

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

Genesis 50:15-26

August 3, 2014

(Thank you to Tricia Aynes for notes on Immigration Policy especially as they relate to this passage from Genesis. I incorporated many of her ideas. She is working on Immigration Issues. If you would like to get involved, she has some specific ways for you to help.)

A small child comes home from Sunday School with a little art project. It's a simple drawing that shows four stick figures in a large airplane. The parents quiz the child, "What's this a picture of?" Oh, that's Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus on the Flight to Egypt. "Well, who is this other guy in the picture?" Oh, that's Pontius the Pilot.

We can find many stories of immigration in the Bible, illegal immigration, legal immigration, voluntary immigration, forced immigration, lots of stories of individuals and groups of people moving around to a new place to live. In fact, the story of the Patriarchs, the ancestors of Israel, begins with God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you."

Was that the kind of call that led your ancestors to the United States? Or were your ancestors chained below decks for weeks and then sold to the highest bidder here in the land of the free? Or did your ancestors cross a land bridge from Asia before climate change flooded that connection? Is that the kind of call that leads a child from Central America to find a place on top of a train headed north across Mexico?

For the most part, the people of Israel and the God of Israel in the Old Testament are quite xenophobic. Israelites have an obligation to provide hospitality to the stranger who is passing through, but mostly they have contentious relationships with their neighbors, they worry about encroachment upon their territory, they strive for spiritual and ethnic purity to the exclusion of everyone who is not Israelite enough. Mostly I'm going to tell you a Bible story this morning. It's a story about undocumented immigrants, economic refugees who went to a prosperous country and became agricultural workers. They preserved their own language and culture while navigating the cross currents of discrimination on the one hand and assimilation on the other hand. You know the story of Joseph and how his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. He spent time in prison. He became the Pharaoh's chief economic advisor. He reconciled with his brothers. He brought the people of Israel into Egypt and settled them in a prosperous province of the vast and wealthy nation of Egypt. It's a great story for entertainment. See if you can get Paul Tellstrom talking about his role in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." And it's a great story for study, so many details on everything from handling personal resentments to handling international economics. Many of our current issues with Immigration Policy show up in the story. Egypt had plenty of food (thanks to Joseph and his prudent stewardship) in the midst of worldwide famine. The Israelites arrived with no claim on the generosity of Egypt, but they found a compassionate leader who helped them send provisions back to their relatives who were still living in the impoverished country of origin. They found a niche in their new homeland doing agricultural work that Egyptians preferred not to do themselves. The host country expressed fear that the immigrants were spies. Language barriers made it difficult to establish trust. The Israelites kept bringing more and more of their relatives to Egypt until all of them left the homeland, and the Egyptians feared a demographic crisis. (And those Israelites kept having more and more babies!) The economic crisis broadened until the concentration of wealth created a vast "income gap" between the government of the host country and the hard working immigrants. A few generations after Joseph died, the Egyptians forgot that his service had laid the groundwork for their fantastic wealth. Then, Egyptian leaders played the nationalism card, "These outsiders are too numerous among us, in the event of war they will fight on the side of our enemies." So they dealt shrewdly with the Israelites and made them slaves. What is our immigration policy and what should it be? What it is now is hash. Judges and attorneys find it difficult to apply complex and conflicting legislation to specific cases before them. Back in Ellis Island days, immigration policy was, at least, more clear. What should be our immigration policy is a topic of intractable conflict. At the far ends of the spectrum, some advocate open borders and some advocate pulling up the drawbridge and stocking the moat with alligators. Should we favor the highly skilled? Should we favor those who are fleeing dangerous persecution? Like

every policy in American government, whomever makes an immigration policy on behalf of all us Americans will offend some of us Americans. The idea of 57,000 children, unaccompanied minors, being incarcerated and/or deported back to deplorable conditions in Central America as a result of our current immigration policy hits our Compassion Button hard. Do you ever think about that Compassion Button? Or do you just feel it like a reflex whenever it is triggered?

I want you to think about your own Compassion Button for a while. No, don't think about that elephant in the room. Just look at the Compassion Button in the abstract for a while. Some people have their Compassion Button set on family, or guilt, or animals, or veterans, or poverty, or people like us, or drug addiction, or disease, or neighbors, or mental illness, or racism, or ignorance, or crime. So much suffering, so little time. Something about those 57,000 children does hit our Compassion Button. How do we decide where to set our Compassion Button? I've got news for you, those are not the neediest 57,000 children in the world. That is no reason not to be helpful to them. Plenty of people are pushing on the other side to send them back and keep them out. It is a stewardship issue. Whom will we help? Shall we wait around until we can find the 57,000 neediest? What about the 57 million neediest? Can we even rally to help one? Shall we save our compassion for those who deserve it? How do we set that Compassion Button? Under the leadership of Joseph, the Egyptians decided to save some undocumented immigrants from famine. The sons of Jacob did not deserve any compassion. They didn't know it, but they were begging from a guy they had sold into slavery. He knew them, he knew how their Compassion Button was set--they showed him "compassion" by not killing their own brother, just selling him. How did Joseph work it out to decide how to set his own Compassion Button? He played with some ideas of how to get revenge. Decided against that. Was it just a matter of taking care of his own family? Certainly was a factor, he saw himself as part of a group--but the Egyptians saw themselves as part of that same group, too. It is not recorded if anyone raised an objection: "Hey, Joseph. Don't be playing favorites with your own family. Those are public benefits you are distributing. We have hungry people right here at home." What is recorded is that when Joseph's father eventually died, the Egyptians mourned for Jacob for seventy days--almost as long as the seventy-two day mourning period for a Pharaoh. At that particular time, that is how their Compassion Button was set. The setting changed. Oh yes, things change. Sometimes in unpredictable ways. The way Joseph worked it out was theological. He set his Compassion Button in terms of God's intentions rather than in terms of human intentions. He said to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, that many people should be kept alive as they are today."