

Immigrants All

The sermon was preceded by the singing of Woody Guthrie's *Deportee*

Woody Guthrie wrote those words in 1948 after hearing a news report on his radio. It would be another 10 years before someone else would set the words to music, and by then Woody was in the throes of Huntington's Disease, which would eventually take his life. The incident he describes was about a plane crash on January 28, 1948 that killed 32 people, including four Americans who made up the flight crew. What struck Woody was how the news reports of the tragedy named the flight crew, but only referred collectively to the 28 passengers being deported as "just deportees".

The 28 Mexican citizens who were killed were indeed being deported; but most, maybe all, of them were not violating the law by being in this country. They were allowed to work in the United States as farm laborers by means of an arrangement between the United States and Mexican governments called the Braceros Program. The American farm contractors who did the hiring under this Braceros Program were responsible for transporting those they'd hired back to Mexico when the contract was up. "Braceros" is the Spanish word for "arms;" open arms in this case for needed workers. It is similar to the Guest Worker program former President George W. Bush tried to put in place; but Congressional opposition did not allow for it.

What Woody was trying to say in one of his last well known pieces of writing before his health failed him was, hey, these people are human beings too. They have names, they have families, and they are working so that others of us can eat the food they pick. To refer to them as simply "deportees" is to rob them of their humanity, even in death. Politically minded as he was, I don't think Woody was out to primarily make a political statement here as much as he just trying to speak up for the basic humanity of those who had lost their lives, and who were going unnamed.

In more recent years, thanks to the dogged research of a wonderful man I've had to pleasure of getting to know, Dr. Tim Hernandez, the names of these "deportees" have been found. There is now a monument in the Catholic cemetery in Fresno, California—where all of the 28 are buried—that lists their names. I had the honor of seeing this site a few summers ago when I visited a local Fresno musician who headed up the efforts to purchase and design the marker, and have it put in place. Being familiar with the song *Deportee*, it was a very moving experience for me to stand in that cemetery and read the inscribed names, even in the 110 degree July heat.

I'd like to do more with this story and tell you more about Tim's work, but we've other ground to cover today. Dr. Hernandez has written about his research, and about what he was able to learn of these nearly forgotten Mexican laborers, in this book titled *All They Will Call You*. I strongly commend it to you.

When it comes to this whole matter of immigration, we as a nation live out a double narrative that indicates one of the greatest, and one of the most maddening, paradoxes in

the story of America. On the one hand we like to pride ourselves, rightly so in many respects, of being the open door to the world. One well known expression of this side of the narrative is Emma Lazarus' famous poem on the Statue of Liberty about lifting a lamp beside our golden shore to the tired, poor, huddled masses yearning for freedom.

[I pause here to offer a brief lesson on the consequences of not fact checking—more to the point, of my not fact checking. Emma Goldman—the name shown in your Order of Service—was a well-known 19th and early 20th century anarchist. Emma Lazarus is the name of the poet who penned the words found on the Statue of Liberty. Mea culpa.]

Back to business: There certainly is truth to the “golden shore” side of our narrative. I still recall, several years ago now, being moved to tears as I listen to a young Cambodian gentleman at a poetry reading over in Lowell read some of his poems about his escaping the reign of terror of the Khmer Rouge's killing fields and making it to America. He knew that other family members, friends, and fellow citizens were being slaughtered even as he got out and found refuge, and safety, and a chance for a new life in America. Listening to him accorded me one of my prouder moments as an American citizen.

But there's a tragic counter-narrative, a terribly troubling shadow narrative, we cannot ignore. It's the open arms, the Braceros, on the one hand; and the fear—if not at times hatred—of the unknown “Other”. The way we as a nation—a nation of immigrants all—have dealt with this matter of immigration has a maddening kind of yin/yang quality to it. It's a narrative and a counter, or shadow, narrative that can be captured in part with the the two quotes in your Order of Service for today. Emma Lazarus' “I lift my lamp beside the golden shore”, and then Guthrie's “All they will call you will be deportee.”

It's time for a brief historical excursion now to take look at that shadow side. Consider these words, spoken by a very prominent American, in the late 18th century, as large numbers of German immigrants began to arrive in Pennsylvania:

"Those who come hither [from Germany] are generally of the most ignorant Stupid sort of their own nation... unless the stream of their importation (can) be turned they will soon outnumber us (and we will not) be able to preserve our language and even our Government will become precarious." The gentleman goes on to ask, "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and who will never adopt our language or customs anymore than they can acquire our complexion." These words were spoken and published by Benjamin Franklin, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of the authors of our Constitution.

