

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Deuteronomy 24:17-22
Issues the Church Should be Concerned About – Aliens
June 1, 2008

Deuteronomy 24: 17 You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. 18 Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. 19 When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. 20 When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 22 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

NRS Hebrews 13:1 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

For the past five or so weeks, I have been sharing with you a series of messages, on issues the church should be concerned about. We have considered what the Bible and our faith has to say about caring for creation, poverty, materialism, and last week we focused on race. Today, we are going to delve into alien territory. Who knew that one day I would be preaching a sermon about aliens, let alone, identifying it as one of the important issues that should concern the church?

I should qualify this topic by stating that I am not speaking of the extra-terrestrial kind. By alien, I am referring to that somewhat quaint Biblical term, that has a contemporary understanding of the immigrant, the migrant, the refugee, or the stranger among us.

Let me further qualify this message, by assuring you that I have little desire to address public policy, or the politics behind what is loosely called, “immigration issues.” Because I am by no means well read on the political dynamic of the subject, I will not be talking about walls, whether in Berlin, along the Gaza Strip, or on the Texas border. Suffice it to say, that every nation, every sovereign state, has immigration issues.

The subject of immigration is contextual. It means one thing among the carpet mills of Dalton, Georgia, and quite another along the borders of New Mexico or California. The farmlands of South Georgia are impacted by immigrant labor, as well as the construction jobs dotting metro Atlanta.

It is not that I think that public policy regarding immigration is unimportant. I do not wish, however, to skate on the thin ice of politicizing an important Biblical issue. Like Martin Luther, five centuries ago, all I can do is offer as a standing point, how the Bible’s reason and conviction captivates us. We need to reflect on this Biblically and theologically, before we venture into fickle fields of polarized political assumptions that are too often based on fear and insecurity.

The immigration issues of our day, in this country as well as around the world, are of great importance in the Biblical witness. But before turning to the scriptures, let us remember that our own nation is a country of immigrants. All of us here came from somewhere else, either by choice or force, unless of course, we are American Indians. My people came from France and England sometime in the 18th or early 19th century. Somebody, somewhere, provided enough of a welcome, so that I could be here today. We were all, on some level, aliens looking for a home.

Here are four things we should know as we consider the issue of immigration.
First, all people are created in the image of God.

In Genesis 1:27 we read: *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

Who does Jesus look like to you? A doe-eyed brunette, with soft features and pale skin? Or, does he look like the image my high school art teacher depicted in a mural in his church – an ebony skin young man with a wiry afro? We all know that Jesus was Middle-Eastern, but chances are, we imagine him looking much like us. And that is okay, for we are created in his image. But our image is not the exclusive image or THE image.

Regardless of national origin, all are made in the “Image of God” and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. In God’s eyes there are no Mexicans, Cubans, Canadians, Israelis, Serbs, Irish, Scottish, Romany or any other national demarcation we may wish to give. We are all children of God created in God’s image.

Secondly, there is a responsibility to love and show compassion for the stranger among us.

In the Old Testament, an alien was simply a foreigner, a sojourner, someone who was either passing through or settling in, but was someone who was from somewhere else.

Father Abraham of Genesis, for example, is described as an alien, living in places such as Egypt and throughout the ancient Palestinian region. He and his wife Sarah lived as aliens, died as aliens, and were buried on foreign soil. Elsewhere in the Bible we read of the Bible’s direction about the treatment of aliens. It was for the Hebrews, a holy duty.

We have already heard from an account in Deuteronomy, but there are many other important passages as well. In Leviticus, starting with chapter 17 and running through chapter 26, we have instructions from God to the Hebrew people on how to live holy lives. This “holiness code” as scholars call it, is concerned with what to eat, what to wear, and how to worship, in order to be a holy people. Much of this is archaic for our ears. For example, as Christians we really do not care about laws governing sacrifices of goats or lambs, or the fact that in Leviticus there is a commandment against wearing fabric woven of two kinds of material. We pretty much ignore the law against cutting the hair at the sides of ones face or cropping off the edges of our beard (assuming you have one in the first place).

But the spiritual truth of Leviticus is timeless. The Holiness code is concerned with setting ourselves apart (to be holy) for the purpose to honor God. The “Holiness Code” of Leviticus 17-26 was concerned with not just how we treat God, but how we treat each other.

