

Who Are Our Neighbors?
April 29, 2018
Rev. Otto O'Connor

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do them no wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love them as you love yourself, for you were once strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” This is from the book of Leviticus, Chapter 19

If you are visiting with us today, perhaps a “stranger sojourning with us” you should know that I don’t usually start off my messages with quotes from the Bible. If everyone can do me a favor and open up your grey hymnals you will see a page with the seven UU principles (and if you want to learn more about THAT join us after worship for an introduction to the principles), but you’ll see on that page that we have the sources of Unitarian Universalism, six of them, from words and deeds of people we admire, to lessons from world religions, to science.

But yes, we also take lessons from the Bible, you’ll see there “Jewish and Christian teachings” This passage that I just read you if from the book of Leviticus, part of what we call the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Torah, depending on your religious tradition. We take lessons from there because the Bible has good lessons (and some terrible ones, too, let’s be honest) the way that so many things in our world are flawed. But if we are to live in North American society, if we are to be a part of this tradition that evolved many of our ways of thought through Christianity, we must as one of my Seminary Professors used to say “take the Bible seriously, but not literally.”

So this morning, while we have Rev. Isaac here visiting us, sharing with us about his important work and about his own story, I want to investigate a little about why this is an important moral, spiritual, and yes, religious practice, to support immigrants and refugees in whatever ways we can.

So it’s likely that this part of the Bible, this part of Leviticus was written in 6000 BCE, which means that it was written eight thousand years ago. I picked it because, as far as I know, it’s the earliest part of the Bible that discusses how we should treat immigrants to our country.

And the Bible uses the fact that the Jews, the ones who wrote the scripture and for whom this scripture was written, know what it’s like to be strangers, for they had been so when they were in Egypt, their experience detailed in the books of Genesis and Exodus of their times as slaves in Egypt, of which the Holiday of Passover which commemorates their liberation from slavery.

The whole Bible (not just this passage) has been used, by Jews and by Christians, all over the world to honor liberation from oppressive governments and regimes. In Latin America, Catholics read in the Bible a liberation lens that has led to political revolutions in favor to liberating the poor and oppressed.

In Ancient Hebrew, the language of the text of Leviticus, the word that is used in the place “to the stranger you shall do no wrong” could alternatively be translated as “to the stranger, you shall not oppress.”

Of course, the laws of Leviticus, written by those with Jewish religious authority, wouldn't have included a commandment to treat foreigners and strangers as natives if it was happening they way they wanted it to.

Leviticus, is call the book of laws, and so why do we make laws or rules in the first place? Because a certain action or behavior isn't happening.

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do them no wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love them as you love yourself, for you were once strangers in Egypt.”

I have to tell you, I'm a little hung up on what they mean by “as a native among you.” I'm hung up because, sometimes, here in the US, we don't treat the natives among us so well - be they the Native Americans, or people of color in this country.

So, the idea of being welcoming to strangers continues throughout the Bible, this one of our sources of Unitarian Universalism, through to the New Testament, also known as the Christian Scriptures, where Jesus expresses the importance of welcoming the stranger. Clearly something that was difficult for some people to do at the time. And still difficult for people today. And this is important to remember - for generations people have had difficulty treating stranger, refugees and immigrants, as if they were their own people. This kind of marginalization and oppression is not new. In fact, we know it's at least eight thousand years old.

Now, Rev. Isaac's organization primarily works with refugees and asylum seekers, those who had to leave their home country under difficult circumstances, and the churches and religious communities that provide them with resources to help get them settled, that literally practice these religious convictions of welcoming the stranger and treating them as one of us. These faith communities truly practicing what they have been taught in their scripture about welcoming the stranger.

Friends, we currently have a travel ban in place in this country. When our President enacted this law a week into her stay in office, we were outraged, shocked and appalled that people were being turned away at airports to go back to their home countries. Separated from their families.

The travel ban is in its third iteration. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court heard arguments regarding this travel ban for people from certain Muslim countries. It looks like this plan is going to stay in place. Despite its blatant racist and Islamophobic ways. This is clearly against the beliefs of Jewish and Christian teachings, these part of our sources, and, honestly, the professed faith traditions of those who are making and upholding these laws.

Which is a pretty grim situation among one where Immigrations and Customs Enforcement is rounding up more and more people for deportation. And, as you may have heard this week, some of those people are even US citizens who are getting detained because they don't have the documents to "prove citizenship" readily available.

This isn't an example of us living into the values of the professed faiths of those that run this country. As we just heard, the Christian scripture is explicitly against this.

Now, I know that we talk a lot about the separation of church and state, but these things are not, nor will they ever be, quite so easily distinguishable as that phrase makes it seem. The state should not control the church, which is why churches should be able to speak their truths and their values, and house asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants. But it is impossible for our values as people of faith, as people part of religious community, to not be impacted by those beliefs and enact them in the service of a greater good. Which means that sometimes our faith, our churches and religious communities, impact what we advocate for in the government.

As Unitarian Universalists, who affirm and promote our seven principles, all of which affirm the web we are connected in with our fellow humans, if our Jewish and Christian sources claim that we should treat those who are immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers as our neighbors, if those people are truly our neighbors, what does that mean for how we live our lives, here in Malden and in the surrounding communities? What can and should we change about how we live, who we give our money to, and how we spend our resources?

"Love is making someone's else's problems, your problems." Have you heard this before?

It is easy for us to love those close to us, those who look like us and go to church with us, those in our own families. But this problem of loving those who are strangers to us, loving those who don't look like us. In fact, study have shown that we are more likely to be friends with people who look like us. Which I'm sure has something to do with the fact that immigrants from Europe and Canada, which immigrants, are treated differently than Latinx immigrants and Muslim immigrants, because they look like the people in power.

But that is not who we want to be. So what would it look like if we made the problems of refugees, of immigrants, of asylum seekers, our problems. What would that look like?

I don't have the answers for you. Rev. Isaac and his organization are one piece of the puzzle, one way to get involved in this. But there are many ways to do so. I encourage you to talk with him. I encourage you to think about other organizations who do similar work, such as the Greater Boston Interfaith Immigration Justice Accompaniment Network, who provides court support to those facing deportation, which our congregation President Heather is involved in. And there are many more.

We come to church to be challenged, to become the people that we say we want to be, right? Because with each other we can be held accountable to what it is we want from ourselves, from our values. We cannot do everything but we can do something, right? So, what will you do, my friends, to live your religious convictions, to live your faith convictions? What will we do?

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May it be so. And let us say together amen, amen.