

Leaning in to the messy / Love your neighbor

6.4: The Immigrants

February 28, 2016

Have you ever believed something to be true – you were absolutely convinced you were right – and then later discovered you were wrong? Or have you ever done something – something you were convinced was the right thing to do – and then discovered later it probably wasn't? Of course you have! We've all been there, we've all done it.

The problem is, sometimes we double down. Sometimes we refuse to admit to ourselves we were wrong. We get stubborn, defensive. We rationalize. We look for ways to justify our ... stupidity. Sometimes we even convince ourselves that we were right, no matter what anyone else thinks ... not even God.

Now, my preaching partner, Randy, told me that this would be the hardest of these "love your neighbor" sermons to preach. Because I'm going to dip into things some people won't bend on. Their minds are made up. Their rationalizations are very refined. They won't even be moved by what God says. I hope Randy is wrong, at least about those in this church family.

You see, Jesus said there were two greatest commandments. #1: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. That's the big one. And #2: Love your neighbor as yourself. And even though it is number 2, Jesus says it is equally important to God. What Jesus means is this: you can't love God without loving your neighbor.

So we've been lasering in on four groups of neighbors that God tells us to pay special attention to. God says, "Don't miss these." One guy calls these the quartet of the vulnerable. Over, and over, and over again God tells us to watch out for the poor, for the widows, for the orphans ... And those three don't give us much trouble. Usually we can understand, we can accept God's mandate to love on the poor, and the widows, and the orphans. We get that.

But the last group ... is different. Sometimes we push back pretty hard on this one. You see, the last group in the quartet of the vulnerable is the immigrants. God says, "You be there for immigrants, you protect

immigrants, you love on immigrants.” He says, “They have a special place in my heart, so you make a special place for them in yours.” And sometimes people push back on this one. They’re thinking, “I don’t know ... I don’t think so.” Because they are outsiders; because they are not one of us, they are not one of ours; and because sometimes they look different, and they think different, and they talk different, and they act different, than we do.

Now ... I am going to make an assumption this morning, a connection that will make it even harder for people. You see, I think that what God says about our attitudes towards immigrants also applies to our attitudes on race. I think the verses we’re going to study this morning apply directly to racism too. I think when God tells us to watch out for immigrants, I think that includes guarding against racism. So I’m going to go back and forth this morning. I’m going to be talking about our attitudes towards immigrants, and our racism, because the two are connected, and the biblical principles we’re going to unpack apply to both.

And both are really big deals, right now. Both of these issues are pretty much front page news right now, don’t you think? If you follow politics at all, you know that immigration is one of the big two or three issues dividing our country. Should we let them in? Which ones? Should we build a wall? Can we get Mexico to pay for it? Should we round them up and deport them? Should there be a path to citizenship? Should they be able to vote? Should they have to adopt our language, and our values, and honor our laws, first? What’s really awkward is that we Jesus followers – Jesus followers! -- have the reputation of being the most anti-immigrant!

And the racism issue ... Well it’s getting worse, guys. You may disagree, but most Americans think racial tensions are getting way worse. In 2009, a New York Times / CBS News poll found that 66% of us Americans thought race relations in the US were generally pretty good. 2/3 of us thought we were doing okay, things were getting better. 6 years later – 2015 – that number dropped by half, to 37%. In other words, now 2/3 of us think things are not going so well – race relations are getting worse. That’s incredible. And it has even reached into our church. I’ve been asked twice by blacks in our church family: “Are we wanted here? Are we safe here?” Now, what would you want me to say? Way more important, what do you think God would want me to say?

So last week when we were talking about this stuff, Randy said to me, “It’s not going to matter much what you say. It’s not going to matter much what you show them from the Bible.” He said, “If your people are deeply prejudiced towards the immigrants, or if they are deeply racist, nothing you say – in fact, nothing God says – will change their minds.” You buy that? I hope not.

But, you see, Randy was teaching a class one time, and he read a verse or two from the Bible. And one of his ladies was honest enough and bold enough to challenge him. She says, “I don’t believe that!” Randy said, “Well, that wasn’t me talking, I just read you God’s word.” And she says, “Well I don’t care, I don’t believe it.” And she was a Jesus follower! Now her honesty is kind of refreshing. Because the truth is, a lot of Jesus followers really don’t care what God says when they disagree with him, they just won’t admit it.

But here’s the deal, guys: We are Jesus “followers” – we are “followers.” That means we try to do it God’s way even when we don’t understand him, and even when we don’t agree with him. We are Jesus “followers.” And the bottom line is this: Jesus followers trust that God is smarter than we are, and that God’s way is better than our way, even when we don’t understand him yet. You see, I’m pretty sure that when I disagree with God (which I do sometimes), I’m pretty sure that when I disagree with God someday I’ll discover “Oh! I see now where I was wrong, and why he was right, after all.” Because I trust him more than I trust me. Do you?

Okay? Here goes. Now I’m going to follow a thread through the Bible. These verses will be kind of like puzzle pieces. By themselves, they are pretty powerful. Pull them all together, and they are overwhelming. These verses will show us God’s heart, and they will point us towards the path he wants us on.