I'm particularly taken with Franklin's saying that the “complexion” of the newly arriving Germans was not the same as the Anglos. One of his many ways of belittling the Germans was to make them persons of color, saying they cannot, as he put it, “acquire our complexion.” Remarks like this make me wonder if we Americans will ever fully comprehend just how deeply entrenched racism is in our nation's story.

Cut to some 70 or so years later: Following the deadly potato famine in Ireland in the late 1850s, Irish immigrants came to our golden shore in large numbers, quite literally fleeing for their lives. Yes, they found refuge here. But in many of our major eastern cities, most notably Boston, they also encountered messages in the windows of certain business establishments, and in the help wanted sections of newspapers that stated, "No Irish Need Apply."

In an 1871 issue of *Harpers Weekly* magazine, a forerunner of our *Harpers* monthly periodical of today, a cartoon ran showing a drunken Irishman sitting on top of a power keg barrel he was preparing to light while swinging a bottle of whiskey with his other hand. The title of the cartoon was "The Usual Irish Way of Doing Things." The author of the cartoon was Thomas Nast, the same editorial cartoonist who gave us our image of Uncle Sam, as a symbol of America; and the images of the elephant and the donkey as the symbols of our two major political parties.

Thomas Nast was a German-born American. Some of his ancestors may well have been among the targets of Franklin's fierce anti-German sentiments. But that did not prevent Mr. Nast from holding up to ridicule, and playing to the stereotypes, of yet another group of immigrants who came to these shores a couple of generations after his ancestors first arrived, and who were subjected to the same kind of fear and suspicion themselves.

The influx of, especially, Irish and Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries also set off a wave of anti-Catholicism in what was then a predominantly Protestant Christian culture. The suspicions went something like this: They conduct these rituals in Latin and ring bells and use incense; and they won't even send their children to "real American" schools. Another of Mr. Nast's cartoons from this era showed American Bishops portrayed as crocodiles, swimming up onto a shore where American children were playing, threatening to swallow them up. This, according to Nast, was what would happen if Catholic parochial schools were permitted to exist.

A very shameful episode in our nation's history occurred at the behest of President Franklin Roosevelt; the same FDR who gave us the New Deal that broke the ground for much of our nation's social policy to this day, and who served as our Commander in Chief in our defeating Hitler's advancing fascism. Under his Presidency, hundreds of Japanese-Americans—American citizens—were sent to re-location camps for much of the Second World War and lost most of their property in the war's aftermath.

It was also President Roosevelt who, in May of 1939, refused a ship carrying Jewish emigres who were escaping Hitler's Third Reich to dock in the United States. The ship was first refused entry in Havana—it's original destination—and was then turned away by the United States as well and had to go back to Europe.

Within my own lifetime, I can still remember, as a fifteen year old high school sophomore at St. Albans High School in St. Albans, West Virginia when then Senator John Kennedy was running for President in the West Virginia Primary. In the Baptist Church I attended there were serious conversations about how, if he were elected

President, his first loyalty would be to be The Vatican, and he would be taking direction from the Pope.

These were not mean or hateful people saying such things. They were decent, hard-working folks who were scarcely aware of the cultural blinders they were wearing. The fact that Senator Kennedy went on to win that Primary and then get elected President represented at least a partial reversal of nearly 100 years of anti-Catholic fear and suspicion.

Throughout our history, then, we have contended with the paradox of the open door to the golden shore on the one hand; and a kind of tribalistic fear and suspicion of the outsider, of the one we don't know and do not understand, on the other. And our celebration of the golden shore, and our exploitation--usually a political exploitation--of the fear of the stranger, continue to occur to this day practically simultaneously.

Before going on, I offer this reality check: We live in a world of nation states with their boundaries and their stipulations as to who is a citizen of a particular nation and who isn't. In a perfect world, perhaps, no such boundaries would exist. But that's not the world we live in. Like any nation we in America have the right and responsibility to determine who can rightfully be a citizen, and—by implication—who is not. So yes, I recognize the necessity of an immigration policy that sets forth the conditions for American citizenship, while also being humane enough to take into account the wide variety of circumstances and conditions of those who pose no threat to our security, and who have very understandable—at times even necessary—reasons for living amongst us, citizen or not.

The thing that concerns me most right now is the approach we take, the angle we come from, in our ongoing efforts in achieving such a balanced policy. Do we come at it from the “golden shore” side of the narrative or from the shadow side of that narrative? The two sides of that narrative remain very much in play. The term “Mexican” has replaced Franklin's “German” in certain quarters of our citizenry. The same goes for Nast's 19th century attacks on Catholicism. Take out “Catholic” and insert “Muslim” and you have a sentiment today that is also finding expression in certain parts of our population.

