

An Immigration Message to Use with the Wisconsin Conference Immigration Working Group Liturgy

Written By Rev. Randy J. Mayer, Pastor, The Good Shepherd UCC, Sahuarita, AZ

(edited by Bryan Sirchio, Pastor, McFarland UCC, McFarland, WI)

Preliminary Note: The message that follows is about half of a Convocation Address given by Rev. Randy Mayer at Andover Newton Seminary, his alma mater, on October 15, 2019. Randy is widely known throughout the UCC and across the U.S. for his congregation's 20 plus years of ministry to and with migrants attempting to cross the Mexico/U.S. border in southern Arizona. No one is more qualified to speak historically, theologically, and practically to the issue of immigration than Rev. Mayer.

We asked Randy if he had any messages on immigration we could share with the Wisconsin Conference to go along with the liturgy our working group was creating. Randy sent this address and gave us permission to use it in any way we like.

The entire address was too long for a sermon, and the edited form probably is as well! But it is full of gems for you to mine. You are welcome to simply read it as a sermon in your local context, edit it however you like, or to use portions of it in a sermon of your own creation. As you will see, Randy offers a comprehensive account of the history behind the current immigration crisis (though he did not in this address touch the implications of climate change—feel free to add those yourself!) as well as extensive connections between Scripture and the Church's call to do justice and practice hospitality. Please use whatever you find most useful.

We are so very grateful to Pastor Mayer for his tireless leadership, his generosity in sharing this text with us, and his congregation's amazing work over the years.

Please Also Note: In addition to the liturgy created by the Conference Immigration Working Group and several contributors, working group member Rev. Elizabeth Hazel also composed a complete liturgy and sermon on her own that we encourage you to look at and use however you like. Thank you so much Elizabeth!

“Strangers, Angels, And The Immigration Handbook”

By Rev. Randy J. Mayer

So how did we ever get to this raging conflict around immigration? This quagmire along the border? How did we get from that lofty quote on the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddle masses yearning to breathe free” --from that idealistic perspective of never-ending inclusion at all cost to this rotting abyss of fear and hatred toward the other that people now call the “immigration crisis?”

It did not, contrary to what some would like to think, start with President Trump. To be sure, during his presidency, the former president took every opportunity to demonize the migrant, calling them animals, rapists, criminals “with calves as big as cantaloupes.” He was hell bent on building his, “big, beautiful wall,” stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. The former president of the United States actually said this about the wall... “Paint it black, so skin burns! Add 6 rows of razor wire, sharp spikes at the top so children are maimed! Dig a moat and fill it with sewer water, crocodiles and snakes, so people suffer.” This rhetoric of cruelty fit right into the mentality of caging children, separating families, and criminalizing people that are fleeing for their lives---escaping poverty and violence. Segments of our population have regressed to a primitive--violent Roman Empiresque reality, where grace and mercy have been replaced with cruelty and brutality.

As evil as it has become, policies against the dignity and humanity of immigrants attempting to enter the U.S. or to live securely once they are in our land are not new. In the borderlands we have seen this ugly movement coming across the United States for a long time. The truth of the matter is that the wall began to appear as early as 1993, shortly before the NAFTA free trade agreements went into place. The United States government knew the agreements were not fair. They knew that there would be unprecedented immigration. How could a Mexican corn farmer compete against a corn farmer from the United States that was subsidized by the U.S. Government? How would a Chiapas village survive after it had been flooded to create a hydro-electric plant? Desperate people would do desperate things. The United States knew this fact. Once there were walls, more agents were needed to guard the walls, and then drones and helicopters to patrol it from the sky, and before long they sent the National Guard and branches of the military. The beautiful borderlands are now a scorched earth, low intensity warzone.

No doubt former President Trump used hateful, derogatory language to demonize and dehumanize the migrant and put in place cruel and barbaric policies. But if you have kept your eye on the ball, like we in the borderlands have, the simple truth is that one can't get to the policies of former President Trump without the policies of former President Clinton who put in place many of the anti-immigrant strategies. It was President Clinton who commenced the building of the wall and put more Border Patrol agents in the field. Clinton used the deadly Sonoran Desert as a deterrent saying, “nobody would be that desperate to cross the desert.”

