

Transcript of Part 2

Insights from Scripture

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by

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So this evening I'd like to outline how insights from Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching challenge myths that enable exclusion and abet division. So certainly, the story of Jewish and Christian pilgrim communities is one of migration, diaspora, and the call to live accordingly. Indeed after the commandment to worship one God, no moral imperative is repeated more frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures than the command to care for the stranger. Despite convenient amnesia in our own nation of immigrants, it was Israel's own bitter experience of displacement that undergirded its ethic of just compassion toward outsiders: So "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you are aliens in the land of Egypt."

When Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled Egypt, the emigre Holy Family becomes the archetype for every refugee family. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins his early journey as a migrant and displaced person. Jesus, who in the same Gospel would radically identify with the least, and make hospitality to the stranger the criterion for judgment.

Patterns of migration across Scripture do not readily resolve complex modern dilemmas. Yet Scripture shapes our moral perception. So by engaging the voice of Scripture in a manner that dislocates these dominant frameworks of interpretation, we can become more attuned to how our perspective shapes our moral response and really how Scripture might enhance our perceptive imagination.

So if our conventional politics of immigration are driven by instrumental values, how might a scriptural politics of immigration shape a Catholic counter-narrative? Well, one of the most persistently recurrent themes in Scripture is justice and compassion for the vulnerable. The prophets repeatedly connect bringing justice for the poor to experiencing God. Concern for the economically vulnerable echoes throughout the New Testament as well, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, which depicts Jesus being born in a stable among mere shepherds and inaugurating his public ministry in terms that emphasize a mission to bring Good News to the poor and release the oppressed.

New Testament scholar Donald Senior notes that in the overall landscape of the Gospel stories, the rich and the powerful are often in place, reclining at the table, calculating their harvest, standing comfortably in the front of the sanctuary, or seated on the judgment seat passing judgment over others. The poor, on the other hand, are often mobile and rootless, the sick coming from the four corners of the compass seeking healing, the crowds desperate to hear Jesus, roaming lost and hungry, the leper crouched outside the door. Senior suggests that experiences of people on the move reveal a profound dimension of all human experience, and they challenge false ideologies of unlimited resources or unconditional national sovereignty. He thinks that these plague our society and choke its spiritual capacity.

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I think similarly, recently the Jesuit Superior General Arturo Sosa talked about self-sufficiency in this regard in terms of idolatry. Or my former colleague Roberto Goizueta has written about security becoming an idol in this regard. So whereas the Scriptures do not provide detailed solutions to contemporary challenges posed by immigration, for people who turn to Scripture for guidance about what kind of people to become, it's clear they should show a deep concern for marginalized persons.

Biblical justice challenges approaches to immigration that are driven by market or security concerns alone. So a key contribution that a scriptural imagination offers then is to bring the perspectives of those most vulnerable and often silenced into the equation.

We have an image here of The Good Samaritan by the Chinese artist He Qi who now lives in Roseville, Minnesota. In Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, he identifies neighbor love and just living with care for the vulnerable stranger among us. You'll recall Jesus reverses the lawyer's expectations with a story of a perceived enemy's loving response to the one lying in the ditch. Jewish audiences would have been shocked to hear of a discredited priest and a Samaritan exemplar.

In the parable, the priests and the Levite notice the wounded man, and yet they keep their distance to avoid any contact that might defile them. Unlike the Samaritan who sees the man as a fellow human being in distress, the others don't allow themselves to be affected by his plight. By sharp contrast, the Samaritan apprehends the situation as the man in the ditch experiences it. Typical of Jesus's parables where the ordinary keeps breaking out of the extraordinary; I'm sorry, the extraordinary keeps breaking out of the ordinary, the Samaritan surpasses the care that would be required for our fellow countrymen to aid the stranger who might belong to his ethnic group's worst enemies. As Bill Spone notes, "Jesus stretches the limits of vision and compassion precisely where fear, enmity, and inconvenience want to restrict them."

So how might this parable where Jesus exposes the lawyer's categories as too cramped shape our imagination about immigration? Posing the lawyer's very question, "Who is my neighbor?" erects boundaries between members and outsiders. We quickly remove ourselves from the scene to balance abstract obligations. Perceptions of immigrants as threats alone, significantly influence our analysis.

So this prior question of perception shapes our assessment. Whom do we see as the immigrant? Freeloaders who take advantage of American generosity while taking jobs from U.S. citizens? Men queuing up outside the Home Depot? Threats to the neighborhood? Outsiders overcrowding our kids' schools? The women I described from Casa Nazaret? Or the student whose narrative I recounted?

If we see immigrants, the face of immigrants, as illegal, forever foreigners, anchor babies, or if we see separated mothers, displaced third-generation family farmers, taxpayers, honest workers, we pursue different avenues of analysis. Seeing immigrants' humanity as primary doesn't resolve conflicting claims over stretched resources and it doesn't absolve cases of immigrant crime, yet it does foreclose on death-dealing practices and invite us away from simplistic scapegoating.

To get at root causes and complex motives, like the Samaritan, we must identify with and become neighbor to the immigrant. Taking the victim's side as our own enjoins not only compassion but also liberation. Just as the Good Samaritan promises additional recompense to the innkeeper, Christians are called to enter the world of the neighbor and leave it in such a way that the neighbor is given freedom along with the very help that is offered.

The un-freedom of present and would-be migrants pointedly illustrates the urgency of this responsibility. The radical hospitality that tutors our vision does not reduce the immigration paradigm to charity or largesse, or move it out of the inclusive civic conversation. But it requires justice.