

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor” part 3

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Traditional Word

<sup>30</sup> you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” --Mark 12:30-31 NRSV

Contemporary Word

“Citizenship to me is more than a piece of paper. Citizenship is also about character. I am an American. We’re just waiting for our country to recognize it.” --Jose Antonio Vargas

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Robin has explored, with all of us, the difficult topic of immigration these past two Sundays. Her sermons on the biblical and ethical morality in how we treat the stranger to our shores have laid out a strong Biblical case that we are to love this stranger, for we were strangers once ourselves. We are told over and over in scripture how we are to respond to people who are from other countries and living in our own country, with or without documentation. It seems God does not care for our papers. And then last week Robin showed us a man who shined a light for the whole world—Fred Rogers—who made such a difference by putting his faith into action. And she shared with us many other immigrants who made not only our nation, but the entire world, a better place; Albert Einstein, Dikembe Mutombo, Madeline Albright, the list goes on. And finally she shared with us the words of her dear friend, Robert Bull, who left us far too early. Words of a real, live immigrant human being that she knew personally and a story she wanted us to hear...and that’s where I want to spend some time this morning. It seems pretty obvious, but

each immigrant that crosses our borders has a story as rich and complex as Robert Bull's. We just find Robert's story easier to deal with, I think, because he came from an English speaking country and he looked like us. But what about all of those other stories out there? Just as rich. Just as compelling. But, because they don't look or sound like us, we've allowed ourselves to be filled with fear. We've allowed ourselves to be carefully taught to hate.

Yes, we have problems at our borders. We need rigid screening and entry procedures, which we have, and we need a way to protect ourselves. But if we want to live in a free country then we must know there is risk. Terrible things will happen even if we totally closed our borders. Our own people are capable of such depraved acts and we have folks just a little south and east of Wichita who are very competent at creating all types of drugs that they then put in the pipeline. It's a falsehood to blame all of our problems on the strangers in our midst.

So, what are some practical ways we can address this issue in a loving, Christian manner? Stories matter and I think we need to embrace the immigrant story. I have taken the words of some humans caught up in our immigration crisis that they have posted to the website "myimmigrationstory.com" This site is curated by the journalist who maintains the site. I've asked some of our choir students to assist me in reading these--the actual words of human beings recently posted online. Let's hear their stories:

Peter, who lives in Boston, shares his story: In 1965 we came to the U.S. not by plane, but by freighter ship, crossing the Pacific Ocean and Panama Canal. I was four years old then. We came because my parents sought a better life for my brother and me, so they gave up the comfortable one they had. My parents always said it was because of President Johnson. Growing up, I was fortunate to make many wonderful friends of diverse ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds. I was fortunate to have received an education that opened many doors for me. After graduation

from college and medical school, I was privileged to take care of cancer patients. I was privileged to work alongside many dedicated colleagues at the FDA and National Cancer Institute as a commissioned officer in the US Public Health Service. I was privileged and fortunate to contribute to the discovery and development of several new cancer drugs that are available for patients today. As a parent, I am blessed to have one son serving our country as an officer in the 82nd Airborne Division and another son pushing the boundaries of medicine and science beyond that taught to me a generation ago. I am an immigrant and a proud American. Like many immigrants, I am grateful for what America has to offer and strive to make America a better country. I was fortunate not to be a refugee. But given today's circumstances, if I were a refugee, would you see me differently?

And Graciela, from Los Angeles has her story: My father was a bracero. He suffered a lot. He was far from his family in Mexico but convinced a good religious man to build a home for his family and brought his family home to the United States. Years later, my mother cleaned others people's homes and ironed other people's clothes: neighbors' homes and clothes, in a middle class neighborhood in a home my father purchased. I stand proud every day because of them. I am proud to be an immigrant.

Basam's story reminds us that refugees come to the United States from all over the world: After my family got a visa in Yemen, I was so glad that I would be going to the USA. All my family were happy for us but most of them were crying at the time we left. We left Yemen during the beginning of the revolution to change the president. Since then people are suffering from lack of food resources. Each year it gets worse. My father told us that we would not stay for a long time in NYC but since the war started in Yemen it's not safe anymore. We couldn't go back so we

decided to stay. So for two years we have been hoping that Yemen will get better and it will be safe so we can go back and see my family after five years of being expatriates.