We can't get to the policies of the Trump administration without President Bush who within months of taking office faced the 9/11 terrorist attacks. His response was a retaliatory war in the Middle East and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security that accelerated the growth of the Border Patrol and the militarization of the borderlands. Why? It wasn't because terrorists came from the southern border. It was because of a deep-rooted fear of the “other,” and because of racism.

We can't understand the current immigration crisis without also recalling the policies of President Obama. Barack Obama came into office with great promise, but spent eight years doing his best to win over conservatives with his “tough on immigration” policies. In the end Obama built more than 200 miles of border wall, deported more than 800,000 immigrants

tearing thousands of families apart, and grew the Border Patrol to more than 23,000 agents. Today along with ICE and custom officers, there are over 50,000 agents with a budget of close to \$30 billion. It is now the largest law enforcement agency in the country, and it is completely out of control, with no oversight, no transparency, and with unprecedented powers to stop, frisk and racially profile border residents. This is life as we know it now in the borderlands.

The truth is that our current immigration struggle has taken years, if not hundreds of years to create. And it will take years to resolve. The real answers we need are much deeper than those conveniently sitting on the surface. Real answers must include justice, truth, and compassion, and that means we must also acknowledge our nation's colonial and expansionist history.

By the mid-nineteenth century the Western expansion of our white European ancestors was called, "Manifest Destiny." Manifest Destiny was, among other things, an evil theology. It justified taking land and resources by saying, that our Pilgrim and Puritan forebearers were "chosen by God, to claim their promised land and tame the natives." Settlers flooded into the area called Texas which eventually led to the Mexican American War, fought for the sole purpose of seizing land. At the end of the war the United States made a massive land grab as their bounty. They called it the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that set the Rio Grande as the boundary of Texas and gave New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Colorado---more than 1/3 of the United States today. Land was one thing, but what people might not realize is that this land was some of the most fertile and rich land in the world. It included gold deposits in California, abundant silver in Nevada, massive oil fields in Texas, and all the natural harbors necessary for commerce. This land is what made the United States wealthy and powerful in the last century and it cut off Mexico's ability to create wealth. People today talk about borders and the need for rule of law, but Manifest Destiny and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo were obscene and absent of law and decency. It was bold-faced robbery. All these years later it is part of the cause of massive immigration. An honest reading of history shows us plainly that the Mexicans did not jump the border, the border jumped them.

Another historical root cause that has contributed to our current immigration struggle happened in the early twentieth century when President Theodore Roosevelt introduced the Monroe Doctrine. These were the policies of, "gun boat diplomacy" and "speaking softly but carrying a big stick." Policies that laid the foundation for today's multi-national corporations. Propping up dictators, and protecting United Fruit Company type corporations that raped, pillaged, and exploited the people of the land. When anyone objected about the aggressive tactics of these corporations in Latin America, the U.S. would respond militarily with the simple justification that we must "protect U.S. interests." In the process of protecting these ruthless multinational corporations the United States overtly and covertly invaded Latin American countries more than seventy times, often overthrowing democratically elected governments and installing brutal dictators.

By the 1970's, 80's and 90's the destructive work of these so called, "Banana Republics" had been solidified, and poverty, strife, and death took hold. The United States poured millions of

dollars and military assistance into the wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. By then the justifying rhetoric had been stretched to include “fighting communism” and “fighting the war on drugs.” The truth however was that the United States was in the business of coddling corrupt dictators and oligarchs so that U.S. corporations could reap huge profits leaving destruction in its wake. Immigration north became the only answer for many who were trying to escape the violence and despair.

By the end of the twentieth century, so-called “first world” countries had moved onto free trade agreements. Through the cover of trade ministers and governments openly signing these agreements it appeared as if everything was above board, fair and honest. But vulnerable people had been left out of the conversation and their leaders exploited them. Today, the United States and other first world countries no longer need to physically invade a country to take it over. The free trade agreements allowed them to virtually take over a country’s economy and siphon all the wealth, natural resources, and cheap labor and call it, “business as usual.” How could anyone argue with free market, laissez faire, neo-con economics?

So you see, if you uncover things just a bit--and it isn’t hard--you begin to see that this immigration and border struggle we face today certainly did not start recently. It has deep historical roots of injustice, racism, and theft of the highest order. Theologian and activist Miguel De La Torre says, “What do you expect, when one country builds roads into another country to extract their raw material and their cheap labor? Why should we be surprised that those same people take those same roads following everything that has been stolen from them?”

