

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Rev. Bill Tiemann
Leviticus 19:33-34, Galatians 6:7-10
“Hospitality and the American Dream”
July 4, 2010

Before I begin, want to give credit to my wife, Rachel, for this title. I told her I was scheduled to preach on July 4, and she said: “Why don’t you preach on hospitality and the American dream.” The title clicked immediately, so I’ve used it. Rachel is one of those people, like many of you, who is aware that something has happened to the American dream of hospitality, and that today it may be more accurate to say that hostility rather than hospitality is a better way to describe the American scene.

I grew up in a small south Texas town 30 miles east of San Antonio. It was proudly named Seguin, after a Mexican hero of the Texas revolution, Col. Juan N. Seguin. In 1836, he fought with the Texans against the Mexican army of General Santa Anna. His family were early residents who received hospitality in the territory that later became the Republic of Texas.

My first high school job was as a clerk in George Levy’s Dry Goods Store. George was Jewish, as were a number of other merchant families in town—the Mendlovitchs, the Reichmanns, and the Horowitzs. Sometime in the 19th century, their families from Eastern Europe had received hospitality in Texas.

My boss at Levy’s was Dan Ramirez, the manager. He was an elegant Latino man, who always wore a dress suit and spoke better English than I did. He was also a kind man, whose advice I still remember: “When Mr. Levy is around, look busy!” Some years before, his parents from Mexico had received hospitality; he was a first generation American, like some of you.

About the middle of the 19th century, my German ancestors had received hospitality, also. They were part of a migration from Northern Germany to escape the bitter cold, the famine, and the continuous wars. They settled the area east and north of San Antonio, as well as in San Antonio, itself. Their descendents are still there, and if you walk the main streets of New Braunfels or Fredericksburg on a Saturday afternoon, you are very likely to hear some of the old folks still speaking German. We Germans were taught never to forget the mother tongue, although most of us have.

But those migrations were long ago. When I grew up in Seguin, it was maybe 10% Mexican. Today all of Texas south of Austin is majority Latino. Almost all towns have a Latino mayor and majority of the city council are Latinos. Catholic churches are thriving. Most students around San Antonio are second and third generation Latinos. The further south you go, they become first generation Latinos. The Texas border has been porous for years, because cheap workers were needed to pick the cotton, groom the yards, and gather the fruits and vegetables grown in the Rio Grande Valley. Until recently, there was more hospitality than hostility, although there was always some of both. Now, everything has changed. The new laws in Arizona are just one example of a general mood of hostility to immigration. Even we here in Davidson and Charlotte seem to have forgotten that immigrants, legal or illegal, are the ones who mow our lawns, build and paint our houses, clean our homes, act as our children’s nannies, or do many other jobs we don’t want to do.

Not all are from nearby areas of Mexico. The wonderful lady who comes every other week to help keep our house clean is from Brazil. Two very able delivery men who came to our door recently were from El Salvador and from Chiapas, the most southern state in Mexico. The couple who just bought Bonsai were both raised in China. Katie, who runs the dry cleaners in Sadler Square, is from Korea. What would we ever do without these people who have brought into the American dream? But for so many people, such a view is considered outrageous.

In the past, the American dream has been one of hospitality. Nowhere is this better stated than in the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, composed in 1883 by Emma Lazarus: “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she with silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, your wretched refuse of your teeming shore; send these, the homeless, the tempest-tossed, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” (1) And for so many years, that remained our dream. The Irish and Italians came to Boston, the Jews to New York, the Poles to Chicago, the Swedes and Norwegians to Minnesota, the Czechs and Germans to central Texas or here to North Carolina, the Chinese and Japanese and Philipinos to the West Coast, the Cubans to Florida. And that is just the beginning of a list of the many nationalities which have populated our country. All have enriched our culture greatly, and many of you are their descendents.

As late as 1989, that was still the dream of some. When Ronald Reagan left office that year, he said these words in his farewell speech: “I have spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it is a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That’s how I saw it and see it still.” (2)

Well, a lot has happened since 1989. NAFTA, 9-11, the terrorist bombings in Spain and England and the Times Square bomber, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the huge influx of immigrants from south of the border trying to escape the poverty of Mexico and looking for jobs of any kind, and lately the drug cartels taking over border towns and creating drug wars like those in Juarez. All these have made us wary of strangers and newcomers and people of a different color of skin or with a foreign accent. I’m afraid that, for a majority of people in our country, the American dream has been forgotten in our efforts to keep out the strangers and the immigrants, and keep our country secure. It is a most understandable reaction brought on by fear for our safety. But I wonder if it is leading the good people of our country to forget the American dream of hospitality. And I wonder if there is anything that will ever change that.

