

“Family Across Borders”

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The family I was born into has been in this country for just about as long as any white people have, and we are just about as WASPy as you could imagine. Both the Hortons and the Winterses (that’s my mom’s side) go back almost to the Mayflower.

We’ve got our share of Puritan-era Obadiahs and Ezekiels in the family tree.

The most recent relative in my personal family tree who wasn’t born in this country was my great-grandmother Annie MacDonald, whose family had emigrated from Scotland to Newfoundland. (I carry her last name as my middle name.)

So, at first glance, it might look like my family’s story is pretty far removed from the story of immigrant families in the U.S. today. But, in fact, the truth is very different.

Today, my sister Amy, my brother-in-law Juan, and their daughter Grace are living happily in Miami, Florida. But just last year, they found themselves struggling to keep their family together. Juan was born in Venezuela and came to the U.S. ten years ago. He got his green card right around the time he and my sister got married. Grace was born a couple of years after that.

Juan had always hoped to become a U.S. citizen and began the naturalization process a couple of years ago. Everything went smoothly until they hit a bump in the form of a hostile, autocratic immigration agent. In the course of one horrifying interview,

Juan was told that that Immigration had the power to deny his citizenship application and deport him permanently without recourse. Thank goodness that didn't happen. Saner heads prevailed, and Juan's application for citizenship was approved within a month. Today he is extremely proud to be a U.S. citizen. But for days before the good news came through, Juan and Amy were terrified that by some horrible fluke of the process, Juan might end up getting deported with no chance of coming back to the U.S., ever. They didn't know what they would do if that happened, and I am so glad they weren't forced to make a choice.

But many families are not so lucky. Our government does indeed have the power to separate families, to tear non-citizen parents away from their U.S.-born children, in many cases with no recourse whatsoever. Luckily my family's story ended well, but many undocumented immigrants threatened with deportation are faced with a heart-rending dilemma: do they bring their U.S.-born children to their own country of origin—a foreign country to their children—depriving them of all the advantages they had hoped to give them by coming to the U.S., or do they leave their children behind in the U.S. and accept the heartbreak of a permanent separation? And you should know: this is not just a few families here and there. A new report, from which the first reading came this morning, estimates that in the last ten years, literally hundreds of thousands of families have been affected.¹

So what would you do?
Can you imagine?

In the ancient story of the Judgment of Solomon,²

¹ James D. Kremer, Kathleen A. Moccio, and Joseph W. Hammell, *Severing a Lifeline: The Neglect of Citizen Children in America's Immigration Enforcement Policy* (Dorsey & Whitney LLP, 2009), p. 2.

two women both say they are the true mother of a young child.
Solomon says to them both:
Cut the child in half and give half to one woman, half to the other.
The false mother accepts this, while the real mother cries out,
“No, don’t kill my child—give him to her instead.”
In the story, Solomon praises the real mother
and gives her back her child.
But our government is not King Solomon,
and no reward awaits the sacrificial choice of deported parents
who leave their children behind—
just the pain of separation and the knowledge that they are doing
the best they can to give their child a better future.

If your heart goes out to these mothers and fathers and children,
I urge you to do two things.
One is something I believe is really important,
something that we as a congregation can do much better
than our government can:
Come with me while I do some theology
about immigration and national borders, and about what it means to
be born in a particular place.
This may sound a little strange—why theology?
But I believe *theology* is extremely important. It’s what underlies
all our social policies, all our thinking about how things should be
in our country and in the world.

Let me remind you what I mean by theology.
It’s a Greek word that literally means “speaking about the Gods”:
logy is “speaking” or “studying,” as in eulogy, or biology, or cardiology;
theo means “about the Gods,” as in monotheism or atheism.
But in the liberal religious tradition, of which this church is a part,
when we talk about theology,
it isn’t limited to that old question of whether God exists.
When we in this tradition say “theology,”

² 1 Kings 3:16–28.

we're talking about all the ways we as human beings
try to answer the really big questions:
questions like,
How did we come to be here? Where do we go when we die?
How are we connected to the rest of the universe?
And what should our society be like?
How are we supposed to live with other people and other beings?