The bottom line is that millions of good, hard working, family loving, salt of the earth, faith-filled people, have followed those roads. Pushed out of their countries in the south and pulled to the north. The desert borderlands where I call home is inhospitable. It is said that everything in the Sonoran Desert will either poke you, bite you, or sting you. The summer heat is unbearable, reaching temperatures of 120 degrees and in the winters the nights can drop to 20 or 30 degrees. Aware of the deadly conditions of the Sonoran Desert, the US Government in 1994, shamefully weaponized the desert, saying no one would be desperate enough to cross in the desert. They intentionally pushed the flow of migration into the most dangerous places. In fact, Doris Meissner, the INS Commissioner said, “We will push them to the most remote parts of the desert--- where we can either track them or they will die. It will be so severe that the numbers crossing will become a trickle.” The trickle never happened. Instead, huge numbers began to risk everything, and the number of migrant deaths began to skyrocket. Desperate people escaping war, gang violence, and poverty will do desperate things. In our area alone more than 3200 remains have been recovered since 2000. It is the Devils Highway; the Sonoran Desert has become a graveyard.

As people of faith we are called, as it says in Micah 6:8, to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” Part of doing justice is finding the courage to hear and face the truth about the root causes of a problem. We engage in this truth telling not to lose ourselves in cycles of blame or partisan disputes or ideological arguments, but so that we can begin to bring healing

and justice to the core wounds at the root of an issue. That is why we must understand the history of the current immigration crisis. As people of faith we also have an obligation to answer to a higher call than simply protecting our own nation's borders. When our own government is intentionally pushing vulnerable people to desolate areas where we know they will die, people of faith must rise up and do something to prevent it. We must offer hospitality. Radical Hospitality.

Our faith ancestors knew how to practice radical hospitality. In fact, Scripture is full of stories of hospitality of opening doors and welcoming the stranger into one's home. Abraham is considered the quintessential host within the Jewish and Christian faith traditions. It all goes back to the retelling of Genesis 18. Abraham is resting outside his tent, when he looks up to see three mysterious strangers approaching. He doesn't waste time. He warmly greets them and he and Sarah hurry to provide refreshment and nourishment for the travelers. Take note that the guests are completely unknown to them. And yet they drop everything and offer their very best. In the midst of this hospitality the three strangers tell Abraham that his promised son will arrive. It is in the spirit of hospitality that a space for grace is made. Abraham becomes the model host for all of Israel. It is not optional, it is an expected behavior to offer food, water, and rest to the stranger.

Among the Torah's strongest impulses is to protect the "ger" – "the stranger." That is why there are no less than 36 instances in the Hebrew Bible of different iterations of the Leviticus 19:34 passage when God commands, "the alien (NRSV) or the stranger (NEV) who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love this one as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God." There is no wiggle room here. Boundaries are necessary, security is essential, but justice cannot be trampled upon, and hospitality is the grace that must be offered.

As a deeply devout Jew, Jesus knew this Leviticus text. He made the principles of radical hospitality central to his ministry. He was always either giving or receiving it. He came as a stranger into the world, vulnerable to the welcome and rejection of people. Without a place of his own, he acted as a host to individuals, small groups, and multitudes, making use of places that were available to him. He went out of his way to welcome, to break down barriers and borders to include and offer compassion---risking it all. With Jesus sometimes he was guest and host in the same encounter. His practices of hospitality were always intense, personal, and counter-cultural.

The Greek word that is traditionally translated in English as "hospitality" is "Philo-xenia," literally, "love of the stranger." The early Christians were charged to offer hospitality. In fact "hospitality" was the first in the marks of Christian identity. All other Christian virtues flow out of this one practice. It is rather astounding to think that the beleaguered and vulnerable early Christian community took such risks to "Love the Stranger." It would have been so easy to hunker down and protect themselves and their families. But hospitality was seen as an obligation, a duty of Christian discipleship in the early church.

So, if we read Scripture seriously, we begin to see that the Bible is, among other things, an immigration handbook. It is a guide to hospitality to and with those on the margins. If we want to call ourselves Christian, followers of Jesus' ways, we must become skilled and seasoned hosts. And that is how the church I serve near the U.S./Mexico border in Arizona got into the business of hospitality, of loving the stranger in the desert. All we did was the Bible, take it seriously, and do our best to follow its instructions.

