

**“Jesus Was An Immigrant”**  
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**Menifee United Church of Christ**

Jay Leno told an immigration joke a few years ago. This was back when he hosted The Tonight Show. Jay Leno said “As you know, Arizona recently passed the toughest anti-immigration bill in American history. The idea behind the bill is to drive illegal immigrants out of Arizona and back to their homeland...of Los Angeles.” Immigration though is no laughing matter. I could tell you what I believe about immigration. But you don’t come here to hear what I believe about something. You come here to hear what Jesus believes about something. So let’s examine what Jesus believes about immigration.

Jesus was an immigrant. According to the gospel of Matthew, an angel appeared before Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary and the baby Jesus and flee to Egypt. He did that because Herod was determined to kill Jesus because he was said to be becoming king of the Jews. So Joseph did that. He took Mary and the baby Jesus and they fled to Egypt and they stayed there for a while until the angel told Joseph to come back. Then the baby Jesus and Joseph and Mary came back and they did that, the prophets say, because God said, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” So Jesus was an immigrant.

America is an immigrant nation. A nation of immigrants. More than 300,000 of us are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Very few of us are descendants of Native Americans or American Indians. So America is a nation of immigrants. Some famous people are immigrants or have been. Albert Einstein was an immigrant. Arnold Schwarzenegger, former governor of California, is an immigrant. The incoming First Lady is an immigrant. America is a nation of immigrants.

Jesus seems to think favorably of immigrants. Also according to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” He also said, “As you did it to the least of these, you did it to members of my family.” So I believe Jesus is telling us to welcome the stranger, to welcome the immigrant, because they’re members of Jesus’ family. Do we see immigrants as members of Jesus’ family?

The incoming president promises to deport something like 12 million immigrants. He is also talking about building a wall across our southern border. Not across our northern border, not across our border with Canada, just across our border with Mexico. Although there is talk that Canada may build a wall across our northern border to keep Americans from leaving after January 20th, but that’s a joke, I think. Anyway, the incoming president promises to build a wall and this wall will be, I guess, nearly 2000 miles long, which will make the Berlin Wall look like nothing. That was about 70 miles long. Although it pales in comparison to the Great Wall of China, which is something like 13,000 miles long! Who knows how high the wall will be. I haven’t heard, but you know the old joke: If you build a 20 foot high wall, there will be a run on 22 foot ladders! It’s questionable whether a wall will be able to keep immigrants from coming here from Mexico, but that was the promise made and we’ll see if the promise will be kept. If they do build a wall across our southern border, I wonder if it wouldn’t be appropriate to put a plaque next to the wall like the one next to the Statue of Liberty, which says, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Of course, this would have to be the opposite, “Don’t give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” We’ll see.

Jesus tells us perhaps why we should welcome the stranger, welcome the immigrant. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is said to say that God is the father of all of us. We are all brothers and sisters, whether we were born in America or Mexico or wherever, we are all brothers and sisters. We’re all Jesus’ brothers and sisters. Do we all see everybody as our brothers and sisters?

Mexico is where my seminary class went for a week. This would have been about ten or twelve years ago. We went to Tucson, where we were told about immigration and how hundreds of people a year were dying in the desert from starvation, from heat stroke, from dehydration. People literally are dying to get into this country and the question is will that stop any time soon? We went from Tucson to Nogales, Arizona and then crossed over to Nogales, Mexico and we lived with host families. The family that I and a classmate lived with consisted of a mom and her teenage daughter. We didn’t see the teenage daughter much. I think teenagers in Mexico are pretty much like teenagers in America and she’d rather have been anywhere but with her mom and her guests. Even though the mom didn’t speak English and I didn’t speak Spanish, she and I got along famously, I think because she reminded me of one of my aunts. When I was four or five years old, my mom would go visit her sister and my aunt would put me on her lap. She would drink coffee and she would give me sips of coffee. And they wondered why I was a hyperactive child. The woman we stayed with fed us breakfast. We had eggs and refried beans. I’d never had refried beans for breakfast before that. It was a very enlightening and enjoyable time in Mexico. The people were very friendly; they fed us every night in a church setting, usually. It was enlightening to see poverty up close and personal. I don’t think, though, that

the people who lived in poverty realized that they were living in poverty. I think they had what they needed. It's like people in this country who say that they grew up poor, but they didn't know they were poor because everybody grew up the same. We would have thought of them as impoverished, but I don't know if they thought of themselves that way. But if they did, that's one of the reasons, as I understand it, that people come to America, to earn money to send back to their family in Mexico. As I say, it was an enlightening experience.

The Bible tells us to support the stranger, the immigrant, the alien. In the book of Deuteronomy, it says that the Israelite people were strangers in Egypt and therefore they should love the stranger. We should love the stranger, I think the Bible is telling us. I think in some ways aren't we all strangers at some points in life? Probably the first time you came to this church you felt like an alien. You'd never been here before. When you start a new job, you may feel like an alien, a stranger. So maybe we have some empathy for strangers. When I was in high school, my father was a civilian in the military and got transferred to Germany. So I lived in Germany for three years. We lived on the German economy, they said. In fact, we lived on a street called John F. Kennedy Strasse. I thought that was kind of cool. So obviously, I was an immigrant in Germany, in a way. I didn't really feel that way – I went to school on a military base. It wasn't a military school, it just was on an Air Force base, but I was an alien in a different land, a different culture. I wonder if we all have experienced that kind of thing. I felt like an alien coming from Michigan to California, not that I'm complaining over not having two feet of snow outside. I think we all have experienced being an alien, whether we've moved to another country or not.

A Christmas carol, I think, speaks to our topic today. "O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem." I would change the words just slightly: O come all ye hopeful, joyful and expectant, come ye, O come ye to America. Is that a song we would sing to people who are here as immigrants?

What are your thoughts about this? This is not an academic exercise. This could be a real thing for this church. I've been asked to take part in a panel about refugees and, I think, immigrants by an area church in a few weeks. Also in a few weeks, I'll take part in a conference call with other UCC churches about being a sanctuary church, which means we would give sanctuary to immigrants who are about to be forced to leave this country by the government. We have in the past housed homeless people in our church and we may be asked to house immigrants who face deportation. I won't decide that for the church. I don't think I have that authority. So I may come to the council, I may come to the congregation, to ask you all what you think of us hosting a family, essentially. Being a sanctuary church. Before we decide anything, I hope we remember that Jesus was once an immigrant.

Let us pray:  
God of Love,  
*Help us to remember the stranger.  
Help us to remember the immigrant.  
And help us to remember that Jesus was once an immigrant.  
Now and forevermore.  
By the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.*

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes  
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*