

AT THE VERY LEAST . . . LET THEM GLEAN

What's the gospel word on immigration?

Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 16-22; Hebrews 13:1-3; Matthew 10:40-42

The problem of immigration in our country is real.

It is complex.

It is polarizing.

And there are no straight-forward solutions.

As much as our heart wants to say, "Come!" . . .
just throwing our national borders wide open,
and allowing anyone in the world at *all*,
for any reason,
to move here and settle . . .
probably doesn't make sense—
socially, economically, politically, or security-wise.

But then, almost *any* kind of rule-based immigration law we enforce
will create some moral dilemma,
because each individual human circumstance is unique.

We want to do the right thing, but we are caught.
What is a prudent and moral way to behave as a nation,
of which we are citizens?
How do we Christians, as members of a larger society,
help to structure our society in such a way
that it is both hospitable and reasonably secure?

And *more* to the point this morning,
does it make any difference
to look at these questions through a gospel lens?

The gospel of God, revealed in Jesus,
and revealed in scripture from Genesis to Revelation,
actually has a *lot* to say
about our relationship to the stranger,
the foreigner, the wanderer, the non-citizen.

The gospel *has* a word to speak,

and we probably should listen carefully.

Let's do a quick review of some biblical texts.

If you are in the good habit of having your Bibles with you,
and following along,
you may have to do some quick page-turning at times.

All throughout scripture,
the people of Israel are given specific, and detailed,
instructions—*rules*, if you will—
about how to relate to the foreigners among them.
And *remember*, this was a nation and culture
far more tightly bound to each other
than we Americans are—by a *long* shot.
They had *much* more to protect than we do—
they had one common religious code of ethics,
that governed their everyday lives,
one common set of daily, weekly, and yearly rituals.
a strong cultural and religious sensitivity about
purity and impurity,
and what they needed to do to *stay* pure.

Completely *unlike* we Americans,
they were mono-cultural—*one* culture.
They certainly *needed* strong boundaries
to protect and preserve this one culture.
They had a lot to lose, and a lot to protect.
We know *God* was deeply concerned
about them remaining pure and holy.
So they had legitimate, God-ordained reasons
to fear the influence of pagan foreigners,
who could threaten or corrupt or weaken their way of life.

So how did the people of God protect themselves,
and their cultural and religious borders?
And how did God *himself* instruct them to do so?

Let's *look*. One text we already heard this morning: Deuteronomy 24.

Here's how God wanted them
to protect themselves from the foreigner:
“You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers,
whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land . . .
you shall pay them their wages daily *before* sunset,
because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them;
otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you,
and you would incur guilt.
You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice . . .
remember that *you* were a slave in Egypt . . .
therefore I command you to do this.”

Interesting . . . “treat them justly, like any Israelite.”
Where's the part about keeping aliens away at a safe distance?
Maybe it's a little *later* in Deuteronomy, maybe chapter 26?
Here, God instructs the Israelites in one of their holiest rituals—
bringing the first-fruits of the harvest in to the priest,
and giving thanksgiving to God.
So at one of their central acts of holy worship,
this must be where God tells them
how to keep the outsider at arms length,
so they don't corrupt their holy way of life.
V. 10 says what the Israelites are supposed to *do*
with their first-fruit basket of produce:
“You shall set it down before the LORD your God
and bow down before the LORD your God.
Then you, together with the Levites
and the aliens who reside among you,
shall celebrate with all the bounty . . .
Then pay the tithe of your produce by giving it to
the Levites . . . the aliens . . . the orphans, and the widows,
so that they may eat their fill within your towns.”

Hmm. It's got to be in here *somewhere*.
Maybe it's in Leviticus . . . that book of the Bible
with all the rigid rules . . . what we call the Holiness Code.
So let's turn two books back and take a look.
Certainly *here*, it will spell out how we as God's people,
have to keep ourselves pure from the outsiders,

how we must protect our boundaries.
Leviticus 19, verse 33:
“When an alien resides *with* you in your land,
you shall not oppress the alien. [*Okay, fine.*]
The alien who resides with you shall be to you
as the *citizen* among you . . . [??]
you shall love the alien as yourself . . . [??]
for *you* were aliens in the land of Egypt:
I am the LORD your God.”
Leviticus 24, verse 22:
“You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen:
for I am the LORD your God.”
Back one more book: Exodus 23, verse 9 . . .
“You shall not oppress a resident alien;
you know the heart of an alien,
for *you* were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

So these scriptures seem *more* concerned
that we identify with the aliens among us,
and even include them in our community rhythms
of fellowship and feasting and worship,
because we *ourselves* were once people without a home.