We noticed that Jesus didn't always wait for the people to come to him. He would wander to the margins looking for the people in most need. The ones that society had disposed of, that had been pushed to the edge. He would find them and nourish them, treat them with dignity, and in the process, they would be healed.

We tried to practice that same spirit of radical hospitality. Driving an hour or more to the desolate parts of the desert to put water on the most active migrant trails. In those early days we couldn't put out enough water. 50 to 100 gallons and it would be gone in a day or two. We would minister to individuals, small groups of three or four, we never had the multitudes that Jesus had, but sometimes groups as big as 50 to 100 people. We imagined ourselves as the water-boys and water-girls for the soccer team. Waiting for the players to come to the edge of the field so we could take care of them. The migrants were the stars---the heroes of the story. We were servants to them. We would make sure everyone had water, cleans socks, a little bit of food. We would treat them with love and dignity. Those simple gifts seemed to give them strength to continue on. We sent them back onto the field, on to the trail with new hope and energy.

Sometimes we found so many migrants on the way to our water drops that we never got to the migrant trails. This was always a huge disappointment and heartbreak for us because we knew that water is critical for survival---water is life and without it people die.

So we started another group called the Samaritans. Their role was to roam the back roads and washes looking for migrants in distress, giving food, water, and medical care so the other volunteers could get to the trails to put out the water. The Samaritans literally replicated the work and words of their name's sake in Scripture, who took a risk and broke the cultural norms to give life-saving support to his neighbor on the treacherous road to Jericho.

One of our eldest Samaritans was a woman named Velma. Every morning she would walk her dogs in her neighborhood close to the desert. Probably two or three times a month she would end up bringing a migrant home from her walk. Her husband Al would always smile when she arrived at the door. He never knew who she would bring home. She would say, I brought a couple friends home for breakfast. And Al would get busy making the eggs and toast, the gift of grace and hospitality would begin to fill the room.

Many of our Samaritans say they have met Jesus in the desert. Yeah, literally we have sometimes found migrants named Jesus. But I think it is a little more profound than that.

Matthew 25 gives a feel of what Jesus was implying when he said, "When I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty you gave me water; when I was a stranger you invited me in." We all get that one, when we care for the least of these, we care for Jesus himself. But I kind of like this passage from Hebrews 13 a little better that says, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unaware." I love this passage because it has hints of the hospitality story of Abraham and the three strangers, but it also mixes in a little bit of Matthew 25, seeing Jesus in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger.

To be honest, I didn't believe in angels before I moved to Arizona. But I do now. I have seen them with my own two eyes. Their soft wings. The breeze that blows with and through them like a feather in the wind. Sometimes the angel is the stranger in the form of the migrant. Their strength, their pure commitment to family and loved ones, willing to risk it all for life and love. That is the kind of "family values" that I can believe in. I want to be in a community with people like that. Not just a community but a world filled with deeply committed, loving people, devoted to faith and family. I will risk everything to help them find their way. But sometimes the angel is in the form of a Samaritan volunteer, a humanitarian worker, a lover of the stranger. Being present in the right time and the right place, providing basic needs in hazardous circumstances. But more than that it is the meeting of the stranger and treating them like a long lost friend, like a child of God, like they matter and you will go to the ends of the earth to make sure that their needs are taken care of and they are treated well.

Jesus had that great ability of being guest and host in the same encounter---somehow flipping the roles. That happens a lot in the Sonoran Desert. Our Samaritans go out to literally save lives in the desert. But more often than not it is their own lives that are saved, transformed, never to be the same again.

In the desert, on the margins, where the desire to extend grace and the desperate need to receive grace fall into each other, things have a way of getting mixed up and turned upside down. Who is the stranger? Who is the Angel? Who is saving whom? And does it really matter? The only thing I know is that it is holy and sacred. It is filled with mercy and grace.

And isn't that how God's world has always worked? It is turned upside down, counter-cultural, twisted and turned, extravagant and generous. Grace appears miraculously when you least expect it.

It should be a clue for us to as we seek to resolve our immigration struggle. The solutions we need at this point in history won't be found first and foremost in the Halls of Congress or from whoever sits in the Whitehouse, as consequential as those positions are. But the solutions we truly need will be found among those who look into the eyes of the other and instead of seeing a stranger, see a member of their own family, a child of God, an Angel unaware. May it be so. Amen.