Our society—any society—makes a law because collectively
we think it's a good idea.

The *why* we think it's a good idea—*that's* theology,
the way we make sense of the world.

When we talk about immigration, there are always theological
questions lurking just under the surface of our usual arguments.

Here are some:

Is it moral to exclude people from this country?

Is it moral for a country to defend its borders,
and if it is, *why* is it moral?

Is it ever right for a group to band together
and keep out others who “don't belong”?

Let's think about this.

The fact is, whether it's right or not,
every human society that I know of does this,
And it's not just a human thing.

Wolves and polar bears defend their territory; birds do; insects do too.

Animal behaviorists tell us

animals tend to defend the resources they need to live
when those resources are scarce.³

Probably most of us would agree territoriality in animals
isn't immoral or wrong; it's just instinct;

it's just the life-force in them rising up to protect its own existence.

Well, we human beings are animals too.

³ Animal Behavior Society, “Crickets and Territory Defense,” online at
<http://www.animalbehavior.org/ABSEducation/laboratory-exercises-in-animal-behavior/laboratory-exercises-in-animal-behavior-crickets-and-territory-defense>.

The life-force is strong in us too.
There is something very basic and deep
about the urge to protect our lives.

And, bringing us back to immigration,
I think any theology of national borders has to give some due
to what I would call the divinely given urge of all beings to live—
and that includes people.
We have a deep-seated fear that letting other people onto our turf
will mean less for us—maybe so much less that we'll die!
The truth is that immigrants actually contribute far more to our
economy than they receive. Study after study shows this.
But some people still have that instinctive fear
that letting people into their country will mean less for *them*.
Even in the wealthiest country in the history of the world,
that fear of scarcity can get so strong,
it can even override our wish
for families to stay together and be happy and strong.
That fear sits deep inside us. We didn't choose it; we're born that way.

And yet, for thousands of years,
religious people and moral philosophers have been saying,
just because we have an instinct to do something,
doesn't mean it's right.
People are gifted with the power to examine our fears
and think before we act.
We have the power to think about how others are going to be affected
by what we do.
We have the power to make moral choices.
Simply saying it's our human instinct to defend our borders
is not going to fly as a moral argument.
One day when I was in elementary school, I instinctively pulled a chair
out from under a kid who wouldn't get out of my seat.
That doesn't mean it was a *good* instinct!

Our country has been driven far more by unconscious fears of scarcity

than by generosity and compassion,
or even plain old economic reality!
I do believe everybody has the right to protect their own life.
But, when it comes to immigration, I believe we have
a moral obligation to examine our fears—
to remind ourselves of how much we in this country really do have,
and to remember *every* person wants to live without fear of scarcity.

We might do well to remember the words of a fellow heretic,
the English reformer John Bradford.
He's the one who said, "There but for the grace of God go I."
Those of us who were born in this country
can hardly help asking ourselves, why was I so lucky?
Why was I born here and not in North Korea or Darfur?
We know that people all over the world,
and indeed within this country,
are born into very different circumstances.
And we can't help but question, *why* is this so?
To speak very personally,
why was I born into a wealthy family here in the U.S.
while my brother-in-law was born into a poor family in Venezuela?
Why is anyone born into the circumstances we are?
Is it chance? Is it some kind of divine plan?
We can't know for sure, though I often wonder.
This is a mystery that we will never solve in this lifetime.

The one idea I *can't* accept
is the idea that seems to underlie our current immigration policy—
the idea that those of us born into wealth and comfort
were born with some special merit, some inherent right to live a life
that's safer and easier and better than someone else's.
Just saying that idea out loud makes me feel awful inside.
I can't give you any scientific proof that it's false,
but along with the founders of this country
I hold this truth to be self-evident, that all people are created equal.
In spite of their failures and, no doubt, my own,

I still hold on to that vision.

