

## SERMON FOR BERKEY AVENUE MENNONITE FELLOWSHIP – MAY 13, 2018

### “FINDING JESUS IN THE STRANGER”

Scripture: Leviticus 19:33-34; Romans 12:9-18; Matthew 25:31-45

**Summary:** As Christians, we're called to welcome immigrants and treat them as we would other citizens – with fairness, charity and love. In short, we're expected to treat “the least of these” as we would Jesus. But what should we do in these turbulent times when some government leaders are treating immigrants unjustly and seeking their deportation? We should focus on what we believe as Anabaptists: Keep Jesus at the center of our faith, community at the center of our lives and reconciliation at the center of our work. Then we can advance social justice, embrace the common good and Find Jesus in the Stranger.

### INTRODUCTION

Good morning. I've stood here many times to make announcements, to give updates or to ask your prayers for immigrants. But it's far different and scary to be here delivering the Sunday message. So I appreciate the support Mag and Bob and Dan and Joanne have given me over the last few weeks and for the support of the Worship Commission in planning today's service.

Growing up as a “cradle Catholic” in Southern California, I was so drawn to the church that my mother thought I should become a priest. That wasn't for me, but I respected and loved the Catholic Church and could not imagine ever leaving it.

So it's amazing to me still that I married a Mennonite, work at Goshen College, and joined the Mennonite Church. And I'm astonished that I'm an elder at Mennonite church. And I still can't understand how that happened.

Of course, it's taken decades since I married Judy to be here giving a sermon. So maybe that's because pastors along the way recognized that I've never learned how to be one of the “quiet in the land,” much less passive aggressive.

I do appreciate the opportunity to talk about immigrants, why I have such a passion for the subject and how I believe we're called to respond in this time of crisis.

### MY BACKGROUND

I'd like to tell a little of my background to give you a sense of why this matters to me so much.

My father was a carpenter and my mother was a factory worker. We always got by, but we also knew what it was like to live paycheck to paycheck, eat surplus food from the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) and receive unemployment checks.

My parents worked hard because they wanted better lives for their seven children.

Dad would come home from work exhausted, covered with sawdust and dirt and soaked in sweat. And he would fall into his recliner and say, "Son, get an education, so you don't have to work like an animal, like me."

My Dad's hands ached from swinging a hammer all day and from carrying lumber. His palms had thick callouses and the back of his hands had the consistency of like alligator skin because of the constant exposure to sun, dirt, concrete and other chemicals.

My Dad wanted me to have soft hands. And he didn't want me to have the broken body and illnesses that took his life when he was only two years older than I am now. So I learned and I studied. And with God's grace, I got a college education and became the first in my family to get a white-collar job.

Eventually, I married Judy and we had Richard Enrique and Ana Maria. They reflect America's melting pot philosophy. Part Mexican-American, part Swiss, part Mennonite. We used to jokingly call them "Mexican-nites" or "Menno-cans."

Still, I never forgot where I came from. So during my 26-year career as a journalist, I wrote many stories about the Latino community and immigration. It was my hope that this exposure would make a positive difference. And I've continued and interest in immigration at Goshen College. So besides my other responsibilities, I've also raised money for Latino students and helped immigrants.

I'm the grandson of Mexican immigrants – people who came to this county to escape political turmoil, a depression and domestic violence. I was born outside El Paso, Texas – just a few hundred yards from the U.S.-Mexico border. As a kid, I learned that being born on this side of the border gave you a life of opportunity. And the other side often meant a life of poverty and uncertainty.

I've always lived among and learned from immigrants, legal and undocumented. They were family. During my life, I've heard them called insultingly and dehumanizingly such names as braceros, wetbacks, dirty Mexicans and illegal aliens. So I know what it's like also to be mistaken for an immigrant, and not always Mexican. People have asked me, Are you Iranian? Are you Arab?" While in Peru, some people asked me if I was Chilean.

I also know what it's like to be "the other," never quite accepted in the country or in Mexico. A few months ago, I called an Elkhart church and asked to speak to the pastor. After telling the secretary who I was, she expressed surprise and said, "Are you Latino?" And I said "yes" and she said "wow." When I asked "Why are you surprised?" She said, "Because you speak English so well."

Like many of your Anabaptist ancestors, my grandparents and great-grandparents came to this country not knowing the language or the culture because they wanted to live the American Dream. And by learning and working hard, they and people of all races and ethnicities made this nation of immigrants the best in the world.

Our leaders once believed that the worth of an individual was based on what they accomplished and how they treated others – and not based on their country of origin, their ethnicity, their race or religion, or their education or the balance in their bank accounts.

