

Breaking the Law

Imagine with me, if you will, a group of people traveling to the next country by crossing the border. They have trekked miles through the desert to cross that border because the opportunities in their own land have dried up. They have come to this place because there is work and there is food for their families. What seemed like a short-term economic solution turns into a long-term residency. These people have set down roots in their new community and are growing.

Leadership of the country changes from an acceptance of these people to one that is hostile to their presence. They are forced to do the work that no one else will do. There is exploitation and violence against them that is accepted because of their status imposed by the leadership of that country. They are not citizens, and their status in that society makes their citizenship impossible.

When relegating them to the shadows and harsh work does not stifle, does not stop them from growing in that countries midst the leaders devise a plan to staunch the growth of these wretched aliens. If they stop children, they will stop the growth. The political calculation is that if these people see the violent threat to their children they will quit growing in number. This cruel policy is set out across the land. Get the children!

So offensive is this new law, this new edict that God tells certain upright citizens of this society that they will be blessed if they do one thing. That is break this unjust law. God has seen these people's pain and instructs citizens to protect these children from being permanently separated from their mothers.

It is clear to the leader that these new policies are not working. It is not stopping the growth of these people that he despises so much. He confronts these agents of the state about why the policy he has enacted is not working and you know what these people he believes are collaborators with his government does, they lie. Thus these illegal children are not separated from their despised and reviled parents by the state.

Does this story sound familiar at all? Have you heard it before?

It is deeply imprinted on the spiritual history of the people of Israel. It is by breaking the law, lying, and deceit to the state in the midst of hugely unjust immigration policies by the pharaoh were the God's enslaved people able to be free. If midwives did not defy the law of the land children would not have survived and Moses would have never lived. The law breaking extended all the way to Pharaoh's own home. For the freedom of the people of Israel the breaking of unjust laws fulfilled God's purpose.

I believe that it is this alien status, this outsider status that informs a deeply spiritual concept which begins with the

covenant people of that day all the way to the covenants that we make with God today. It is the welcoming of the stranger. The Bible is filled with gracious examples of welcoming of the stranger in our holy scripture.

This same Moses, who is saved as an alien in a foreign land one day proclaims this nation of Israel's law stating, "When the alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. 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."

In our own covenant through Jesus Christ we are aware that Christ similarly faced unjust laws and his life was in danger. Told by God to flee his parents reversed the course and they hurried back across that border to Egypt to protect his life. Jesus became a refugee, an asylum seeker for his life in a foreign land to save him from state sponsored violence. He was a stranger in a strange land.

Is it any wonder that Jesus later when judging the nations makes inviting a stranger in with grace and hospitality what separates sheep from goats? Not inviting a stranger becomes a judgement against you that will make you separated into eternal punishment.

Many would make you believe that this is politics. It is not. No matter what a particular government does or does not do to the stranger is irrelevant to what we are told is part of a central

element to our faith. The problem isn't that it is political to stand with the stranger, alien, or outsider the problem is that for too many people if they disagree with welcoming the stranger they have made clear Biblical principles to be political.

Nebraska is historically politically one of the most conservative states in the union. I grew up in an extremely conservative church, that was predominantly Reagan Republicans. and that is where I learned these principles, not from the Democratic party. The church I attended rescued Vietnamese refugees from the war. We sponsored a Vietnamese church in the basement of our church and I went to Sunday School alongside Vietnamese refugees. My Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Cooley, would have thrown us out of our class if we would have treated these other students with prejudice or derision. My pastor, the Rev. H. B. Leastman, would have condemned any treating of these children of God differently. It was not their politics, but their deep and abiding faith that influenced my understanding of accepting the stranger.

I was taught that it was essential, orthodox, engrained in our very faith to welcome the stranger. No matter whether we hated or loved them. We were to look at them as if they were Christ himself. I still believe that to this day. Thanks be to God for the stranger. For without them I would probably miss meeting Jesus Christ.