Hospitality for God’s people, is more than just good manners. “Hospitality was seen as a *holy duty*.” (Juengst, 1992) The first five books of the Bible are saturated with how to relate with the alien, because this holy duty was and is a reflection on the character of God.

Thirdly, immigrants are our neighbors.

As a neighbor, both literally and figuratively, we have a responsibility according to Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves and show mercy. Last week we touched on this when I referred to the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

In Leviticus, we are guided with the words: *"The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."* (Leviticus 19:34)

Fourthly, work towards justice for the stranger.

This means that we should respect the laws of the land. In Romans 13:1 Paul writes: *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.*

This also means, however, that we, the followers of Jesus, must work for laws and systems that will uphold justice and protect the oppressed and vulnerable.

In Jeremiah 7 the prophet proclaims: *4 Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" 5 If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever.* How we treat our neighbors, according to scripture, has a direct implication of God's protective guidance. And then there is Isaiah who says: *1 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, 2 to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. 3 What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? (10:1-3)*

Just as I shared with you four considerations regarding aliens, here are four things we can do.

Recognize – Recognize the stranger.

In our society we tend to portray the strangers as bad guys. Even I – like most all of you – warn my own children to watch out for strangers, etc. Strangers are laden with risks. Yet, the Bible reminds us over and over to recognize the strangers all around us. We are called to love them. What is even more telling, is that in the domain of God, there are to be no strangers among us.

Do you know your neighbor? We have homes immediately surrounding our home. I can only name a few of our neighbors. And out of those homes I rarely see them at all. Two others I see occasionally and sometimes can slip in a wave. One neighbor I never see.

Who are the strangers among us? A colleague working next to your own cubicle? The girl working the counter at *Starbucks*? Someone cutting their lawn just across the street? Notice...recognized.

Remember – Remember when you were a stranger.

Throughout its existence, Israel was reminded of two things: 1) You were once strangers in a strange land (aliens), and 2) therefore welcome the strangers among you.

“God chose the Hebrews to become the people of God so that they could be a light to the nations and a witness to the world...What God had in mind was a people who reflected God's character.” (Mark Price)

The kingdom of God is not for the *insiders* but the *outsiders*. God is throwing a party and there are going to be some surprises. The early church was never the established church. It started out as a “God Movement” (to use a phrase by Clarence Jordan) populated by outsiders. They originally were outsiders of the Jewish community and religious establishment.

This has an important theological dimension. At one time or another, we have all been a stranger to God. That is we have lived lives of separation. God was something we may have talked about, maybe even studied about or even prayed to on occasion. But in our very hearts we were strangers. When we bear the name Christ and call ourselves a Christian, we are no longer estranged.

Respond – Respond to the stranger.

Who sets the table at your house? How is it done? Formally or informally? There are a number of places you can eat: the dining room, the kitchen, around a quilt spread out in the park, during one's lunch hour at the office. There is something about a meal that brings people together.

What we as God's community are doing is setting a table for ourselves and others. Two weeks ago Kelly and I were invited to eat and be entertained by the students of the English school who represented nearly thirty different language groups. It was a time of shared thanksgiving for the welcome provided by this church.

As partakers of the table we also have the responsibility of inviting others to join us at the table. "You give them something to eat..." (Matthew 14:16)

Let us ask of ourselves and of this church, what are the needs of the strangers, the immigrants, the aliens around us, and how can we respond?

Receive – Receive from the stranger.

Luke 24 is a wonderful story of two friends traveling back home to Emmaus from Jerusalem. They were typically preoccupied in their conversation and did not notice at first a stranger who joined them in their walk. As they welcomed the stranger he soon joined them not only in their journey, but in their conversation as well. In fact, this stranger even was invited to sit at the table with them. And while they were breaking bread for the meal, it was there that these two friends recognized who the stranger was – Jesus.

Matthew 25:35

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

Hebrews 13:2

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Today, following the last morning church service, we will go out to eat at one of our favorite restaurants in Grovetown. It is Mexican owned, operated and run. They will serve us our food, clean up our mess and send us on our way filled.

It is not just what can we provide for the other. It is about how Christ wants to serve us through another. May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to receive those around us as the very presence of Christ. Think how this light will change the world!