## THE PRESENT CRISIS:

But that's not the case anymore. There's growing anger, intolerance and hatred of immigrants. Since President Trump took office, we've seen disruptive changes to U.S. immigration policies and enforcement. The Trump administration has:

- Ended Temporary Protected Status, a program which allowed many Haitians and Central Americans, who came to this country because of turmoil at home, to stay here. And some of these people have lived here for decades.
- It has discontinued Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the DACA program, for undocumented immigrants brought to this country when they were children. As a result, 700,000 young people, including 10,000 in Indiana and about 1,200 in Elkhart-Goshen, may soon lose their legal status and be deported.
- And increased numbers of non-criminal immigrants have been arrested and deported.

In recent weeks, this onslaught has continued:

- No longer can families arrested at the border live on their own or be detained together. The Justice Department has begun separating families – sending parents into criminal detention and even young children into federal detention centers.
- The Trump Administration also wants to limit family reunification by stopping the parents and siblings of legal immigrants from coming to the United States.
- And just last week, it announced that it will be reclassifying legal immigrants who receive tax, health and nutrition benefits as public “charges,” so they can be denied legal permanent residency and deported. So a U.S.-born child of a legal immigrant who receives Medicaid or health insurance subsidies could disqualify his or her parents from receiving legal residency.

These changes and the many more detentions and deportations have been devastating – something you'll hear more about from young the immigrants during today's Sunday School.

Having spent a lot of time with immigrants over the past year, I can tell you:

- They no longer feel safe, even in places they've lived for decades
- They feel they've been abandoned by their communities and neighbors
- They doubt Congress will never pass immigration reform or create a path to citizenship.
- And there's a growing sense of hopelessness and despair.

## HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

So how are we called to respond? That's a question many people have asked me since the new administration took office. (They ask) How can we do that with an administration that challenges the courts, ignores the rule of law, attacks all who disagree, encourages racism and undermines the news media?

Well, I'm happy to say Berkey Avenue has responded, and for that I am very grateful to all of you. Berkey Avenue was the first church whose members offered to help immigrants after I created a support network called Elkhart County HOPE. Berkey has also donated funds to several initiatives that will be Darin (Short) will mention later in this service.

But there's more work to do and I believe Mennonite can lead by focusing on our core beliefs – Jesus, Community and Reconciliation.

## ANABAPTIST PRINCIPLES

Before we were married, Judy shared with me a little booklet called "The Anabaptist Vision" by Harold S. Bender. And in it, I learned that Mennonites:

- Followed Jesus
- Were a community of believers committed to holy living
- And that they embraced nonresistance and peace and opposed war.

The Catholic Church of my youth taught us to believe in the Holy Trinity and to live an upright life in order to ensure eternal rewards in heaven.

Mennonites had a far more appealing belief. H.S. Bender wrote that Anabaptists believed "Jesus intended that the kingdom of God should be set up in the midst of earth, here and now..."

In 2008, a Mennonite pastor, educator and author named **Palmer Becker** updated the vision in the booklet, "What is an Anabaptist Christian?" This was an updated vision of what Mennonites believe:

- **Jesus is the center of OUR FAITH**
- **Community is the center of OUR LIVES**
- **And Reconciliation is the center of OUR WORK**

I'll explain why I think these beliefs are relevant to the immigration debate.

## JESUS IS THE CENTER OF OUR FAITH

As you know, migration is an important theme in the Bible – from Adam and Eve to Noah and Abraham and to Moses, and then to Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

Interpreting the Bible from a Christ-centered point of view makes clear how we are called to treat the stranger and the immigrant. And the scriptures that Mag and Judy read seem especially helpful.

## Leviticus

In Leviticus 19:33-34, the Israelites were told to extend radical hospitality to the “stranger,” the non-Jew, because it was God’s will. But that’s not the only reason. They were also to love the stranger because they were once strangers – the persecuted minority – in Egypt. So they should treat the alien as the Jews would wish to be treated in a foreign land.

## Romans

The passage from Romans 12: 9-19 also has a clear call to action. We can’t just limit our love to those in our community; we must also “*extend hospitality to strangers.*” And to reinforce that message, Paul goes even further by writing that we must bless those who persecute us, associate with the lowly, not repay evil with evil, and to live peaceably with all.

## Matthew

The meaning of Matthew 25 is not as clear to some. Some religious conservatives believe that “my brothers” refers to the disciples or followers of Christ and not immigrants and certainly not to the poor. They point out that elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus refers to his disciples as “my brothers.” So in this interpretation, Matthew 25 it is intended to warn others about the consequences of mistreating the followers of Jesus.

