

July 3, 2016

TEXT: Jeremiah 31:15–17, 21-26

TITLE: Coming to our True Home

If someone asks you “Where are you from?” your answer might be “I’m from Pittsburgh”—or if you’re traveling you might say “I’m from Pennsylvania.” If you’re traveling abroad, you might say “I’m from America.” Sometimes being asked this question is simply a way to make conversation. But often it is asked to determine your status—are you a stranger or a friend, an outsider or an insider? Do you belong here? Can I trust you? Every year when the 4th of July rolls around, we hear people talk about our nation that stretches from sea to shining sea, the land of the free and the home of the brave. And we do have much to celebrate and much to give thanks for. We remember how America is a great melting pot of a nation, with a Statue of Liberty that has welcomed countless ships of immigrants to our shores. But it is sadly also common to hear that the days of being a welcoming melting pot are over—that our borders should be closed—or like the xenophobic sentiments expressed in the recent Brexit vote imply that it’s time to “take our country back.” In that context, the question “Where are you from?” has a more sinister ring to it.

Maybe it’s time to answer the question “Where are you from?” more honestly. Unless you’re 100% Native American, none of us can honestly say “We are from here.” All of us are immigrants and aliens who have found our way to this place. No one likes to admit that, because it means we self-identify as outsiders, and (if you’ll forgive the double negative) no one likes not fitting in. But if we identify ourselves as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, then it is right for us to honestly say we are immigrants; we are outsiders, people wandering over the face of this earth yet never fully at home in this world.

Remember: Most of the bible story is about homelessness and being strangers in a foreign land. In the book of Genesis: Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden and must wander east of Eden. Abraham leaves his home and settles as an immigrant in the land of Canaan. During the great famine, Jacob and his kin, the tribes of Israel, had to live as guest workers and then later as slaves in Egypt. In Exodus, Moses led them out of Egypt, where they wandered for 40 years. After King David and Solomon, the Israel nation divided in two, was conquered, and the people were taken away into exile in Babylon. And even when they returned home, someone else was in charge—Persians, Greeks or Romans.

The Old Testament legacy of wandering and outsider-status continued in the New Testament. Jesus’ family fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod. All the early Christians living under Roman rule were treated as second-class citizens. Jesus himself said, “*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*” The churches formed by the apostle Paul lived on the margin of society, with followers of Christ often kicked out of synagogues and distrusted by the worshipers of traditional Greek gods.

Our faith legacy is that of being an immigrant people, never fully at home even as we trust in the Lord who is always with us. That is why the bible so often admonishes us to welcome the stranger and take care of the alien, the immigrant in our midst. Deuteronomy 10:19—*You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* Hebrews 13:2—*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Matthew 25:35—*I was hungry and you gave me food; I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* We welcome those who come to us because we are ultimately not Pittsburghers, Pennsylvanians and Americans, but in the eyes of God we are all immigrants—foreigners making our way as best we can in this earthly realm.

To be an immigrant is not a bad thing. By now most of you have heard of Lin-Manuel Miranda, the 36-year old composer of the Broadway hit “Hamilton.” Miranda is the son of Puerto Rican immigrants. He grew up in America a child of two languages and two cultures. So far he’s won a Pulitzer, 2 Grammys, 4 Tonys, an Emmy and a MacArthur genius grant. The subject of Miranda’s recent musical, Alexander Hamilton, was also an immigrant, born on the island of Nevis in the Caribbean – a child abandoned by his father whose mother died when he was 11. He was fostered by a family who recognized his genius and sent him off to America at the age of 16, where he became one of the great Founding Fathers of this land. Early in the musical about Hamilton, Miranda includes this telling line: “*Immigrants—we get the job done.*”

If we are honest enough to name ourselves as immigrants, and seek to honor the commandments and the words of Christ to care for the stranger in our midst, then the prophet Jeremiah has a message for us today. Jeremiah 31 is part of a section called “The Book of Consolation.” The passage we read opens with tears—*A voice is heard in Ramah. Rachel is weeping for her children and she refuses to be comforted.* In the Old Testament, Rachel was one of the wives of Jacob, the mother of the sons who would form the basis of the tribes of Judah—the people of the southern kingdom of Israel who during the time of Jeremiah would be taken away forcibly into exile in the land of Babylon.

The next verses offer words of hope: *You shall come back from the land of the enemy. So set up road markers for yourself, make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went.* Think about those words both literally and symbolically. The Israelites were going into exile. Jeremiah tells them not to travel without hope. They are to notice the road—set up markers along the path they travel—Why? Because they’re coming back. The literal message is: God will not abandon you. Dry your tears.

But symbolically, this passage reminds us to consider well the roads we travel in life. What guides the choices you make? God’s commandments or someone else’s? God’s law or human desire? The actual location of where we are going to or where we live is secondary to how we live together. The zip code is far less

important than the moral code. As Jeremiah says, it is God who restores our fortunes, who blesses us and is “our abode of righteousness”, our true home. Verse 24 says *Judah and all its towns shall live together; the farmers and those who wander with their flocks*. Farmers—people settled on the land—and nomads, those who wander with their flocks, immigrants, outsiders—shall live together. Sometimes we’re the farmers; sometimes we’re the immigrants. But in God’s plan, we are to live together in righteousness.

The biblical wisdom on this subject is unambiguous and not difficult at all. As I said, it is never about where you live as much as it is about how you live together. Our true home is not a place as much as it is a shared life with God and with one another. Recognizing that good news means we’ve come home at last.

Every day we hear news reports about people fleeing their homelands, risking all they have, crossing rough seas and dangerous borders simply to live—to work—to get the job done somewhere safe. If you are ever tempted to blame the victims here, to demonize the migrants and refugees, look up the poem simply titled “Home” by another immigrant, the Somali poet Warsan Shire. She writes this:
*You only leave home when home will not let you stay;
You have to understand—no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.*

A voice is still heard in Ramah—Rachel weeping for her children about to go into exile, whether that “Rachel” is fleeing Mexico, Syria, Burma, or Honduras. And in truth, we are all immigrants. I am an immigrant. I am only here because my grandfather’s parents came to America from Syria around the turn of the last century. You are all immigrants too. And in so many spiritual ways, we all live in exile, trying to make a home in this world while not being fully of this world. But in claiming a common identity as immigrants, there is hope in our shared humanity as children of a loving God. As the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr said, “Through Christ we become immigrants into the empire of God, which extends over all the world and [thus we] learn the history of that empire as our history.”

We are about to celebrate our shared humanity and unity in Christ by gathering at this communion table. You will not be given seeds to plant crops of wheat on your own fenced off piece of land in God’s kingdom. Nor will you receive special portions based on your ethnicity, your age, your gender, economics or sexual identity. You will all receive the same bread and juice—the communion of Christ—which is given to you as food for the journey ahead. Take, eat, beloved migrant people of God. May we travel well together.

AMEN