

A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 1, 2007, Pentecost 5, dedicated to Evelyn Baker and Ruth Anderson as we remember them with love and to all who come to America seeking a better way of life and always to the glory of God!

“Yearning to Be Free”

Galatians 5:1,13-25, Luke 9:51-62

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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On January 29, 1989, Lourdes leaves Tegucigalpa, Honduras and heads north to the United States of America. Left by her husband with two young children, starving, living in a shack in the slums of the capital city, Lourdes sees no other way to provide for Belky (4) and Enrique (6), than to leave her home and her family and risk a 1,600 mile trip to America. She tells herself and her family, she will send money back and soon her children will be reunited with her in El Norte (the North). She kneels and kisses Belky and hugs her tightly. But, Lourdes cannot face Enrique. He will remember only one thing she says to him, *“Don’t forget to go to church this afternoon.”* With that, she steps off the porch and walks away as Enrique cries, *“Where are you going Momma?”*

In *Enriques Journey*, winner of two Pulitzer Prizes (one for feature writing and one for feature photography), Sonia Nazario, of *The Los Angeles Times*, tells the story of one Honduran youth’s unforgettable journey to be reunited with his mother more than 3,000 miles away. After 11 years of broken promises of return and reunion, Enrique can no longer wait for his mother to come home. So, he goes north to find her. He braves unimaginable hardships - beatings, robbing by bandits, corrupt and violent cops and border police - to come to

America. Mostly clinging to the sides and tops of freight trains, and with little more in his pocket than a slip of paper with his mother's North Carolina telephone number, Enrique pushes forward relying on his wit, courage, and hope - and the kindness of strangers.

Virtually unnoticed, this teenager, indeed still a child, becomes one of an estimated 48,000 children who enter the United States each year from Central America and Mexico, illegally and without either of their parents. Roughly two thirds of them make it past the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Some flee abusive families. Most are seeking reunification with a parent. Seventy-five percent of these children are looking for their mothers. Some children say they need to find out if their mothers still love them (*Enrique's Journey*, by Sonia Nazario, Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2007, p. 241). Enrique is one of the lucky ones who makes it, finds his mother, and now lives near her in North Carolina. Many are not so fortunate.

An estimated 1.7 million children live illegally in the United States - mostly from Central America and Mexico. Like Enrique, almost all have spent time away from a parent before following them to the U.S. One in four children in our nation's schools is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant - a group whose numbers grew between 1990 - 2000 seven times faster than that of children with both parents born in the U.S., and like all other immigration numbers, these numbers have skyrocketed since 2000. Each year, the United States legally admits one million people. Another 700,000 arrive illegally each year - a number that is up from 200,000 to 300,000 a year in the early 1990s.

Today, 36 million residents of the United States were born in another country, nearly one third (or 12 million) live here illegally. The number of immigrants coming into our country in recent years is the highest ever recorded. And while the proportion of the population that is foreign born, at 12%, is still lower than the all-

time high of 15% in 1890 - it has risen from 5% since 1970 (Ibid, pp. 245 and 251).

More than six in ten residents of Miami and four in ten in Los Angeles are from another country. Some Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have jokingly dubbed the influx *la reconquista* - the reconquest of lands once held by Mexico. While we receive 16 billion dollars a year in taxes from the newest Americans, the cost of services extended cost \$26.2 billion each year.

Ironically, like most Americans, Enrique and Lourdes, disagree about the impact on this mass immigration on the United States. Enrique says that was he an American citizen, he would want to curtail illegal immigration. Like most of the paint crew on which he works, he is paid under the table. He uses public services, including emergency medical services. And he sends a portion of his income to Honduras, rather than spending it here (It is estimated that 15% of El Salvador's Gross National Product and even more of Mexico's come from money sent back into the country from illegal immigrants.)

Lourdes disagrees. Yes, she says her daughter Diana was born in a public hospital and she received welfare for a time. But, she pays taxes and is entitled to those services. She believes immigrant labor drives the U.S. economic engine. Immigrants like her, work hard at jobs that no Americans want to do, at least not for minimum wage with no health coverage or paid vacation. These are backbreaking jobs at low wages providing goods and services to all Americans at reasonable prices. "America should be glad we are here," says Lourdes.