As deeply disturbing, even frightening, as these sentiments are, they should come as no surprise to those who have any familiarity with the two sides of the narrative we've been exploring today. What is even more disturbing and even more frightening, however, is that the shadow side of our immigration story is now finding a level of validation at some of our highest levels of government—including that of the United States Presidency—that is appalling.

One role of the President, and of those around him (males so far), is to call us to what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.” I am seeing quite the opposite of our being asked to summon our “better angels” in determining the best way to deal with our immigration challenges. What we have gotten instead is a blanket ban, by Executive Order, on Muslims from certain Middle-Eastern countries; an order that has

twice now been stricken down by the courts. And here I offer a grateful nod of appreciation to the authors of our Constitution (indeed, even Mr. Franklin) for giving us our system of separation of powers when it comes to how we are governed.

When it comes to our Mexican neighbors what we get—again from the highest levels of government—is a reference to “bad hombres” and a proposal to build a multi-billion dollar costing wall along our southern border. Whether that will actually happen or not remains to be seen. According to the last Pew survey numbers available there is now a greater level of movement by Mexican nationals going south across the border into Mexico than of those coming north into this country. The best estimate is that of a net decline of Mexican nationals in this country of 140,000 persons between 2009 and 2014 alone. But why let the facts get in the way when there is political hay to be made in fomenting fear, mistrust, and xenophobia?

Beyond these terribly troubling incidents—I leave it with these two for today—and others like them, the even greater and more sobering concern is for the larger aura and atmosphere such actions create. There has always been a latent fear and mistrust and xenophobia percolating around in our societal life when it comes to the newest arrivals in our country. What’s happening now, to some measure anyway, is that the latent is becoming blatant. And for the President of the United States to be a party to that latent xenophobia becoming blatant is unconscionable.

A quick personal caveat: Anyone who takes an oath of citizenship to become a naturalized American, promises to defend the United States “against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” If I were becoming a naturalized citizen—as my mother did when I was six years old—I would have no qualms about raising my hand and taking such an oath. And I still reserve the right to determine for myself—based on the most informed judgement I can muster—just who is a foreign or domestic enemy and who isn’t. I’m with Woody Guthrie here in another of his well-known songs: “This land I’ll defend with my life if need be, but my pastures of plenty must always be free.”

In addition to the individual lives that are being threatened, or being needlessly made fearful, by a poisoned atmosphere of mistrust, if not hatred, of immigrants, we as a nation are paying price for such an atmosphere as well. I go to an article in last Monday’s *New York Times* for just one example. It was about how the aging population in the State of Maine was experiencing an increasing shortage of health care providers—doctors, EMTs, and the like. They have become increasingly reliant on foreign nationals, recent immigrants, to fill these kinds of positions; and EMTs—who are largely Asian immigrants—are being given a status similar to that of doctors to meet the shortfall.

The article went on to say that there is concern, given the current atmosphere with respect to immigrants, as to how well such medical services can be maintained—and the ripple effect of that throughout the State’s population. Quoting from the article: “Economists regard Maine’s rapidly aging population as a demographic tsunami that has severe implications for the state’s labor pool, health care system, and overall socioeconomic

well-being. But the state can grow, they say, with more international immigration—though that may become more difficult under the current (Presidential administration).”

In addition, then, to the individual lives that are being upended by an aura of xenophobia, we are hurting ourselves as a nation by possibly keeping at bay those who skills and services we need the most.

I’m not out this morning to offer grand strategies for resisting the ascendancy of this shadow side of our country’s immigration story today. I will say now that we—individually, as part of citizen action groups, as members of this congregation—seek and act on ways to be a part of the positive and uplifting piece of our immigration narrative.

Part of your church’s story, as told in one of the chapters of this coffee-table type book on Littleton’s 350 year history, is about how members of this church were very strongly involved in the civil rights struggles of the 1960. Rev. Robert Hadley, Judy and Ron Pickett, and Grace and Carl Lindquist are among those church members cited. You have your own narrative of social justice advocacy, of standing on the side of love; and I have a feeling there are more chapters yet to be written of that story.

The words found in our closing hymn “Do You Hear?” can be applied in any number of contexts. I chose it for today for some of the lines in the closing verse that ask if we hear “all the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers;” dreams and dares and sighs and prayers that so many people from so many places in the world bring to what we must still hold forth here as a golden shore. With that in mind, let’s sing this together.

Stephen Edington
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