

# *Immigration, Justice and Jesus*

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Columbus, OH  
May 18, 2025

*To love one's country is a splendid thing, but why should love stop at the border?* —Pablo Casals

Reading: Luke 4:16-30

Six months ago, the current president won the election, promising that he would round up and deport 12 million people who have immigrated without proper documentation. We heard the demonization of all immigrants from the southern border as drug dealers and gang members and Haitian immigrants as killing and eating pets. Since then, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been operating with impunity, seizing students who have legal visas, but who have protested the genocide in Gaza. With no due process, people have been captured and sent to a prison in El Salvador. And this week, troops have been deployed, militarizing the southern border. There are hash winds blowing in the United States, scapegoating and blaming immigrants for every problem, while massive corporations and billionaires rob everyone blind.

So this morning, as an issue of faith, I ask, what do we have to say about immigration?

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus tells a story of when the Promised One, the Human One, comes in glory to sit upon the royal throne. And the Promised One will say to the righteous, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." (Matthew 25:35). And because you have done this, you will inherit the kingdom. Now I want you to see that the word there for "stranger" is the Greek word, *xenos*, which means "alien, foreign traveler, or immigrant." "I was an immigrant... and you welcomed me!" So in our tradition, those who don't love the immigrant don't love Jesus.

The word in the Greek for hospitality, *philoxenia*, is from the words, "love" and "stranger." And it is just the opposite of *xenophobia*, the fear of strangers, which is rearing its head in this nation of ours today. One could make the case that according to Jesus, no human being is illegal, and the term, "illegal alien" would offend him. And at the very least, each alien deserves love, respect and care.

How does our Christian faith inform our perspective on immigration?

In our passage for today, Luke's story of Jesus has him returning to the area of his up-bringing. And so here's the scene. Jesus goes to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, and he is acting the part of a rabbi. And right away we see that he is a radical. He reads from the prophet, Isaiah about the year of jubilee:

*The Spirit of God is upon me,  
because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
God had sent me to proclaim  
release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,*

*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (jubilee year).*

What is the year of jubilee, and why is it so radical? Every seven years, according to Jewish law, all debts were forgiven and all servants were to be released, and after 49 years on the “year of jubilee,” all property that had been in anyone’s family was also returned to them.

What you had in the ancient world was money becoming concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, and people who lost their money and property—through a very regressive tax system (hardest on the poorest) to support the kingdom. Jesus, it seems, carries forth this jubilee principle of redistribution of wealth. Good news, indeed, for the poor! And those who are in servitude, enslaved and oppressed by debt are set free!

He then tells them that “Today is the time for this to happen. As you hear this, it is starting to be fulfilled.” So this is a jaw-dropping sermon that Jesus is giving. Revolutionary. And they were amazed.

In addition, I want you to see that Jesus stops his quote of Isaiah 61:2 after the first part of the verse. And it is very interesting that he left off the second part of the verse: “the day of vengeance of our God.” There is a pattern for Jesus to portray God not as violent and vengeful but as gentle and loving. Perhaps this is why they were taken aback and surprised by “such gracious words.” They were expecting to hear about divine retribution of bad news for the rich and powerful but heard only good news for the poor. And so they were astonished, but not in a positive way.

Sometimes the graciousness of God is offensive. And it sparks anger. Jonah was so offended and angry that God would be gracious and loving toward his dreaded enemy, the Ninevites, that he couldn’t stand it and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

And here is where Luke’s story starts to get good. Jesus says, “You will probably say, ‘Do here in your own country what we have heard you did in Capernaum.’”

There seems to be some kind of jealousy going on here. They resented Jesus’ good deeds toward those who lived in Capernaum. It was, after all, a largely non-Jewish town, filled with foreigners. “They don’t deserve it. Jesus, you should be looking out after your own kind. They are not part of us.”

So Jesus zings them. He goes right after their attitude, quoting from the Jewish scriptures:

*“I can assure you, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens were stopped up for three and a half years and a great famine befell all the land; yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but rather to a widow in Zarephath near Sidon.”*  
(see 1 Kings 17:9ff.)

Now if you look at the map of the time when Elijah was alive. You would see the northern and southern kingdoms of the Jewish people, Israel and Judah. And you will notice that Zarephath is by Sidon way over here—outside the country and over the border into Phoenicia. God’s grace extended to those who were in a different country.

And then Jesus continues:

*“And there were many lepers in Israel, when Elisha was the prophet; yet none of them was cured, but only Naaman of Syria.” (see 2 Kings 5:1ff.)*

And you would see that Syria is to the north, again a totally separate kingdom and country than Israel. Again, God’s love does not stop at the border.