We’re going to start at the very beginning: Genesis 1. On the 6th day of creation God creates Adam and Eve. By the way, what color do you think they were? I know, you’ve seen the pictures – they were white, like me, right? Seriously, what color do you think they were? If Adam and Eve sent their DNA samples to Ancestry.com, what ethnicities would they discover, what race do you think they’d be? As to their color ... I don’t

know. Although from what I understand some geneticists figure they were probably “mid brown.” Okay. What race do you think they’d be? I’m pretty sure the right answer is: human ... they were pretty much, 100% human race. Since every ethnicity can be traced back in some way to Adam and Eve.

But this is the most important piece from Genesis 1. It says, “So God created human beings (the human race, all of us) ... in his own image. In the image of God ... he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1.27) Guys, what sets us humans apart is that we were created somehow in the image of God. That’s huge! Let me tell you what that means. Look at the person sitting in front of you: that person bears the image of God ... male, female, young, old, black, white, doesn’t matter: image of God. Do you buy that? There is no person in this room who does not bear the image of God. Now, some of us cover it up pretty well, but if you are a son of Adam, or a daughter of Eve, you bear the image of God, which makes you ... special, to God, and to us God-followers. That’s puzzle piece #1: Every human bears the image of God – including every immigrant, and every person who is not your color.

Piece 2: God tells Israel over, and over, and over again: You guys watch out for the immigrants, because don’t forget, you’ve been there too. I want to show you some verses that are just powerful.

- This is Moses, speaking for God. He says, “You must not mistreat or oppress foreigners in any way. Remember, you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22.21) Guys, this wasn’t a suggestion, this was a “must” for God-followers.
- Here’s Moses again. I read the first part of these verses to you last week. He says, “For the Lord your God is the God of gods and Lord of lords. He is the great God, the mighty and awesome God, who shows no partiality and cannot be bribed.” That’s just powerful. That means, when God speaks we listen. Then he says, “He ensures that orphans and widows receive justice.” That’s the part I read last week. But he keeps going: “He shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10.17-19) Same big idea: you

watch out for the immigrants, because don't forget, you've been there too.

- You'll find the same idea in the Psalms. It says, "The Lord protects the foreigners among us. (Do you think he still does? It says,) He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked." (Psalm 146.9) And I suspect here the wicked are those who don't protect, who don't care for the foreigners, and the orphans, and the widows. You see, this is a window into God's heart, and a clue to the kind of people he expects us to be, as God-followers.
- Here is God, speaking through Jeremiah the prophet. He says, "I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; (specifically, I will be merciful) only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows..." (Jeremiah 7.5-7)

Do you have any idea why God has this tender place in his heart for the immigrants? Wouldn't you admit that a lot of us have this built-in suspicion about those who don't look like us, or think like us, or talk like us, or act like us? We have those suspicions even though we know they still bear the image of God. And don't you suspect that God nearly always is drawn towards those who are marginalized, and vulnerable?

Guys, those verses should have been enough for Israel. If they obeyed their God, they should have had a tender heart for the immigrants, and zero tolerance for racism. But sometimes we God-followers don't listen too well; or, when we do hear, we just don't obey. By the time Jesus entered our world the Jews was as prejudiced as any other people in the world. They were terrible. If you didn't look like them, and think like them, and talk like them, and act like them, they pretty much considered you second, or third class. They had a disdain for, a contempt for, people like ... us. At least I'm assuming that just about everybody in this room would qualify as a Gentile. You see, to most Jews there were two kinds of people in the world: there were Jews, and there were those who were not Jews. And the notion that loving God requires loving Gentiles ... that was absurd ... despite what their Bible said.

And then along came Jesus ... puzzle piece #3. And Jesus took a chain saw to their prejudices.

- He scandalized his disciples by reaching out to an immoral Samaritan woman, one of the most despised of the most despised. In fact he made a Samaritan the hero of one of his greatest parables: we call it, The Good Samaritan.
- Then Jesus heals the servant of a Roman Centurion – not just a Gentile, but one of the oppressors of the Jews.
- And then Jesus called himself the good shepherd. He says, “I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. (He’s talking to Jews, about Gentiles. He’s talking about us. He says,) I must bring them also. (Aren’t you grateful? Here’s what he says, about us,) They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.” (John 10.16) – Jew and Gentile ... radical, revolutionary!
- And then to make it so, he went to the cross ... for whom? Guys, whose sins did Jesus die for on that cross? White sins? Black sins? Any other color? Mexican sins? Indian sins? Arab sins? The Bible says, “This is how God loved (what? ...) the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that (who? ... what color? ... immigrants too? ... so that) everyone who (soever) believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3.16)

And it took the Jesus followers a while to get it, but the Holy Spirit finally got through to them. Which brings us to Puzzle piece #4: When they got it, the early church began to look like something strangely beautiful, wonderfully weird. The apostle Paul put it like this. He says, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile (in this place), (there is no longer) slave or free, (there is no longer) male and female. For (here, in this family) you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3.28) Here, in this place, in this family, there is no longer black and white, and a plethora of colors in between. Here, in this place, in this family, there are no longer the privileged rich versus the marginalized poor ... you all matter. Here, in this place, in this family, it doesn’t matter whether you were born here, or whether you were born half-way around the world. In here, in Christ, what binds us together is way bigger than what makes us different. Do you buy that? It is God’s truth! Anything else is a damnable lie.

