

Reading Rev. Peter Morales, President, Unitarian Universalist Association[^], "What people of faith and conscience must do about immigration reform" [^]

Sermon

I'm going to start this sermon by reminding us that we are in a free faith that promotes the free pew and the free pulpit. I usually remind of us of this when I'm about to preach a sermon where I express strong views. Today I want to talk about our immigration crisis and I have some strong opinions about it, so I want to remind us of the free pulpit, which expects our clergy to speak from our conscience. It also offers us the free pew, which means that you are free to question what I say, to disagree with it, and to say so. So long as we speak the truth in love, we are living the covenant of our liberal religious tradition.

Four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, I had the opportunity to work in a college cafeteria in a village outside of Hannover. My co-workers were working class German women who lived off of gossip and complaining about how everything was changing, and not for the better. They complained about two things. First, they complained about East Germans. Four years after reunification, unemployment in the East continued to be high while the rebuilding was costing billions. West Germans felt like the piggy bank had been broken by their poor cousins. Second, they complained about the Turks, who are the largest minority in Germany.

The Turks began entering Germany in the early 1960s when Germany faced labor shortages and created a guest worker program to allow foreigners to come work. It seemed to work. Turks did the work no German would do, for cheaper. But the plan was that they would go home when the work was done and that didn't happen. Instead, Germany became dependent on this cheap labor. Turkish immigrants found they really liked living in a first world country. They married, had children, raised them in the public school system, and those kids weren't content with being cheap second class labor. They wanted to be equal and have a say in the country they lived in. They wanted to be citizens! And the country refused, saying that Germany was for Germans.

One day in the kitchen, "Marta" complained that her daughter was dating a Turk! I asked why that was a problem? Because Turkish men didn't know how to respect women. Another wouldn't let her

grandchildren open a window because Turks lived next door. They shouldn't breathe their air. And I could tell this was a country still doing its homework. The growing Turkish community was asking Germany to re-imagine itself and most were saying no.

Nations aren't just physical borders. They are constructs of the mind, creations of a collective imagination. I was experiencing the gap between the real Germany and the imagined Germany, and it wasn't pretty.

Let's bring this home. The growing population of Mexican and Central Americans in the U.S. is asking us to re-imagine the America of our minds. And it's clear that a lot of Americans are struggling to do the work that is being asked of us. The passing of SB 1070[^] in Arizona is trying to force into reality an America of the mind that doesn't exist anymore, and never even existed in the first place.

Robert Bellah, an American sociologist, says that American identity has always had a religious sense to it. From the beginning, America was about rebuilding what was broken. Puritans came because they experienced Europe as broken. The American Revolution tried to correct a covenant between Britain and its colony that was broken. The Civil War erupted from a sense that a sacred contract had been broken. Every one of these events engaged the concept of nation as something sacred that needed restoration. It has continued since then. The Civil Rights movement pointed to a broken covenant. For many the Vietnam War pointed to a broken covenant. Today equal marriage advocates seek to restore the covenant. And Rev. Peter Morales sees SB 1070, the Arizona law that is the most restrictive law ever regarding undocumented workers, as a broken covenant.

Others see the same legislation as repairing a broken covenant. I remember getting a distinct sense of that covenant back when I still watched Lou Dobbs on CNN. If you don't know Lou Dobbs, he had his own show every evening and he jumped on illegal immigration as a national security issue in the years after 9/11. He would play the same video clip over and over, of a man, clearly Mexican, climbing over a wall and scuttling into the desert. He played this clip night after night, presenting it as proof of an invasion of lawless renegades with no respect for the laws of the land coming to steal American jobs. Recently, the term "Anchor baby" has been latched onto as another invasion. Supposedly women are coming here to have babies so they can stay in America. The problem is it's blatantly false. Having a baby in America doesn't give you the right to stay here. But this falsity is presented as truth over and over again, to give this sense of a southern invasion and to justify and legalize human rights abuses towards those who are undocumented. So whether it's nameless brown skinned men in grainy videos slithering into the desert or pregnant Mexican women landing in American emergency rooms, for some Americans, the America of their mind is under attack. SB 1070 is about fighting back and protecting the America of their minds. It's about cleaning the American house by more easily identifying

undocumented workers so they can be deported back to their country of origin.

This legislation has been touted as simply enforcing the law and that's how it's gained so much support, I mean who isn't supportive of enforcing the law? But I think Peter Morales is onto something. This isn't just about the law, it's about ethnic cleansing, and I know those are strong words, but I'm going to ask you to bear with me. It's about restoring America to some imagined vision of purity that never really existed but somehow has incredible emotional power. And it's cloaked as simply enforcing the law, which is what makes it so insidious. People like Lou Dobbs have been successful in planting the seeds of fear because it connects to that core of racism that is in so many Euro-Americans, that has been taught to us consciously and unconsciously since we were little, that real Americans are white Americans and the rest will never really match up.

