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“Here We Receive New Life”
5. In Our Thinking About Immigration

Acts 16:9-15 9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. 11 We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. 13 On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 15 When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Four years ago, the week before the presidential election, I announced that I would be preaching a sermon entitled “Who You Should Vote For.” Along with the outraged grammarians who chided me for not saying “*Whom* you should vote for,” there were people who attended worship that Sunday whom I had never seen before and haven’t seen since. Several people the week before that Sunday nervously asked me if I was going to do something to put the church’s tax-exempt status at risk. You folks are always very attentive during the sermon - which is a humbling thing – but on that Sunday as I stepped into the pulpit that attentiveness was accompanied by many furrowed brows and serious and worried faces.

It is indeed a fraught thing to preach on topics that are neither “safe” nor “easy,” particularly when they involve the intersection of what our obligations and opportunities as citizens are versus what our obligations and opportunities as Christians are. I know

that this has not been a light sermon series and I am grateful to you that you have stuck with me through these topics that indeed are oh-so-live in our culture and oh-so-hard to figure out how to think about sometimes amidst the noise of the shouting all around us. Today is another of those hard topics - immigration. And our task today, as it has been throughout this Easter season sermon series, is to try to ask how the Good News of Easter and the new life it offers can also offer us new life as we think about the hard things of our lives and our society. Now, that sermon four years ago was a bit of teasing misdirection on my part, though, for while it would not be my place to ever tell you who (or whom) to vote for, I did use that sermon as the occasion to suggest **how** you and I should think about that privilege of voting, **how** to think about the candidates in light of the Christian faith. So, not so much what or who, but **how** – and that is the same tack I want to take this morning and ask how the Good News of Easter’s promise of new life and the promise that we need not fear should affect how we should think about the topic of immigration. With that in mind, I want to offer four suggestions for how you and I as followers of Jesus might think about immigration.

First: **Don’t oversimplify.** The very word “immigration” is much too broad, and therefore hides the fact that the story of those who wish to come to this country is actually a complex and multi-faceted one. Yet, from the media on the left **or** the right, you would think that immigration was something solely related to Mexicans and Middle Eastern Muslims. But actually, the largest group of immigrants to the United States every year are from India and China. You can also often hear that immigration to the United States represents an unprecedented percentage of the people in this country. Actually, in 2014 there were 1.3 million immigrants to the United States – which

represented about one-half of one-percent of the total population. In 1850, though, there were 2.2 million immigrants to this country – more than a few of them ancestors of people in this room – which represented ten-percent of the country’s total population. And in 1890, the total immigrant percentage of the population was almost 15%!¹ Over-simplification helps none of us, as citizens or as Christians, think about how to best understand and respond when the term “immigration” covers such a broad range of cases, from the skilled scientific folks from other countries whom the government actually courts to the tragically surprising number of unaccompanied children as young as five whose ranks continue to increase. As my mother used to say, *“For every complex question, there is a simple answer – that’s probably wrong.”*

Second suggestion: **Don’t lie.** It’s right there in the Ten Commandments, too, isn’t it? *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”* When you or I as followers of the Savior who told us that the truth would set us free (John 8:32) do **not** look with skepticism on some of the lies told about our Christian brothers and sisters we do not honor Jesus nor what he has asked of us in regards to loving our neighbors. You hear all the time – and these lies are forwarded in dubious emails and trumpeted on Facebook – for example that immigrants are responsible for the country’s rising crime rate. But there are two lies here: first, study after study after study *for more than a century* have shown that immigrants – whether legal or undocumented – are far **less** likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans and this is true whatever their education level and whatever country they hail from. Second, the crime rate in the

¹Statistics above from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>

United States over the last decade has fallen **dramatically**, not risen: from 1990 to 2013 violent crimes declined 48% and property crimes declined 41%.² There may be legitimate public policy discussions to have about immigration, but when these discussions are fueled by our believing fear-based lies rather than the truth then we do our faith and our country no service – and we violate the Ninth Commandment. There is an old saying I've always liked: *"Do not believe everything you think."* Scientists tell us that on the average day, you and I will have about 70,000 different thoughts.³ These days, too many of those thoughts will likely be echoes from the noise around us that does not tell the truth about too many things. Those things may therefore be in your thoughts, but I invite you not to believe them, not to pass them along, not to base your actions on them.