But there was something more the early Christians began to understand, something we sometimes forget. Do you remember how God told the Israelites to look after the immigrants, because once they were immigrants too? Well, the early Christians took it a step further. This is puzzle piece

#5. The early Christians said, “We still are ... immigrants. We are still resident aliens. We will always be strangers in this world.” We forget that sometimes, guys. This isn’t our home, at least the way it is now.

This is from the Apostle Peter. He was the one appointed by God to lead the earliest church. Peter says, “Dear friends (he’s talking to us; Dear friends), I warn you as “temporary residents and (I warn you as) foreigners” to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls.” (1 Peter 2.11) I like the way the Message puts it. It says, “Friends, this world is not your home (we are part of something way bigger than this), so don’t make yourselves (too) cozy in it. Don’t indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. (He says, this is pretty cool:) Live an exemplary life among the natives (those who are not Jesus followers, yet) so that your actions will refute their prejudices. (In other words, show them something different, something way better; show them how God meant it to be.) Then they’ll be won over to God’s side and (they will) be there to join in the celebration when he arrives.” (1 Peter 2.11-12)

Did you know that next week, in this water (baptistery), we’re going to see some people become aliens, like us? When they die to the old, are rise up to something way, way better ... like most of us did, once.

One last puzzle piece, piece #6. This is so cool! The apostle John has a vision of heaven. And he sees something what someday every Jesus follower will see. He says, “I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and (every) tribe and (every) people and (every) language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. (How many colors did John see? How many ethnicities? How many languages did he hear? He says,) They were (all) clothed in white robes and (they all) held palm branches in their hands.” (Revelation 7.9) Guys, that’s where we are headed. It would be despicable for us to aspire to anything less here.

Now I know that there are some who try to find proof texts to support their racism. There are verses they twist in the Old Testament. There are verses they mangle in the New. But guys, this thread is irrefutable. This is God’s heart. This is who we are, and what we stand for.

They still call Sunday morning the most segregated hour in America, unfortunately. And we have a ways to go, here at Capital City, to prove

them wrong. But when I look around the room on a Sunday morning, I am proud of how far we've come. We used to be nearly completely white. Now we have a number of bi-racial couples, some black families, some Hispanics, some Indians. We have several children our families have adopted from around the world. We have a number of internationals who have made Capital City their home. Guys, does that matter? Does that matter to you? To be honest, we could probably grow more quickly if we didn't care about such things. It's more efficient to select a single demographic and throw all your energy there. But I don't think it's more Christian. I don't want to grow something here at Capital City that does not reflect God's heart.

Jesus meant for his church to be a magical place, where people who are very different love on each other. Grandparents and grandchildren worshiping side by side, the rich and powerful worshiping side by side with the poorer and less powerful (on the world's terms). Black and white, rednecks and immigrants, the messy and the not so messy, bound together by something far more powerful than politics, or passions, or even blood. We are Jesus followers, we are God lovers, and that knits us together into something incredibly special, and eternally enduring.

So what does God want us to do? Now I am going to make one suggestion that doesn't come from the Bible. We've got a real issue right now in our country. We have some God-honoring people who think our government needs to reign in illegal immigration. And there are other God-honoring people who think that erecting walls would be a violation of who we are and what we stand for. I don't know. I've got my opinions, and you have yours. Just let me suggest this: a government has a God-given responsibility to protect its people. And a church has a God-given responsibility to love on all God's people. I think a God-honoring government can protect its borders. And I think a church like Capital City has to love on anyone who wants to pursue God here. Any walls here, any rejection here, any discrimination here, or anywhere else by Jesus followers is out of line. Do you buy that?

So what does God want us to do? Well, first, he wants us to call sin "sin." Any time "we" push away an immigrant, any time we detect racism in ourselves, or in our Christian brothers and sisters, we call it "sin." It's a violation of the two great commandments: love God with all you heart,

soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor (every neighbor) as yourself. And it's a violation of the great commission. Right before Jesus went back to the Father, he left us with these marching orders. He said, "In my name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to (whom? ... to) all nations." (Luke 24.47) We can't get that done if we're not willing to lean in to the immigrants, and if we are not willing to challenge every vestige of racism we find in ourselves or in our family.

So what does God want us to do? Second, we can live differently. We can treat every person -- no matter what their ethnicity, no matter where they're from, no matter how strange they seem to us -- we can treat every person with dignity, and respect. Just recognize that that person bears the image of God, and they are precious to our Father. Treat that guy as God's son; treat that girl as God's daughter ... because they are.

And what does God want us to do? Third, we can build a different kind of church. The apostle Paul said, about us: "In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew (black or white), (there can be no division between) slave and free (poor or rich), (there can be no division between) male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ." (Galatians 3.28) Guys, let's prove it to be so in this place.