

April 29, 2012
First Presbyterian Church, Waukesha
“Our Neighbors Are Immigrants”

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers.” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

When Jesus was asked who was his neighbor, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the priest and Levite passed by the wounded man, and the cultural outcast of a different nationality bound up his wounds.

In America right now, the question of who is our neighbor can be answered in many ways. Examples might be people of a different political persuasion (the governor recall issue), people of a different religion (the Brookfield mosque issue), the starving people in Africa, or the people of a different skin color in our country. All these are legitimate applications for a sermon on “Who is our neighbor?”

However, May 5th is Cinco de Mayo, commemorating the Mexican victory over the French in 1862 at Puebla and the immigration parade that is happening in downtown Milwaukee today. Therefore, it seems to me today that we need to apply Jesus' teaching to the subject of immigration. In the literature passed out here in church about the Roma people in Russia, it said that persecution always began with people asking, "What shall we do about the Roma problem?" when the Roma had been in Russia for centuries and had stuck to themselves.

We are a nation built on immigration, but suddenly politicians are asking, "What shall we do about the immigration problem?" Asking that question is what creates the problem.

The question was first asked in 1892, resulting in the opening of Ellis Island with the object of keeping out sick immigrants. Then the question was asked again, culminating in 1921 in the Quota Act and in 1924 with the National Origin act. For the first time we had "illegal immigrants". We chose to make them illegal.

Forty percent of all U.S. citizens can trace at least one ancestor to Ellis Island, which opened in 1892 and closed in 1954. The Statue of Liberty has an invitation carved on it, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden sea."

My grandparents would have been illegals. My grandfather and his two brothers came from County Armagh to escape the border violence of the religious wars. They walked the railroad tracks from New York to Ford County, Illinois. There, in the night, they heard a windmill which needed oiling, screeching. Thinking it was a wild animal, they ran to the nearest barn and hid out, eventually getting jobs there.

My grandmother was an orphan. Her parents were weavers, being displaced by the Industrial Revolution. We visited a weaver's cottage in County Down. The loom filled 90% of the cabin, leaving just enough room for a fireplace, table, and pads to sleep on. She was indentured to a farm family, mistreated, with neighbors providing money for her to run away and get on a boat in Belfast for New York. Her first night in New York, she blew out the gas light. They broke down the door and revived her, or she wouldn't have lived to bear nine children.

My grandparents both spoke Gaelic when they wanted privacy. I remember a few Gaelic words. One day Grandma had me by the hand as we crossed the barnyard to see the little pigs. Suddenly she pulled me to one side and said, "Don't step on the ----." So to this day I know the word in Gaelic for what you don't step on. I suspect that all my Gaelic words are not church-type words.

I served in Vernon with a co-pastor from South Africa, named Bobby Musengwa, who was married to Veronique, from France. She got her green card and citizenship in a matter of weeks after she applied. While the entire time he served with me, Bobby was struggling to keep from being illegal and was forced to go back to South Africa in the middle of the time he was there, for a whole year, and start the process all over again. He was of the wrong national origin.

So we need to keep in mind that the concept of illegal immigrant is in our minds, something we have created by discriminatory laws.

The solutions to the problem are partially provided by ideas like the "dream act". It provides citizenship for illegals who serve in our military or who are college graduates.

Another solution is proposed by the Governor Rick Perry of Texas, who says that we need to educate the children who have come into our states for no other reason than that they have been brought here through no fault of their own.

Most illegals today are from Mexico. Two generations ago, we welcomed as citizens the people of Puerto Rico, who are Hispanic, but are of a non-Indian derivation. They are Castilian Spanish, and their skin is the color of Jennifer Lopez. But the Mexican Hispanics absorbed the native Mexican cultures that existed there and are considered darker skinned with Asiatic DNA, so our upset with Mexicans flooding over the border is partly racial. The color of their skin.

One of our US senators said recently that anyone who says there is no racism in America is a racist. The New Testament teaches that we are to welcome our neighbor, the stranger, the immigrant, with open arms and not to point in discrimination and alarm. The New Testament teaches that we are to make the world godly and just.

I believe very strongly the Bible teaches about heaven and eternal life. But in rejoicing in our eternal life, it's too easy to turn our backs on the here and now, and miss the fact that eternal life begins in this world when we receive it, by grace.

I think that some of the growing churches today are growing because they turn their backs on the poor, sick, enslaved, oppressed, and on service to these. We preach and teach not just "Are you saved?" and a paradise in the sky, but selflessness and love and grace to a broken world.