But I believe that interpretation contradicts much of the Gospels. For example, the Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us to set aside our prejudices and extend love and compassion to our neighbors, regardless who they are. Jesus goes further in the Sermon on the Mount, commanding us to love our enemies. In Matthew 5:43-47, Jesus said:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”*

So the conventional interpretation of Matthew 25, is that Jesus was referring to anyone in need. And that’s reinforced by those of us who believe, as I do, that we should acknowledge the worth in all people because the next stranger we see may be Jesus.

So was Jesus a migrant? And are we migrants? Father Daniel Groody, who’s a professor at the University of Notre Dame, believes so and has developed something he calls the “Theology of Migration.”

His conviction is that we’re all migrants “based on the Incarnation – the belief that God migrated to humanity so all of us in turn could migrate back to God.” Father Groody writes, “As pilgrims of faith, Christians are spiritual migrants searching for a true homeland, an identity that should make us more sympathetic to all people on the move today.”

He also has offered another upside down idea that I find intriguing. Father Groody says it’s incorrect to define “alien” as a person lacking legal immigration status.

Instead, "alien" should refer to "those who have so disconnected themselves from their neighbor in need that they cannot see in the stranger an image of themselves, a reflection of Christ and a challenge to human solidarity."

### **COMMUNITY IS THE CENTER OF OUR WORK**

The second Mennonite belief is making community the center of our lives. I believe that includes allying with those who share our convictions, regardless of their faith.

One of my life heroes was Ellie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and author. When I was a newspaper reporter in California, I had the opportunity to interview Elie Wiesel a year after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Wiesel endured devastating horrors at Auschwitz and later the Buchenwald concentration camp. Afterward, he dedicated his life to bearing witness to what happened. He stirred our consciences and warned us of the awful consequences of indifference. In short, he tried to prevent us from repeating history.

When he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel said: "When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe."

And so for me, immigrants have become the center of my universe.

I know there are many critical issues today, including rising spending for the military, attacks on education, the environment, health care system and a tax system that favors the rich, to name only a few. Immigration is important to me because I believe our future is linked to those who are scapegoated, hated, arrested and deported.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said it best: "We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

### **RECONCILIATION IS THE CENTER OF OUR WORK**

The final Mennonite belief is a commitment to reconciliation. And I believe it goes beyond reconciling with just Christians. I believe we're called to reconcile with the larger community. And to me that means promoting the common good.

We saw that happen most powerfully this winter during the controversy over the proposed immigration detention center. CoreCivic, one of the nation's largest private prison owners, wanted to build a 1,400-bed detention facility to house immigrants imprisoned by U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement. County officials said it would probably be approved.

But others disagreed.

I founded and co-led a coalition of 3,600 people who worked day and night to stop the detention center. We held rallies and information sessions, coordinated a letter-writing campaign and lobbied county officials. Later, Mayor Jeremy Stutsman persuaded elected officials as well as businesses and non-profit organizations to oppose the facility. And CoreCivic withdrew its proposal.

I believe we were successful because our opposition was built on three principles:

- Faith and a strong moral belief that a detention center was wrong.
- We promoted community and maintained good relationships, even with those with whom we disagreed.
- And we rejected violence and extremism and sought the common good.

In essence, we used the same approach Anabaptists have followed for hundreds of years:

- **Jesus at the center of OUR FAITH**
- **Community at the center of OUR LIVES**
- **And Reconciliation at the center of OUR WORK**

Our movement was God inspired and strongly influenced by Mennonites and strongly influenced by Mennonites in this room today.

The challenge before us today is as clear now as it was 50 years ago when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his final Sunday sermon. In it he said:

“We have difficult days ahead in the struggle for justice and peace, but I will not yield to a politic of despair. I’m going to maintain hope ... The cards are stacked against us. This time we will really confront a Goliath. God grant that we will be the David of truth set out against the Goliath of injustice, the Goliath of neglect, the Goliath of refusing to deal with the problems, and go on with the determination to make America the truly great America that it is called to be.”

There’s a real irony in that – “to **make America** the truly **great** America that it is called to be.”

## **CONCLUDING PRAYER**

In the spirit of Jesus, Community and Reconciliation, I ask that you please join me in a concluding prayer from the Catholic Church. And it’s on the screen.

*Dear Jesus, you are the refuge of people on the move.*

*We ask you to grant immigrants, refugees, and other migrants peace, protection, and comfort.*

*Help us to recognize that whenever we welcome the stranger in your name, we welcome you.*

*Teach us to recognize your presence in every human being. Bring us together as one family, at the banquet table of your love. Amen.*

**Thank you very much for listening to me this morning.**