And a young girl identified as only E.G., from Albany, New York, tells her story: I'm lucky. I'm 16, live in a small town and I am a daughter of an immigrant. Growing in a small town, when 96 percent of the population is white is tough. You turn white. Sure, the color of my skin will never be the color of a piece of printer paper but inside it feels like I'm all white. I guess the word "anchor baby" defines me.... sort of. I'm the president of debate club, where we talk about bills, current news topics, and political nominees. The hardest topic... Is immigration reform. People are so uninformed. "Yes I believe we should deport all undocumented immigrants here, and they should get in line with all the other people to get their papers... LEGALLY" I find that easier said than done. I haven't seen my father since I was 8 and only spoken to him on the telephone. He was deported in 2009. The last day I saw him was in a train station... And I had no idea why I was saying good bye... and why everyone was crying. When my friends came over and asked where my father was I said he was "working". Every year on my birthday he calls me and I try hard not to cry because I know it's another year of him not being able to see me grow. My mother is a single mom. Terrified of being deported. Just a couple weeks ago she was caught. She was driving to work when a police officer pulled her over because she wasn't wearing her seat belt. For anyone else it's just a ticket. For a single mother that is illegal it's "I have to go to court, I have to show identification... They will find out I am illegal.. I will be deported... I have to call my lawyer... Who will take care of my daughters?" I hate seeing my mother in constant fear. I hate hearing family members and friends calling us to be careful because in Hudson ICE was seen deporting families. She's scared. I'm scared. We're all scared. Living the American dream shouldn't consist of being scared every second of the day.

Denise's story reminds us that there are those that would prey on the vulnerable immigrant: I came in the US in 1988 at age 12 and now today at 37. I'm still dealing with being an immigrant after being married with 4 kids. I have had lawyers take my money and scam me over and over. My recent lawyer was indicted for scam. I lost my job 5 weeks ago because my lawyer was arrested and he kept all my documents to return to work. I have done all I can the legal way to obtain a green card but I feel like the system has failed me. I have lived in a prison for 25 years and I have committed no crime. My daughter will be 17 soon and when I started this journey I was pregnant with her.

Alejandro, from Pasadena, Texas reminds us of the unintended consequences of legalism. My father was heading to work when the immigration was waiting for him. They had a warrant for him. They took him even though he has been living here for 40+ years. Now he can't see his newborn grandson, nor me or my brother including my little sister. My parents are divorced and who is she supposed to give her advice, give her that comfort that my father did? He paid all of his taxes, did everything by the book. I just can't believe this is what we call justice in America. This isn't the land of the free anymore. My father is my role model he raised me and my older brother by himself. I just can't believe how they can do this to an innocent man. He's been in the immigration holding facilities for a year now!

Thank you, all, for sharing those words. So, what do we do? What do you and I do to honor the lives represented by the stories we just heard? Here are 5 practical steps you can take to respond:

Love Anyway. This means to move beyond our fear of national security, beyond the arguments, and find a refugee, a minority, an immigrant to love. It's highly unlikely that you will fight for someone you've never had a relationship with. Get to know someone vastly different from you. Hear their stories and perspective. Choose to not fear what you don't know or don't understand

and challenge those in your church or around you to respond with open arms to welcome refugees. These choices don't have to be so polarized. You can want to protect your nation, and still not want refugees to be banned. And let's not just love our immigrant and refugee neighbors, let's also love each other by not getting nasty and rude on Facebook or in blog comments. Prioritize your relationships over your beliefs. Try to understand another point of view. Don't forsake kindness over your ideals.

Love Your Neighbor Jesus did not discriminate between people when He loved them and healed them, regardless of their beliefs. He ministered to Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans alike. If we are to be one in Christ, we have to start with unity, not separation. We need to accept versus reject. We need to look across what we perceive to be "enemy lines" and see the person, a child of God whom He loves.

Raise Your Voice Contact your Governmental representative and senators and ask them to speak out against injustice. Technology has made it easy to contact your representatives about the issues you care about. It's not that hard or scary, so choose to take that step. By raising your voices you can change policy.

Donate and Volunteer There are many amazing organizations working with refugees around the world and in the States. Do a simple Google search to find local and National partners in this work or ask Robin or myself. I belong to an important group called Christian Peacemakers in Palestine, and we work to create safe spaces for dialogue in that country.

And this congregation has developed relationships with our friends in Nicaragua. What a beautiful example of "love of neighbor" as we accompany them in their current, complex situation.

Be in It for the Long Haul Protests and posts on social media are wonderful, but they are not going to get the job done for the long haul. They leave us with a “feel good feeling” of having done something, but do little to effect the change we want to see or keep us engaged long term. Stay connected to people and organizations in this field of promoting peace and keep working together for a specific cause. Protect our democracy’s checks and balances by holding your representatives accountable. Most importantly, remember that love is the only thing that can bridge division. Let’s not give up on that.