The melting pot, which is our American experience, has reached a new crossroads. And sadly, but clearly, the U. S. Senate is unwilling to deal with this crisis. Earlier this past week, the Senate walked away from legislation, which would deal with our recent influx of more than 10 million illegal immigrants. While the President

and moderates in the Senate crafted bipartisan legislation, the conservatives and the liberals in each party crushed the compromise bill. Is it any wonder that while the general public supports the President with a mere 29% approval rating, America's confidence in the U.S. Senate scrapes the bottom of the barrel at 15% support? We have not had any immigration laws passed in this country since 1986. The Senate's failure to produce immigration laws at this point in our history is regrettable and appalling. It means that we will not have any meaningful federal legislation for at least 2-3 years. By that point, an additional 2.5 million immigrants will have entered our country illegally.

As Christians, we follow a savior who himself was an illegal immigrant in Egypt. Fleeing the slaughter of Herod's forces, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt through the desert when Jesus was 12 days old. Abraham and Moses were immigrants. Peter and Paul had immigrant status, along with most of the other disciples.

Throughout scripture, the resident aliens (the Biblical word for immigrants), along with widows and orphans are the ones for whom we are told to care. In Exodus 22:21, we read, "*You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were all aliens in the land of Egypt.*" Leviticus 19:33 proclaims, "*When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.*" Jesus proclaims in Matthew 25, "*When I was a stranger you took me in . . . whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me.*" When asking what Jesus would do, we are hard pressed to be devoutly Christian and anti-immigrant.

Often, those who oppose illegal immigrants begin to speak of the breaking of the law by undocumented workers. However, we must be honest. The relationship of Christians and the law has always been shaky and uneasy at best - especially, as pointed out a moment ago, the relationship between our immigrant Lord and his lawbreaking parents. Moreover, we worship a God who is famous for forgiveness

and grace in the face of our fallen and lawbreaking ways. Don't we celebrate God's amnesty and pardon for our sins? We might also remember, our great lawbreaking founders overthrew the legally binding government of England and established a new law in this new land. Later, it was the lawbreaking abolitionists who helped slaves steal away to freedom who established this congregation in 1852. This church building would not be standing here if our forebearers in faith had not broken laws! They followed a higher law in following God's call to freedom for all God's children. So let's be honest, declaring illegal immigrants as lawbreakers simply brings us closer to them - for we are built in a fine tradition of law breaking believers.

Several things are clear to me:

- * First, every human being has intrinsic dignity and needs to be welcomed and loved as a child of God. The legal status of a person should not affect our love and welcome for that person.

- * Second, it is clear to me that immigrants in our land must be treated justly and humanely. We are called by God to offer hospitality to all who come to us. Our God who led Israel out of slavery to freedom in the Promised Land is opposed to the oppression, degradation, and humiliation of any of God's beloved ones - foreigners or nationals!

- * Third, it is clear to me that we will reap what we sow. Many immigrants who have fled from Central America and Mexico and certainly from other nations have come to our shores because of war, famine, international unemployment, or a lack of political or religious freedom. Some of these situations are due to corrupt governments in their countries. Nevertheless, our government and North American-based international corporations have not been neutral spectators of this international immigration. For example, it is hypocritical to contribute to the militarization of Central America in the 1980s

and complain about massive immigration from those terrorized nations in the aftermath of military coupes, civil wars, and death squads terrorizing native people and the poorest of the poor.

Clearly, the vast majority of our 12 million immigrants come from Mexico. In Mexico, 1.8 million campesinos have been forced off their land in the last 25 years to make way for the growth of mega-corporate farms. The overwhelming majority of these poor, landless peasants have migrated to the north. In addition, our government's participation in Mexican electoral fraud, and the ensuing losses in agricultural jobs due to NAFTA regulations have brought millions of others north of the border. Sooner or later, we reap what we sow.

As we stand on the edge of Independence Day, let us remember, our experiment in American Democracy is only 231 years old. Conversely, our experience in Christianity is 2,000 years old and the hospitality and welcome to the stranger in our midst extends 4,000 years back into our Jewish heritage.

As we worship today, another Enrique is on the way to find his mother to the north. As we worship today, thousands of refugees from war in Iraq, Darfur, the Sudan, Ethiopians, and citizens from other parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are in pursuit of happiness. They are yearning to be free.

However we open our doors and our hearts, we must find a way to welcome the stranger in our midst. It is our mandate as Christians. It is our heritage as Americans. Outside of African-Americans who were brought here in the heinous economics of slavery, your forebearers, like mine, would not have entered this land had someone not welcomed them. We wouldn't be here unless our immigrant relatives had not come through the passages of immigrant entry. Just because we came through New York's harbor and passed

through Ellis Island, our entry to this land is no more blessed than those who pursue freedom still. As we welcome others who yearn for freedom, may we find a way to do so with the grace and love instilled in us by our illegal immigrant Savior, even Jesus Christ our Lord!

Amen.