If you look at the map in Jesus’ time. Nazareth in Galilee is up in the north, and Jesus would cross several borders, going through Samaria, in order to reach Jerusalem in Judea. Jesus, himself, was a border-crosser.

He embodied the biblical principle of hospitality to the migrant, the foreign traveler. He embodied love for the stranger and sojourner. And he, himself, was one. All people are deserving of care and respect.

But this is a threatening message at its core. People sometimes think that if we care for others, there will be less for care and opportunity for me. And so we have the response of the crowd when they realized what Jesus stood for:

*When the people in the synagogue heard this, they all became furious...They took him to the edge of the cliff on which the town was built, to throw him over it.*

So from the very beginning of his ministry the die is cast, and we can see that Jesus’ message of justice and fairness for all people will enrage the good religious people of his day. Filled with righteous anger and indignation, they ground their teeth at him. “Who are you, anyway?” they thought. “The carpenter son of that nobody, Joseph?”

So Luke sets the stage, and we see that from the beginning Jesus would meet his end for standing up for the outsiders, the excluded, the exploited and the powerless. We can see the reasons why there where those who wanted to kill him. It reminds me of that pithy truth written by the famous New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan:

*Those who live by compassion are often canonized.  
Those who live by justice are often crucified.*

What did he mean? Well, Crossan reminds us that good, compassionate people are not a threat to the empire and the powerful. They work within the system and don’t try to change it. He says,

*It is impossible to have justice without compassion, but it is possible to have compassion without justice.*

Jesus was in the first group; he was compassionate *and* lived by justice. He challenged the system, the laws, the rules. Jesus died, it seems to me, not because God wanted him to die or needed him to die, but because he would not back down from his commitment to justice. He was a threat. Jesus didn’t come to change God’s mind about humanity; Jesus came to change humanity’s mind about God, about the ways of love and justice. He enraged those who lived entitled lives of privilege, those who benefited from the status quo. They might have even been good, compassionate people, but they did not have justice.

And so there's a lot of rage out there even today—rage against those who would suggest that we should care about the migrant in our midst. Rage against those who want to change the rules and make them more humane.

For years now, there have been 12 million immigrants without documentation working in the United States—on farms, in hotels as maids, as janitors, as domestic workers, in construction, in meatpacking. Many of these are jobs that no one else will do. Many of these workers pay into taxes but are afraid to receive services. Many pay into Social Security and will never claim those benefits. Because they have no documents, these workers are easily exploited. When this happens it hurts all American workers, driving down wages and worsening conditions.

It is a myth that they take jobs from citizens. Economists tell us that they help the local economies grow, that they contribute to the tax base and that they bring in as many jobs as they take.

Outdated laws have driven too much immigration into the black market and not enough immigration through legal channels for those who want to work in this country. Many families have been separated from their loved ones for years and are blocked from being united. Hundreds of thousands have been detained or deported, and thousands have died in the desert, trying to cross over to provide a better life for their families or simply to survive.

It seems to me that the Bible's clear call for hospitality to the migrant in our midst—the sojourner in our land—is not conditional. It is not predicated on documentation. It is a call to treat them with respect, dignity and compassion. It calls us to care about their struggle and their suffering. And it calls us to evaluate our laws in light of these realities.

Jesus himself would never take the law as the final word. He challenged and even broke the law whenever it conflicted with compassion

- breaking purity laws by caring for lepers and eating with the outcasts and unclean,
- breaking Sabbath laws by healing and caring for the broken, the destitute and the lame whenever they needed it, and
- breaking the laws of the empire by denying them ultimate authority and proclaiming that there are things that belong to God and not to Caesar.

Jesus proclaimed that boundaries and borders are not the final word when it comes to God's grace and compassion.

Look, as a Christian I'm not saying that we should have totally open borders and let everyone in. But neither should they be virtually closed as they are now. I'm suggesting that based upon our faith tradition we should be more open than we are by

- creating a pathway to citizenship or legal status for the millions who have been working here for years, and
- bringing the quotas into line with the current economic realities by increasing the number of temporary and seasonal work visas, increasing the number of legal residences and increasing the number of green cards for those to be citizens.

People are told to “come through legally,” but unless one is a professional athlete or has advanced academic degrees in specialty occupations or has a spouse who is a citizen or legal resident, it is virtually impossible to do so. What does it mean to say, “Come here legally,” when

it is impossible to do so? Unlike previous periods in our history, there is virtually no process for unskilled immigrants without family relations in the U.S. to apply for permanent legal residence.

Jesus, the prophet, is speaking to us. Jesus, whose words both comfort and infuriate, is calling us to change the status quo, to be a voice for the powerless and outsiders, and to work for greater justice in our land.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*