

Hospitality: Laying the Groundwork for Justice and a Starting Place for Immigration Reform.

So much of our Catholic teaching on justice is rooted in the biblical understanding of hospitality. Unlike our contemporary take on being good neighbors, the biblical notion of hospitality was a bit more neuralgic, more about what made the difference between life and death; between mere survival and thriving. For a nomadic people, like Abraham and Jacob, the expectation of hospitality was considered not simply good manners, but what helped guarantee that an encounter with a stranger on your land would result in friendship and peaceful coexistence rather than having to contend with a warring enemy. The first welcoming started people off on the right foot because it acknowledged the common ground of humanity, and that another had the right to live and to thrive. The surprise visit was a cause to “kill the fatted calf” and bring out the best dinner ware. When “company is coming” we still tend to do this.

This openness lays the groundwork for what makes for a just people: “Treating others as we ourselves want to be treated.” It is also a good first defense against someone who might not have the best of intentions toward us. I am sure that those first nomadic encounters were approached with a good deal of prudence and the wide embrace withheld until they were fairly certain that there was not a dagger under the cloak. But if it went well, especially after sharing a meal, in the end, more was to be gained than lost. There is no need for daggers when we are among friends.

This is what I’ve been pondering as I consider the current state of our nation’s immigration policy and my work with the Spanish-speaking communities here in the Eastern Panhandle of our diocese.

FIRM, the acronym for “Fair Immigration Reform Movement” will gather on Wednesday, January 21 at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Washington, DC to offer prayer to “purge our government of 8 years of punitive immigration practices that have hurt our communities and through the power of faith, create a fresh space for true reform.” Afterwards we will gather at a local Presbyterian church to attend a forum with civic and religious leaders. Our desire is to be “firm” in our commitment toward comprehensive immigration practices. We want to do everything we can to keep this issue in the forefront of our legislature.

Our hospitality toward the stranger in our midst is what shaped us as a nation, “Give me your tired, your poor; your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . .” as goes the sonnet inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. It is a central feature of the biblical heritage of the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is the gospel justice most recently reannounced by our holy father Pope Benedict when he visited our land last April. At this juncture in our nation’s story, I believe that it is important to pay heed to the words of the poet Robert Frost who said: “Half of the world has much to say but is prevented from saying it. The other half has little to say and never shuts up.” As a community of faith I believe it is our responsibility to be a voice for the voiceless.

I want to set aside, for the moment, the pressing and legitimate argument for our nation’s need to secure our home and prevent such things as the flow of drug and human trafficking that often accompanies the breaching of our borders. I want to focus on the human drama that envelopes our communities. Part of that drama concerns the Latino immigrants who live and work under the continual

threat of being arrested while at work, placed in detention and then deported. It is true. People should not enter our country illegally. Yet, I would say that the vast majority of the men and women who come here do so not because they want to flaunt our laws but because they are desperate. Thus, to speak about a commitment toward comprehensive immigration reform, we have to consider the reasons why annually, thousands would leave the country of their birth, a familiar culture and language. When I ask our Latino brothers and sisters, and I have asked many, “Why are you here?” the answer is basically the same: “To live!” If they could do that in their home country, they would. “To live” is to have the opportunity to thrive and not just survive. “To live” is to have the freedom to enjoy and use the gifts and relish the relationships that have been given to us, and so much more. For example, since we live in a global economy, we have to examine the part we play in making for a desperate situation wherein this kind of living is not possible. My hope is that this new administration will help lead us in making better global economic decisions. We will need to rethink our priorities. Our life, nationally and globally depends on it.

It is obvious to most that our legitimate national self-interest cannot be pursued in isolation. We are intertwined on many levels. As a country built by immigrants, we are uniquely blessed to understand this fact. Perhaps this is our greatest strength. In addition, our immigration policies have shifted over the years reflecting our economic priorities. This is still the case. How we balance things out globally will be determined in part by our national equilibrium. And how we do that is the result of the choices we make as individuals, families and communities. This is the dynamic of a democratic society that hinges itself on the principles of being a commonwealth. To the question: “Why are you here?” we can all respond: “To live!” We are hospitable to one another because we want to live. To illustrate this, I would like to tell you María’s story. I have changed the names.

Like many immigrants from Mexico, María came here to the United States along with her husband more than twenty years ago. In Mexico, they finished the fifth grade and then went to work. Shortly after they married, María and Antonio decided to apply for and received Work Visas. Our immigration policies were more open then. Both found employment; she as a housekeeper for a number of wealthier families in the area. He worked as a day laborer. Here they gave birth to and raised their four children. With their labor intensive jobs and attending to their family, they had neither the time nor the energy to finish English language classes. Besides, they spoke a mixture of Spanish and one of the many Indian dialects. This made it difficult for them to understand the others in class and have a wide circle of friends, at least at first. They learned enough English however to get by, and were eventually able to begin saving for their return home to help their relatives and to build a life there. But, as is so often the case, the time they needed to stay here in order to do that lengthened and by this time, the children were pretty “Americanized” and had no connection with their family in México.

One of the families, we’ll call them “The Smiths” for whom María worked, hired her to come more often and also to cook for them on those days. Both parents had busy careers, so María often was the one who greeted the two children when they came home from school and made sure that they did their homework. She made sure they had supper before she went home to tend to her own family. While the two families never socialized, the Smiths always made sure that María’s family had what they needed. They enjoyed sharing gifts at Christmas and on birthdays. The question of María’s and Antonio’s legal

status never came up. Unfortunately their Work Visas had expired even though both had requested extensions. At this writing they have yet to receive their cards. María and Antonio are here without proper documentation.

When speaking with the Smiths about the current policies on immigration, both were adamant that those who are here “illegally” should be deported. So when asked, “does that include María and Antonio?” both replied, “Absolutely not!” “And, why is that?” “Well, because we know them.”

There in that story, and there are many like it, we have one of the commonwealth, grassroots solutions to our policy reform. It is about hospitality; about allowing another into our lives. The same dynamic at play with our nomadic ancestors in the faith are in play today. We want to; we need to live in peace.

As a community we have the chance each day to get to know one another not as another statistic but as persons. Relationships do make us color blind and accustoms our ears to an accent. It is our mutual need and desire to live that melts the fears that separate us. Language and culture can be barriers, but only because we allow them. While we might not be inclined to participate in public demonstrations or even write to our representatives, that does not mean we cannot be powerful forces for more humane and therefore, just governmental policies. The real work for justice happens closer to home anyway and it does not involve a lot of detailed organization. What it does require is an open mind and a willingness to step beyond our preconceived notions of the other who walks on our land.

I have a suggestion for my fellow Catholics. The next time you are at Mass, consider sitting in another location in church. Sit in a different pew. Try to get a different perspective on what is going on and then learn the names of some new people, perhaps people whom you have seen for years. If your community does not have the custom of publically welcoming the visitors before Mass, you can be your own personal welcoming committee. You don’t have to greet everyone, just the person next to you. This is especially important if the ethnic makeup of your community is mixed. A friendly greeting is the language understood by all. Whether we like to hear it or not, with few exceptions, our Catholic communities are considered one of the least friendly among the other Christian denominations. When it comes to really living the faith, we are all “Ministers of Hospitality.”

“Ministers of Hospitality”, this is a pretty good description of how we live as Catholic Christians. Like the Smiths, we invite others in to our home we call the Church. We are engaged in something vital and not merely demonstrating good manners. We are open to what we all have in common: “I want to live”.