I want to leave you with one last story. The story of our friends, Javier, Daniel and Anna. These are the family’s words: Our dear friends of UCC, some of you might be familiar with this story; or at least parts of it. The story of a single mother who sold everything she had and brought her two sons to the land of opportunity when her country was falling apart. It was 1995, and Venezuela had just gone through a coup d’état. The public school system was on strike, her father had just passed away, and work opportunities for women were scarce and decreasing at a rapid rate. Additionally, the country had become incredibly corrupt and dangerous. Desperate for a solution, Ana reached out to the only family she had outside of the country - her brother and sister who lived in Wichita.

Ana and her two sons arrived with only \$200 in her pocket but with a heart full of dreams and aspirations. With the help of family and new friends, the kids were enrolled in school and Ana began working and taking English classes. Her brother petitioned for her and the kids to become residents and everyone thought that for sure, within a year, it would all be a done deal. This wasn’t so. Many years went by and so Ana, the once licensed speech therapist, had worked just about any job. From housekeeping and working at a sewing factory to serving fast food and washing dishes. From working as the file clerk at a car dealership to selling shoes at Dillard’s.

From head cook at the Catholic Care Center to working as a home caregiver. Anything to provide for her two sons.

We met Ana, Daniel, and Javier 8 years into their quest, or should I say, “wait” to becoming US residents. It was time for the boys to start college and word had come to us by our dear Helen Griffin that a young and talented singer and theatre artist with an amazing story was struggling to afford college and was about to take a year off. Concerned that this would be the end to the young performer’s promising career, Bob Scott and Jim Rhatigan intervened. It was serendipitous! Life changing! Javier and his family, not only had a spot in our choir loft but also a private scholarship for him to attend Wichita State University. In the 5 years that followed, Ana, Daniel, and Javier became loved members of our congregation as soloists in our church choir and Revelations concerts. They also participated in the church musical productions of Jesus Christ Superstar and Children of Eden. All along, carrying the burden and fear that someone would find out the truth about their past and reject them.

Finally, news arrived from immigration regarding their case. After many years of waiting, Ana would finally be able to begin proceedings to adjust and become a resident. Daniel and Javier, however, got devastating news. You see, the original petition submitted by Ana’s brother naturally included Daniel and Javier because they were minors. However, after so many years of waiting, Daniel and Javier had aged out of the petition and were in danger of being deported to a country they knew nothing about. It was time for the family to shift all focus towards this problem and a friend directed them to an attorney in Miami who had a lot of experience working on difficult immigration cases. So Ana, Daniel and Javier said goodbye to their Wichita and UCC friends and family and moved to Miami. The years in Florida were filled with many court appointments, government fees, and attorney fees - thousands of dollars, in fact, and above all,



emotional and psychological trauma. From medical and psych exams to the most intimate questions about their lives before moving to the states. Every route and tactic was explored and yet the court could not find a simple way to grant Daniel and Javier their green cards. Finally, the judge grew sympathetic to their story and granted them “Withholding of Removal Status” as a way to avoid deportation. Ana became a resident but the boys would have to start over by having their mother submit a brand new petition for them to become residents with an estimated wait time of 8 more years.

Time has passed, and through the struggles, the family has managed to stay united and achieve some incredible goals. They relocated to NYC and Ana became a US citizen. The two young men continue to work with a lawyer to remain in the states and fight to obtain their green card, while at the same time pursue their careers. Daniel is a photographer and web designer in New York and Javier is pursuing his musical theater career. He recently made his Broadway debut and works extensively through the New York region. Ana, Daniel, and Javier are forever thankful to UCC for all of their love and support throughout this incredible journey.

This community of Christians supported Javier, Daniel and Anna during the sacred time they were in our midst. We nurtured them, fed them, held them up and, when the time was right, we let them go. We continue to watch from afar as their stories take on a different luster. We get to watch those lives unfold in living time. Technological advances means we get to be part of their stories just a bit longer and cheer them on from here. I have a question for you, now. Who is waiting for the same outrageous love and care? Who is right outside our door, waiting for that invitation, that generous invitation, to cross the threshold and let us accompany them on their journey through our complex and intimidating immigration system? Perhaps we ought to maybe,

step outside and look around and see whose hands we can take—hold them tightly—and say:  
“We will be with you through this journey, because there is no other choice”.

## RESOURCES

<https://myimmigrationstory.com/>

<https://relevantmagazine.com/article/5-practical-ways-to-support-immigrants-and-refugees-today/>

<https://citizenpath.com/immigration-quotes-great-americans/>