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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Leviticus 19: 33-34; Matthew 2: 13-15
June 2, 2024

Notes on Hospitality and Faith

(Steve Jungkeit)

What does it mean, I wonder, that an immigrant stands at the center of our religious life? What does it mean to pray in the name of a migrant? What does it mean to address our prayers to a refugee? What does it mean that the God in whom we take refuge was once forced to flee political violence? And how can it be that so many of those who are most enthusiastic about Jesus, an immigrant and a refugee, are so hostile, so afraid, of those who share that same condition? In his comments on Friday, the former President stoked fear of those immigrants, saying that some of them spoke languages that we have never heard of. Does it matter that Jesus spoke a language, Aramaic, that most people have never heard of? Does it matter that the language of compassion that Jesus used is also a language that many people today seem not to understand?

Those are a few of the questions that have been on my mind of late. But they are also the kind of questions that were circulating in my thoughts several weeks ago, when some fifty or sixty people gathered in an office building overlooking the New Haven Green. We had been summoned there by Glenn Formica, who, as I mentioned earlier, provided legal counsel to Malik and Zahida when they were in Sanctuary here in our church. There were faith leaders and lawyers in the room, community organizers and those who have been most deeply affected by the outmoded immigration laws in our country. Glenn summoned us there as a way of preparing us for some of the pressing human rights concerns that are barreling toward us from the future. Once we had gathered, Kica Matos took the floor, and she began to share her work with the National Immigration Law Center, or NILC. As I listened to Kica, I knew immediately that I wanted all of you to hear what she had to say as well.

There may, I suppose, be some among us who wonder why we would devote a Sunday morning to such things. There may be some who worry about importing politics into the pulpit. My response to such worries is simple. What we are speaking about today is part and parcel of the biblical story. It is the story of Abraham, leaving the land of Ur in order to seek out a new home, in a strange land. It is the story of the Hebrew people, fleeing enslavement in Egypt in order to find refuge. It is the story of the law - which urges protection of migrants - given to the Hebrew people on Sinai. It is the story of Jesus, who became an immigrant when he and his parents fled the persecution of Herod. If you take the story of biblical faith seriously, if you take the story of most any religion worthy of the name seriously, you'll be forced to consider the fate of immigrants.

And so with that in mind, I'd like to invite Kica to share with us about her work. Though it may not operate explicitly under the rubric of faith, in my understanding, it is a form of biblical religion that Kica is talking about. And so Kica Matos, welcome...

(Kica Matos)

It was almost exactly a year ago that I was at the US Mexico border. I was part of a delegation of civil rights and human right organizations that had traveled there to meet with migrants – black migrants in particular, who were converging in Matamoros and Reynosa, Mexico. They were in camps, living in wretched and dangerous conditions. They slept on the ground or in tents in 100 degree

weather. They burned their trash. In one of the camps, the ‘bathroom’ consisted of an open air field with tall grass. They did not dare leave the camps at night for fear of being kidnapped. Day in day out they stayed, patiently waiting for the possibility and opportunity to cross the border to the United States.

During my time at the border I spoke to dozens of migrants. Many of the stories I heard were heartbreaking. There was the young man from Haiti, no older than 23, who was orphaned, having lost his mother and father over the course of a year, both murdered by gangs and militias. He told me he left Haiti, quote, “Because there was nothing left there for me. I had no one left to love me.” There was the Honduran father of three who had to flee because he was being threatened by gangs, who demanded money in exchange for protection. His journey to the border included being beaten and robbed of his most precious possessions – a phone and his Mexican permit. He lamented that his children were sad and always hungry.

I met with families living in an abandoned gas station. They told stories of being victimized by gangs during their crossing of the Darien Gap, which extends from Columbia to Panama. They shared that as Black migrants they dealt with daily racism from many Mexican citizens who seemed to uniquely disparage Black people. At one of the shelters that we visited, they simply refused to take in Black migrants. Even among the most disparaged, there was further disparate treatment.

Then there was Alicia, a Venezuelan woman in her 50s who left her two sons behind and traveled on her own, with a strong determination to make it to the US. When we met, she had been living in the most wretched of all of the camps we visited for more than 9 months. She told me that she witnessed horrifying acts including - kidnappings, beatings, and death. Despite all of that, Alicia was filled with kindness, hope and dignity. She had established herself as a camp leader, welcoming families, helping them settle in, and creating a sense of community that was nothing short of astounding.

Alicia -- was one of the lucky ones. A few months ago, she sent me a text with a photo of herself outside of a non-profit organization in Texas. After almost a year and many many hours of trying to apply for permission to come to the US using a glitchy US government phone app, she finally succeeded. She was given an appointment, and after talking to Customs and Border Patrol, was told that she would be given the opportunity to apply for asylum. Alicia is now in New York city, making her way in her new world.

She has since discovered that we don’t make it easy for even the lucky asylum seekers like herself. New York City recently announced that it was evicting all migrants in City shelters after just 3 months. But it takes several more months than that for asylum seekers to qualify for work permits. Thus today, even in the city where Lady Liberty beckons, we are pushing people out into the streets and into homelessness.

In just a few days, the Biden administration will announce a new executive order. The order will allow the government to shut the border down whenever more than an arbitrary number of people show up to seek asylum. While this may be useful politics in an election year, it does nothing for the families and people like Alicia. Nor is it a fix for our hopelessly broken immigration system. This new order also fails both our legal obligations under international law and our moral commitment to welcome the stranger.

And that is not all. In Congress there are also efforts under way to undo our asylum laws.

The right to seek asylum is a fundamental human right recognized in international law and required by federal law. The US adopted it in the aftermath of World War II, when our government, in the name of “security” shamefully turned back Jewish asylum seekers to face their Nazi persecutors. We said then -- never again! Never again would the US turn its back on people fleeing their home

countries for fear of government persecution, torture, or death. NEVER AGAIN, we said. We did not say never again until 2024.

The truth is that today and now, during this election year, we find ourselves in a moment when immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees are demonized. Where our inclination has not been to welcome the stranger, but instead to turn our backs on them. Make our laws harsher. Treat the newcomers with harshness and cruelty.

History will not look kindly on this moment.

Our state, much like our nation, benefits from immigrants. Economists agree that immigrants are critical to growing the economy, reducing the deficit, funding Social Security and lowering inflation. Immigrants make additional cultural, social, and civic contributions to our state and our country. We know that because we see it here in Connecticut.

Some of you in the past have stepped up to advocate for immigrants in our state who have faced threats of deportation. People like Luis Barrios, Salma Sikandar, Joel Colindres, Julian Rodriguez, Sujitno Sajuti, Malik Naveed bin Rehman, Mariano Cardoso, Nelson Pinos and Nury Chavarria. All of these families are beloved members of our community who are still with us because of your work and dedication and commitment to keep them here, in the place they call home. And still today, they continue to make contributions to our beloved state – as domestic workers, as restaurant owners, as university professors, as carpenters and as construction workers.

I have come here this morning to ask you all during this very difficult moment to do everything that you can to support the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers. Please call or write your Senators and ask them to protect our asylum laws. Especially Senator Murphy, who has been leading the charge to gut our asylum laws in the Senate. For those of you who can, make a donation, volunteer for organizations that support immigrants, make your voice heard in whatever way you can..

My final plea to you is lifted directly from scripture. It is to Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13: 1-25). I ask all of you to join us in our advocacy so that we can protect our asylum laws from being decimated. Let us do everything we can to continue to uphold civil and human rights that are so central to our democracy.