Well . . . maybe where the borders need to be protected,
where the rules get enforced,
is not so much social and religious,
but economic.
Because making a living off the land was hard work,
and didn't always pay well.
There was a lot of economic risk involved.
So landowning farmers *certainly* would have the right
to protect their investment,
to get the full benefit of what they grow,
and keep the freeloaders off their land.

Let's *see*.
Back to Deuteronomy 24:
“When you reap your harvest in your field
and forget a sheaf in the field,

you shall *not* go back to get it;
it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow . . .
When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left;
it shall be for the alien . . .
When you gather grapes, do not glean what is left;
it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.
Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.”

And Leviticus 19, verse 9:

“When you reap the harvest of your land,
you shall not reap to the very edges of your field,
or gather the gleanings of your harvest.
You shall not strip your vineyard bare,
or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard;
you shall leave them for the poor and the alien:
I am the LORD your God.”

Wow! This is *not* exactly what we would expect,
from a self-contained mono-culture,
trying to preserve their way of life,
trying to maintain religious purity
and economic stability.

Certainly, God is concerned about moral and religious faithfulness.
There *are* boundaries to be respected.
For instance, in Exodus we read that to participate in the Passover
aliens must essentially become part of the covenant community,
the males must be circumcised.
And the people of Israel are also strongly warned
not to allow any idols,
or pagan worship rituals into the community.
And as a matter of *fact*,
the aliens did *not* have all the same rights as citizens.
They could not own land and property,
and therefore could not raise their own food.

But as much as God is concerned about holiness and purity,
God is *just* as concerned about justice for the poor and needy.
And this is no minor secondary concern in God’s law.

It’s not an “oh-by-the-way” law.
It’s a consistent command that appears over and over and over.
And it extends to the New Testament,
in the life and teachings of Jesus,
and in the letters to the early church.
We cannot talk our way around it.

Paul in Romans 12:

“Contribute to the needs of the saints;
extend hospitality to strangers.”

The writer of Hebrews in ch. 13:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing that some have entertained angels.”

Jesus both taught and modeled

radical hospitality and acceptance of the foreigner.
On *multiple* occasions, he publicly praised the great faith
of a foreigner living among the Jews.

He said to his disciples in Matt. 10,

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.

And whoever gives even a cup of cold water
to one of the least of these
in the name of a disciple—
truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

And in Matthew 25, he tells a parable of the final judgement,
saying, “Then the king will say to those at his right hand,

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father,
inherit the kingdom prepared for you
from the foundation of the world;
for I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . .”

And these are but a *few* of the *many* biblical words

on how we need to relate to the immigrant, the resident alien,
the foreigner,
not *only* with a polite tolerance,
but with an active, radical welcome . . .
and a firm commitment that they will not suffer in our land,

or go hungry or homeless.

For no less reason than that God cares deeply about their welfare.
And that the Lord is God.
And we are thus commanded.

So how do these ancient biblical words speak truth
into our complicated modern problem,
and our polarized conflict over immigration in America.

What is the gospel word?
What is the biblical bottom-line?
What is the *least* we should do?
Here is what I would say:
“At the very least . . . let them glean.”
Let them glean.

Think about it.
No, most of us aren't crop farmers,
and gleaning may be a strange thing to get our heads around.
But let's just take gleaning as a model
for how our country should relate to immigrants.

Remember, the economy in the Old Testament
was not a cash economy, but an agricultural one.
To survive and thrive you didn't need cash,
you needed to have decent shelter
and find a way to get hold of grain and other produce.
So the practice of gleaning,
was pure basic economic support of the aliens and other poor.
It was a public assistance program, if you want to say it that way,
funded totally by the landowning farmers.
It *ensured* there would be no extreme poverty or malnutrition.

