this is helpful to know and it's good to know these statistics, but as Christians the primary reason we are to love immigrants is not just because in our American economy it's beneficial to us. That's kind of nice icing on the cake. As people of God, we love because he first loved us. As people of God we love because of philoxenia. We love because of love of the stranger. We love because God tells us, "Make room at your table for the outsider."

Jesus grows up, Jesus starts teaching. He teaches in Matthew 25, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." Say this next line with me, "I was a stranger and you invited me in." He says in verse 40, "Tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me." He's saying here, hospitality to strangers is hospitality to Jesus. Hospitality to strangers is hospitality to Jesus. When Jesus concludes his earthly ministry we come to this next portion of the Scripture story called the Great Commission.

In Jesus' last message to his disciples, he gives them a migration message. It's a statement that not only calls for migration but actually insists on it. Jesus comes to Matthew 28:18 and says, "All authority in Heaven and Earth has been given to me." Therefore, do what? "Therefore go and make disciples." Where? In your community. In your country. Across borders. "Emigrate, and go to all nations because my gospel is for the world." Jesus ends that by saying, "Surely I'm with you always, till the very end of the age." Just like in Exodus when Moses says, "God, I don't know about this," God says, "I will be with you." Jesus here says, "I will be with you. I will migrate with you."

That takes us to the final story of history that is going on in the Bible in the book of Acts. The church is exploding. Pentecost happens, so the gospel is then broken out into other languages. People, Jews from all over, hear the gospel in their language and they take it back to their Jewish communities all over the world. After that the church explodes to the Gentiles. Then they set up their church headquarters, and their church headquarters are not in Jerusalem. Their church headquarters are settled in Antioch. They go into Gentile territory, and Antioch becomes the hub of the church where the Christians are first called Christians.

Antioch becomes that hub for mission. All of Paul's missionary journeys begin in Antioch and go out from there. Immigration is the only way that the church grows. It is the only way that the good news of Jesus will be communicated. It is the only way that the church will fulfill its mission. We go and we take the gospel there, legal or not.

And so, that brings us to the question today: what is all this have to do with us? What is God saying to us? What does this tell us about God? What does this tell us about our relationship with God? I think the message of Scripture is this: your spiritual mothers, your spiritual fathers, they've been travelers in this world. They have been on a journey. We as the people of God, we are aliens and strangers in this world. We're resident aliens, we got our green card in this world, but if you're a believe in Jesus, this is your temporary world. If you're a believer in Jesus, you are on your way to the place of citizenship and it is not here. As believers in Jesus, Philippians 3:20 says that our citizenship is in heaven.

Ephesians 2:19 tells us that we are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. We're not outsiders to the people of God anymore. We're strangers in this world. "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through." If you're a follower of Jesus you've probably had a spiritual immigrant connection worker, someone who's like a Katie in your life, who has helped you on your path to citizenship. Someone who helped you understand this is where you are not meeting the laws. This is how you are falling short of the law. This is how you are falling short of God's law. Then someone who then explains the pathway toward citizenship in heaven. Someone who helps you fill out that N400 form, that naturalization form that you have to fill out in order to become a citizen of the United States. Someone who helps you fill out that heavenly N400 form, that prayer of repentance. That prayer for God to wash you clean and make you new, and your pledge to follow him as the Lord of your life.

What Jesus does is he offers us justification. Justification, the action of being made right with God's law. Justification is when the record is expunged. Justification is when we are given legal status with God. Before you were undocumented and you did not have status with God. You were loved, but you were not his. And now, if you follow Jesus, your citizenship is heaven and you're passing through this earth waiting for the day when you are in a better place.

Hebrews 11:13 talks about the longing that the people of God have. All these people were still living by faith when they died. We are living by faith in this life. They did not receive all the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. God, we are immigrants and refugees in this world. Verse 14, "People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own." If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country. A heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. For he has prepared a city for them.

We are strangers here on this earth. We are the outsider that has been loved. We have been philoxenia-d by the God who makes space at his table for us outsiders. Jesus has taken us in; he has given us a meal at his table. He gives us communion to share in his meal. He offers us a bath in the waters of baptism. Isn't that the core of hospitality, to give a meal and a bath? We are the outsider that has been welcomed, and there is space at God's table for all his children. Amen.