

“An Approachable God”

Genesis 18:20-32, Luke 11:1-13

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July 29, 2007

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Both of the Bible readings for today have to do with hospitality. They force us to sit up and take notice of this universal more. In the first reading, God is about to wipe Sodom off the map because the citizens of that city have shown themselves to be models of inhospitality! Instead of welcoming strangers, the residents of Sodom have abused them. Instead of honoring travelers from foreign lands, they have dishonored them. By dishonoring the strangers, they have dishonored God. And God has very little tolerance for the sin of inhospitality.

In the second reading, travelers are delayed and arrive at midnight, long after the next door neighbors have tucked their children into bed. But the householder who has received the guests knows that hospitality is the highest of religious values, higher even than the value of not disturbing the neighbors after midnight! So, when he realizes his own cupboard is bare, he doesn't hesitate to knock on the neighbor's door, and keeps on knocking, until the neighbor delivers some bread and some beverage.

The modern reader has very little sympathy with the householder who receives the late guests because we reason that he should have checked his food pantry earlier in the day. And the ultra-modern reader doesn't understand the dilemma at all because we know we can always run down to the convenience store that stays open all night and pick up some PB and J and some hard rolls! But the power of this ancient story lies in the very high value placed on offering hospitality to the visitor, no matter what.

As I began to work with these two texts, I saw that they help us establish a theological basis for our nation to talk about hospitality as it relates to immigration. Though immigration is a hot political topic these days and will continue to be so, I would like us to focus on what our Biblical tradition has to contribute to this pressing conversation. This I do not as a way of staking out a position as if I were a candidate seeking office, but as a way of naming that our faith tradition has some wisdom to offer!

We don't hear this word, 'hospitality', mentioned much in the national debate on immigration, yet this is precisely what it's all about. We do hear about legal and illegal aliens. We hear about building a 2000 mile fence to keep certain people out. We hear about various plans to offer various degrees of amnesty, various penalties and fees for illegal persons to become legal. Legislators are lining up, taking sides, preparing position papers, all pretty much based on political agenda. I don't hear anyone talking in the debate from a faith perspective. No one is using the hospitality word. So, from our Judeo-Christian heritage, here are two basic concepts I believe are relevant.

First, throughout the Old Testament, we have the concept of the sojourner. A sojourner is a traveler in a foreign land, a wanderer, a person without roots or a person who has been uprooted. In story after story, God speaks to the Hebrew people reminding them that they were once sojourners themselves, relying on the kindness and the hospitality of others. As a settled people, their obligation was to treat the sojourner as they themselves had been treated, with dignity and respect and basic hospitality. The sojourner is always at risk, always at the mercy of the host country.

We have, for example, the moving story of Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, who sojourned to the land of Moab when there was drought and famine in Israel.

They had no reason to expect hospitality, for the Moabites had nothing to do with the Law of Moses. But, behold, the Moabites received these foreigner travelers and blessed them and even allowed their two sons to marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. I see this as evidence of the universality of the hospitality code.

Ninety nine percent of the people who call America their home were once upon a time sojourners, uprooted from Europe or Africa or Asia or South America. My own ancestor, Thomas Carroll, came to this country as a stow-away on a ship sailing from Ireland. Clearly an illegal alien, he was received and blessed by the townspeople in Noank, Connecticut. They offered him the position of lighthouse keeper at Race Rock. There he served the sailing community until he drowned in a winter storm trying to reach the lighthouse in a rowboat.

It would be fun some evening to form a circle and each one tell the family's history of coming to America, whether on a slave ship or on a boat from Vietnam or on the Mayflower, whether arriving at Plymouth Rock or Ellis Island, or one of the Florida Keys.

So, the first Biblical principle to bring to any debate on immigration is this notion of the sojourner receiving hospitality, and that most of us were once immigrants, sojourners in a foreign land, who relied to some extent on the mercy of the citizens who had come before us. Thus, when we read a story in the Hartford Courant of a Mexican family crossing the Rio Grande River, we are reading, in part, our own story. It doesn't have to be us and them; it can just be us, all of us.

A second Biblical principle that comes into play is one that is espoused and embraced by Doctors Without Borders. It is the idea that though national borders matter, there are times when other values supersede.

In a doctor's eyes, there are people who are sick. No other standard applies. Doctors do not ask children with whooping cough to produce a passport before they'll administer medication!

Matthew tells the story of a woman from a foreign land who approaches Jesus with a plea that he heal her daughter. She is a Syrophenician citizen, a gentile, an outsider. She is hoping Jesus will be a doctor without borders.

Translated into modern times, we could say this woman is from Haiti or Guatemala or North Korea or possibly Iran. She is not a local. Jesus hears her request and responds by putting boundaries around his healing work. He says in a most condescending, uncharacteristic tone, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words, he is labeling this woman and her daughter as second class citizens.

But this woman, caring more for her daughter's health than for national boundaries, replies, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus is so moved by this woman's truth speaking that he changes his tune and says to her, "Go in peace; your daughter is well again." Some would argue that this is among the most powerful of all the New Testament stories. For here, even Jesus recognizes that there are some values higher than nationalism, even higher than the tenets of one particular religion.

It is no wonder that Doctors Without Borders won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1999. That title, Doctors Without Borders, reveals a theology that we bring to the table when we talk about immigration reform. There are times when God turns a blind eye to national boundary lines. We would do well to appoint the Syrophenician woman to chair the current national debate. She brings a refreshing point of view.

When I am asked to describe South Church to newcomers, I often say we are a community that can talk about anything. Since the whole country is talking about immigration, I thought I would contribute to the discussion two Bible principles; the sojourner and the Syrophoenician woman.

You may or may not like these principles. You may find other, opposing principles on other pages of the Bible. But as people of faith, we need to do our homework and to know what wisdom our tradition has to contribute.

So, I lift up these two in the greatest of hope, Amen!