And keep in mind,
gleaning was *not* just something the farmers were told to “allow”
in a passive way.
That is, they were *not* just told to turn a blind eye,

when the foreigners and other poor people came
to gather up leftovers that just *happened* to be there.
They were not only told, “Don't *keep* them from coming.”
Or, “Don't build security fences.”
Or, “Don't send out the National Guard.”
The laws about gleaning *required* the landowners to be pro-active.
To go out of their way to *leave* stuff behind.
To purposely, and intentionally,
sacrifice profit and productivity,
in order to guarantee that the aliens had enough to eat.
They were *prohibited*, by *biblical mandate*,
from harvesting all the way to the edges and corners of the field.
They were *prohibited*, by *biblical mandate*,
from shaking the olive trees more than once.
They were *prohibited*, by *biblical mandate*,
to go back into their own harvested field once they left it,
and realized they forgot a good sheaf of wheat laying there.

So when I say, at the very *least*, let's let the aliens among us “glean,”
I'm saying God issued a mandate to be pro-active, not reactive.
Wherever we can, we are called to purposely, intentionally,
limit the harvest of our resources
so that aliens among us
have enough to which they can help themselves,
and survive.
If foreigners among us end up suffering and dying
from lack of basic necessities that we *could* have provided,
and *didn't*,
God has feelings about that. It's pretty clear.

And I would also challenge us never to hide behind
the legal vs. illegal debate.
For *one* thing, when God looks down on America
and sees a land flowing with milk and honey,
with millions of people in it from south of the border,
who live on the edge of extreme poverty,
multiple families in a single home,
working in dangerous jobs for low wages,
continually subject to discrimination,

resentment from neighbors,
racial profiling,
and sometimes outright violence . . .

I sincerely doubt that God's compassion for them
hinges on whether or not
they have the right documentation to be here.
And if *God* has compassion, *so must we*.

Certainly, there are some, perhaps many,
who come to this country for ulterior motives,
intent to take advantage of others,
to do themselves a favor at someone *else's* expense.
Those who flagrantly break laws intended to keep the peace.

But if we dare to listen to the stories of the
undocumented immigrants who are our own neighbors . . .
If we dare to acknowledge and welcome the [quote] "illegal aliens"
who make up, by some estimates, well more than half
of the members of our Hispanic Mennonite churches
and of churches in every *other* denomination, as well . . .
If we dare to disengage from the polarized political debate,
long enough to listen to real people, real neighbors,
real fellow church members,
we might begin to get a very different, and I think,
more accurate picture
than the one we get listening to talk radio.

These are, for the most part,
persons who once lived in desperately poor,
and sometimes violent situations,
who could no longer stand by and watch their families suffer
because there was no work, and little food.
And who made, in *desperation*, a choice to survive.
They are *not* proud of the fact
that they broke a law to help their family live.
And they are *now* doing all they can to live
quietly and peaceably and productively here and now.
They are mostly persons of Christian faith,
who gather often to worship God and support each other.

We would be shocked, I think, if we knew
how many of our Hispanic neighbors in Harrisonburg
are gathering today to worship Jesus in the Spanish language,
giving heartfelt praise to God,
and going to work tomorrow without proper documents.

Now, what kind of immigration law will provide
the right balance of hospitality and security?
I don't know the precise answer.
The debate in the public square needs to continue.
But I *don't* think we've found the balance yet.
Perhaps, as people of Judeo-Christian faith,
our contribution to the debate can be this:
"At the very least . . . let them glean."
Let's find creative ways to *purposely* leave something in the field,
so they and their families can simply survive.
I think it's what God would want.
It's what the gospel would say, if we would listen.

Because we, too, were once aliens and strangers.
Our ancestors were slaves in Egypt, so to speak.
In a very real, and human, sense, *they* are *us*.
We are members of the same family.

There's a hymn we sing that celebrates that.
Turn to HWB #322.
*For we are strangers no more, but members of one family;
strangers no more, but part of one humanity;
strangers no more, we're neighbors to each other now;
strangers no more, we're sisters and we're brothers now.*

—Phil Kniss, November 14, 2010