Yet, for us who call ourselves Christian, there is another side to all this. Let us call it “Hospitality and the Christian Dream.” The Christian dream has always been one of hospitality, from the earliest days of our history in Israel to our present day DCPC partnerships with the Segona Church and School in Kenya, and the Kilambe community in Nicaragua.

Let me cite just a few Biblical examples. Abraham was a migrant, moving from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran in Canaan to start a new people.

Joseph was a migrant carried into slavery in Egypt, but one who later saved the Hebrew people from famine.

Moses was an immigrant Hebrew child, raised by Pharaoh's daughter in Egypt; yet, a man who grew up to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt.

Ruth was a migrant from the land of Moab. She went to Judah with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after their husbands had died, and eventually married Boaz, the Israelite. Ruth was so admired that a whole book of the Bible is reserved for her story.

Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus were immigrants in Egypt who fled there to escape the persecution of Herod.

All these were given hospitality in some way in their new land, even though they were not native born. As a writer says of Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus, "They became asylum seekers in Egypt. Without travel documents, they crossed the border looking for safety and sanctuary. Although they were strangers, someone took them in. Someone welcomed them and protected them." (3) In other words, someone showed them hospitality.

In the book of Leviticus, there are these instructions which God gives to his people. "When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the immigrant. The immigrant who resides with you shall be as a citizen among you. You shall love the immigrant as yourself, for you all were immigrants in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God." (4) One day we, or our ancestors, were all immigrants to this country, and someone loved us and showed us hospitality. Like the Israelites, God would not want us to forget this.

It may seem like a stretch to bring Galatians into this argument, but since we are supposed to be preaching from Galatians these weeks, the Scripture today reminds us that we reap what we sow. If we have been sowing seeds of hostility toward our immigrant neighbors, we will surely reap hostility in return, in some form or the other. But if we sow hospitality, we shall not only reap good will from them, but also be doing the will of God clearly laid out in Scripture. Galatians says we are to work for the good of all persons and I take this really to mean all persons, not just persons who look like us. (5)

I suppose today I want to make one simple point. I want to ask us to think as Biblical Christians when we consider what should be our response to the whole problem of immigration. We all know it's an extremely complicated issue, as even the president pointed out in his address this week. There are no easy solutions. It has divided our country already in so many ways. Sixteen states are seeking to pass legislation similar to that of Arizona.

When you look at a county-by-county population map of the United States, you discover that two-thirds of the counties in southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, West and South Texas, have a minority Anglo-American population. And that holds true for many counties in all the states bordering the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic coast, including some counties in North Carolina. (6) The present Congress will not even consider the issue of comprehensive immigration reform before the November elections, because it is so divisive. After that, depending on how the elections come out, they may not consider it at all. Yet, the question for us must always be: What is the Christian response to this issue, no matter what any political party says? What does God call you and me to do and feel about this moral question?

The North Carolina Council of Churches, made up of both Catholic and Protestant churches, has released this official statement: “As people of faith and conscience, we recognize that while the issue of immigration is complex, our calling is to welcome the stranger and offer hospitality and justice to migrants and refugees, regardless of legal status. Religious communities must look to our scripture and faith traditions which call us to welcome the stranger, promote hospitality, and seek justice.” (7) This is our Christian vision.

In her recent book, Episcopal Priest Stephanie Spellers calls this vision “radical welcome,” the kind of welcome God gives to all of us. The author goes on to say that God’s dream for us is that we should show “radical welcome” to all our neighbors, whoever they are, wherever they are from. She quotes Michael Curry, Episcopal Bishop of North Carolina: “God is changing things so that they finally reflect the dream of God. It will be new to us but it is merely the fulfillment of what God intended all along.” (8)

I think this describes hospitality and the Christian dream; it is God’s dream for us, the people we might become.

Maybe, if religious communities do serious work on this issue, one day God’s dream for us will be transformed into the American dream, as well. Who knows? Nothing is impossible with God.

Have a happy Fourth of July, the birthday of our nation. It really is a day to celebrate the amazing diversity of the America we are living in these days. Perhaps it is also a day for us to practice hospitality and welcome the stranger! Amen.

References

1. StatueLiberty.net/statue-of-liberty-poem, “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus
2. RonaldReagan.com, “Farewell Address to the Nation,” Jan. 11, 1989
3. Leviticus 19:33-34 (NRSV, revised)
4. From Galatians 6:7-10 (NRSV)
5. usatoday.com/news/nation/census/county-by-county-diversity.
6. “Faith and Immigration: The Religious Calling to Welcome the Stranger,” North Carolina Council of Churches (www.nccouncilofchurches.org)
7. Ibid.
8. Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome*, New York: Church Publishing, Inc. (2006), a book discussion selection for Women of the ELCA, p. 31

For more information about this whole subject, please click on: <http://www.welcometheimmigrant.org/>