Third: **Remember just how much of the Christian faith is the story of immigrants.** It is often truthfully said that the United States is a nation of immigrants but what is not as often recognized is that Judaism and Christianity are also formed by the stories of immigrants. From the story that is the beginning of the Jewish people's history when Abraham and Sarah immigrated from their homeland in the land of Ur, to Jesus' earthly family fleeing terrorism and immigrating to Egypt, to today's scripture, our forebears in the faith are often ones who followed a call to a new place in the trust that God could and would offer new life and transformation. And such journeys always change both parties, don't they? In today's scripture, Paul takes the Gospel for the very

²<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/criminalization-immigration-united-states>

³http://www.loni.usc.edu/about_loni/education/brain_trivia.php

first time into Europe. And there to greet him was Lydia and a band of women who were seeking something better for their lives, a connection to the holy that could change them and transform them. Paul gave them that. Yet Paul himself was also changed. As you know, in some of Paul's letters, he has some very harsh things to say about women. But his encounter with Lydia, the women of Macedonia, and Lydia's household changed him so that by the time he writes his final letter to the church at Rome he acknowledges and gives thanks for the women to whom he accords the title of "minister" along with him. You see, God is always seeking to nudge and push all of us out of our comfortable routines and past our prejudices to become new and better people. And God uses folks in the new lands and new places to change us for the better, to make us more open to the fact that our "neighbor," as Jesus put it, is someone we might earlier have feared. When we ignore God's promptings to go to new places in our lives, we will miss the opportunity to grow.

Which brings me to my fourth and final suggestion for how we can think about immigration in the hopes that we might find new life: **Seek to be civil**. Now, that may seem a pretty low bar, but it's not. Particularly in this season of our shared civic life, civility is seldom seen. And as civility disappears what takes its place are demonization and fearfulness and stereotypes that play to people's worst instincts. It is just uncivil and inaccurate to say, whether from the right or the left, that every Mexican is a rapist or every "Wall Street banker" is a crook. Such language, such attitudes – and too many others like them – make it that much harder for God to find us with the possibility of new life and new hope, make it that much harder for us as Christians to "reason together," in the prophet Isaiah's words. To seek to be civil in our thinking, in our conversations, in

our Facebook postings and in the emails we choose to forward is to ask how we can learn from new opportunities and new people and the new places God is calling us to instead of assuming that we must fear all of these. And after all, it's the attitude of civility that made it possible for immigrants to the United States like⁴ Albert Einstein and Joni Mitchell and Neil Young and Cesar Chavez and Madeline Albright and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and thirty Medal of Honor winners from among Mexican immigrants and the two Muslim generals who were with George Washington's army fighting against the British and the Muslim doctor who in the 1960s revolutionized the way brain surgery was done and – last but not least – the Muslim immigrant who in 1904 invented the ice cream cone (for which I am grateful).

A few years ago, a Disciples of Christ pastor in Indiana wrote the following words: *"Religion should increase our honesty, civility and compassion. It should not be used to make our politics even more polarized...."*⁵ I hope these four suggestions I have offered might indeed increase our "honesty, civility, and compassion" as we as Christians and as citizens seek to think well and faithfully about immigration – and every other area of life for that matter! And you know what ? When all is said and done, these four suggestions – don't oversimplify, don't lie, remember that the story of our forebears in the faith is often the story of immigrants, and seek to be civil – can really be summed up by some very wise words of the Apostle Paul: "Watch your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift.... Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting,

⁴Cf. <http://www.visaplace.com/blog-immigration-law/us-immigration/immigrants-famous-united-states/> and <http://www.murthy.com/famous-immigrants/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Mexican_Americans and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/donald-trump-famous-muslims-us-history>

⁵Quoted in <http://firstchristiancos.org/library/documents/Newsletters/Sept2012.pdf>

profane talk. (From Ephesians 4, The Message). Or from the perhaps more familiar King James version: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying.... Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.” It’s not always an easy thing to do. But is the way of our God, our Christ, and it is the way to new life. May it be so. Amen.