And more than that, my theology tells me
that everybody all around the world is connected.
I believe we are one human family across all the borders that divide us.
So why should any one group of us
have the right to hoard all the good stuff for ourselves?
If our brothers and sisters are in need of food to eat
and education to feed their minds, and work to support their families,
and we have those things in our country and they don't,
can it really be right for us to tell them, "Too bad and keep out!"?
I can't believe that's right.
I believe everyone in the world
has just as much right to the stuff we need to live as anyone else.

I also know we can't do everything and we can't save everybody.
But, as a nation, the very least we can do
is to care for the people who are here,
the people within our borders right now.
For hundreds of years,
tradition and law have divided people up into countries,
each country taking responsibility to care for its own people,
at least in theory.
Of course, sometimes the reality is pretty far from the theory,
and too many of our brothers and sisters are trapped
under governments that abuse and exploit them.
I don't believe our system of countries is a perfect
or a divinely ordained system.
I still hold out the hope that one day human beings will create
a system of government that brings all people together
in a spirit of justice and mutual love.

But that is not the reality today.
And we have to work with what we've got.
So is it too much to ask that, at the very least,
we in this country care for the people who are here now?

Is it too much to ask that children who were born here, accepted as U.S. citizens in every way, though their parents are not should get to stay here in the only home they know with their parents here to love and protect them?

This is very personal for me.

As some of you know, my niece was born with a heart defect. If her dad had had to leave the U.S., there's no way he and my sister would have taken her to live in a country where she couldn't get the medical care she needs to stay healthy.

In all likelihood, they would have made the sacrifice to split up their family so that Grace could grow up safe. But what a choice!

And even that is a choice some families don't have.

Four years ago, Maria Roa gave birth to a little girl named Hazelle. Maria and her husband Victor were both undocumented immigrants living in San Francisco. And Hazelle was born with a heart defect too. At seventeen months, Hazelle had a heart surgery at UC San Francisco to enlarge one of her arteries and save her life.

The doctors told her parents she would need specialized medical care for the rest of her life.

Meanwhile, U.S. immigration officials told her parents to report for deportation two weeks after the surgery date.

At the last minute they were granted a one-year reprieve.⁴

But what happens after that?

Will both those parents have to leave their daughter behind?

Who would take care of her?

I've been trying to find out what's happening with this family right now. I haven't been able to yet. I'm sorry about that—but I wanted to share as much of their story as I knew because it shows so clearly the craziness of our current system.

⁴ Amr Emam, "Ailing Toddler's Parents Get Deportation Reprieve," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 13, 2007, online at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/13/BAGTDQVMMG1.DTL&type=health>.

So, on behalf of all the families who are in danger of being torn apart by our immigration laws,
I ask you to do one more thing this week.
If your heart is touched by these families,
let us speak up together in their defense.
If you turn to your order of service, you'll find there
a postcard that you can take home to sign and mail,
in support of a really good piece of legislation that has been stalled out
in our House of Representatives: the Child Citizen Protection Act.
This would give immigration judges
the power to stop immigrant parents from being deported
when it's in the best interest of their U.S.-born children.

The postcard was created by an immigrant organization
called Families for Freedom,⁵
made up of people who have intimate knowledge
of the fear of deportation.
On behalf of my family and Hazelle Roa's family
and all the families suffering from our immigration policies,
I ask you to please consider taking this one simple step
and sending this postcard.

We can't do everything and we can't save everybody.
But on this Mother's Day, let us do what we *can* do
to build a land where all families are free to stay together,
where the spirit of compassion overcomes all fear,
where the oil of gladness dissolves all mourning.
Let us build that land—our land—together.

So may it be.
Amen.

⁵ <http://www.familiesforfreedom.org/>.