These may be strong words, and I will admit it's a challenge to say them because I don't want to believe it's true for any of us, or for me. But unfortunately, there's enough proof to show that it is. A study done some years ago about hiring patterns by educated liberal whites sought to test whether liberal whites were any less racist than conservative whites, which is the popular understanding, especially among liberals. This study showed that when interviewing candidates for a job, if there were two equally qualified candidates, and one was white and the other non-white, the white still tended to get the job. So we can't just say this is done by those people over there. It's in all of us.

Now I could spend a whole lot of time this morning telling you all kinds of facts and figures to prove that SB 1070 is racist, to show that our immigration policy is blatantly racist, and bemoan how awful things are, just like those women in the cafeteria 16 years ago. But I'd rather go deeper, because just like Robert Bellah said, this isn't about sociology and it's not academic. This is a religious issue. It's a matter of the national soul, and that makes it a theological issue.

Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker[^] has suggested that to make sense of what is happening in our country, we have to go back to our roots, and specifically to the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis, and the story of Jesus' crucifixion, because the way we understand these stories has encouraged us to take the dangerous path that we are on today.

The traditional understanding of the Adam and Eve story is this: God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge. Eve, egged on by the snake, did it anyways, thus committing the original sin. When God realized this, he cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden and condemned them and all of humanity to suffering. And thus began our sinful history, a history filled with war and pain. However, God gave us a way out of this cycle by sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins so that we would be saved. Those who accept Jesus are saved, and those who don't are cast into eternal hell.

This is the most common way those of us raised Christian were taught to understand Adam, Eve, and Jesus. Rebecca Parker says that this is dangerously wrong. First of all, it sets up the idea that suffering is divine punishment and that it is Godly to punish. Secondly, it sets up the idea that violence restores what is broken. God needed Jesus to die a horrible death in order to forgive us. Violence is holy. Thirdly, we deserve more violence, in the form of damnation, if we don't accept the gift of Jesus' painful death.

Progressive religion says that this theology justifies laws like SB 1070. One part of SB 1070, for instance, makes it a crime to provide transportation for an illegal immigrant. If you find an illegal immigrant passed out from dehydration because they tried to cross the desert, it is illegal for you to take them to the hospital because you are abetting a crime. The legal thing to do is to leave them to die. A theology of redemptive violence makes this moral. It has allowed us to be God, and to judge the value of that immigrant life by the laws they have broken. It also makes the suffering of the victims a divine act. It is punishment from God.

Rebecca Parker offers a renewed interpretation of these same stories using progressive Christianity and progressive Judaism, which she argues is much more powerful and deeply true. In this theology, Eve isn't judged for eating the apple. She is recognized for her courage to fully experience her world. Being cast out of the Garden takes her from innocence into awareness and this is something to be honored because there can be no growth without loss. Thus the exile from the Garden is a blessing not a curse. So basically progressive theology takes the original sin out of the Garden of Eden story, which has huge ramifications for how you understand the crucifixion. In progressive theology, Jesus saves us not by dying for us, but through his teaching. Jesus did not die because his bloodthirsty father needed him to. His crucifixion happened because of human sin, and not in the original sin kind of way, but rather a sin that comes from missing the mark, from not living into the promise of the exile from the Garden, which is heightened awareness. So the power of progressive theology is not the crucifixion, because the crucifixion is the terrible tragedy. The power is the resurrection, which is not simply about proving how powerful God is, that he can undo the death he supposedly needed to forgive us. It's about showing how powerful love is and that love is stronger than evil and sometimes, prevails.

So in this progressive theology an undocumented worker's death in the desert is not about God's punishment, but rather another tragic crucifixion at the hands of human-based sin and evil. SB 1070 is not establishing the cleansing rule of law, but rather is an example of how we have chosen to scapegoat the weak in our search for unblemished innocence. SB 1070 allows us to turn away from our part in the crucifixion, such as the fact that our policy of cheap food depends on hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Central Americans risking their lives to cross a deadly desert in search of work. Our sense of entitlement to cheap food causes the crucifixion every day.

What theology do we want to live? With which theology should we build the America of our minds? We are imprisoned in a theology of holy violence so long as we continue to criminalize undocumented workers. We might as well be hammering those nails into the cross. We are freed into a theology of an expansive resurrection when we shift from criminalizing undocumented workers, to reforming immigration. The growing population of Mexican and Central American immigrants, documented and undocumented, is asking America to re-imagine itself. It's time, once again, to say yes, and to commit to a greater restoration of this nation's covenant to itself and its people. May it be so and may the spirit be with you.

References:

John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*. Boston: Beacon Press 2010.

Links from this sermon:

www.uua.org

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/07/what_people_of_faith_and_conscience_must_do_about_immigration_reform.html

To read the actual AZ bill: <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/sb1070s.pdf> To read a previous sermon about this theologian:

http://www.emersonuuchapel.org/sermons/020109_uu_theology_part_3_taves.pdf

A note about this font-face (Century Gothic), it may reduce ink usage by about 30%.