

## Roots 3: The New People of God

The process of drafting the initial reflections and plans for La Vid United Methodist Church was suddenly interrupted by news of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid on a processing plant in Postville, Iowa. Initially, over four hundred people were taken into custody. Following the release of some, the final number detained for presenting false documents stood at three hundred and nine. Of these, three hundred were Guatemalans.

Ripples of the shock wave immediately affected our community some two hundred and fifty miles away, just as it affected Hispanic/Latino communities throughout the U.S. People in our community began asking for a “misa,” a worship service of prayer and of solidarity with those detained. A full week was consumed with grief, shock and outrage, as well as a Christian treatment of those feelings.

As I prepared the liturgy for the service, the question became, “What scriptures?” Even though the Christian scriptures were born from immigrant peoples, the word immigrant or alien is very seldom used. But somewhere in the back of my mind a piece of a verse surfaced. It was the phrase “Christ has broken down the wall.” After a few Google searches, I zeroed in on the passage from chapter two of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. Quite frankly, I was shocked at what I found:

“...<sup>12</sup>(R)emember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup>He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup>So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup>for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (NRSV)

The original context of Paul’s words was the cultural division between Jews and Gentiles that has worked its way into the body of Christ. It was a division with ramifications beyond the

church and anchored in the law of the land. The two peoples had to be kept separate. It is instructive that Paul's very next words to the Ephesians were, "This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ for the sake of you Gentiles...." It was clear to Paul that he had broken the law of the land in approving and encouraging the presence of Gentile aliens in the Christian practices that were being celebrated in the Jewish synagogue. Rome wanted all insurrections confined to only one group at a time. So anyone who brought different groups together was a threat. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was meddling in the stability of the Pax Romana.

The same thing is happening today in the U.S. with the question of immigrants. The government first made policies making the wait too long for desperate people to get jobs that were going unfilled in the U.S. Then it made laws designed to effectively cut off immigration, especially from Mexico and Central America. This would be done through the militarization of the U.S.-Mexican border and the building of a wall. Finally, the government criminalized those who were here without documents, so that they could be rounded up and hauled off in dramatic raids designed to terrorize the rest of the Hispanic/Latino population.

Thus it is that the longstanding official fears and hatreds of the U.S. toward the brown people to its south have inserted themselves into the discourse of the body of Christ here. For many Christians in the U.S., there is nothing more Christian than patriotism and law and order. Long forgotten are the early Christian centuries when it was against the law to follow Christ, and Christians were subjected to sadistic capital punishment, just as it was the case that there were more U.S. lynchings of Mexicans in the 1920s than there were lynchings of African Americans. Also forgotten is this story in the Letter to the Ephesians, in which Paul sees through the official charges to the truth that he is imprisoned for bringing together those whom the law had separated.

Thus it was that Paul's Gospel message to the church at Ephesus was read to an immigrant community in Sioux City, Iowa last week. And once more it sounded like the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Christ... has broken down the wall...." "He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two...." "...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints...." Evidently, in the church things sometimes operate differently. When it comes to accessing the means of grace that the church alone supplies, required documentation has more to do with one's baptismal than one's "legal" papers. There is no waiting list for those documents, and people can enter even without them.

Paul was not urging anybody to break the laws of the land. He was simply stating that the Gospel of Jesus Christ compelled him to act in a way that human laws had declared to be illegal, and he was glad to do it. He could not witness to Jesus Christ, the great reconciler, and allow people to be excluded from the ministry of the body of Christ. For him, the crucial fact was that God was making one new people in the place of two that were currently divided by a wall.

We need to wrestle with this a little as a church, regardless of our racial or ethnic background or our national origin. La Vid will be a ministry primarily to Hispanic/Latino people, but it will find ways to intentionally invite others, especially as it moves from being a first-generation immigrant community of faith to become a second-generation one in which language is not a barrier. But even within the community of those who speak Spanish there are walls just as formidable as the one being built on our southern border. The figurative wall along the southern border of Mexico is just as difficult for the church. We cannot allow those of us who are Latino to hide our own cultural prejudices behind the thin veil of language. Both Mexican and U.S. Christians suffer when three hundred Guatemalans are treated like cattle on the way to slaughter, no matter how “humane” that process may be.

In the very old days of the Old Testament, this is the point that the faith community would begin to say among itself, “to your tents, O Israel.” It’s time to get on the move. God is leading us in a new direction. The place where we now are in the U.S. immigration debate is no longer hospitable to our faith. To your tents, O Israel!