

Define American

Rev. Barbara Prose
Assistant Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church
Delivered February 28, 2012

When a University of CA professor was stopped by police officers in the middle of night, on his way back home from hanging an art exhibit, he started to realize it was more than a casual pull-over when there was no talk of speeding, and his headlights were both working. But he started getting really nervous when the two officers asked, "What race are you?"

"I thought fast," he said, "Looked them straight in the eye," and said, "The human race, sirs. The human race."

Arkansas has the 4th fastest growing immigrant population in the country, the fastest growing Hispanic population in the country between 2000 and 2005. About half of the immigrants here are undocumented. Most have come to work.

The face of America is changing. The face of Arkansas is changing too. Our statewide association of congregations has taken a stand on immigration as a moral issue and General Assembly will be held in Phoenix, Arizona this June. But it's one thing for other people to tell you something matters, and another thing completely to find within yourself, the place you stand on an issue.

Immigration matters to me for several reasons. I am a first generation American on my mother's side and barely a third generation American on my father's side. Because the arrival of both sides of my family is so recent, I never forget that I am came here from somewhere else.

I studied and trained to be a midwife in El Paso, Texas, and will never forget watching helicopters herd people from the sky, chasing them in circles, into metal cages, like animals. I will never forget transporting a woman who was hemorrhaging to a U.S. hospital, being denied care, and having to drive over the border into Mexico, to find a clinic for a life-saving Cesarean section.

And I am first of all, a human being. Without studying the intricacies of quotas, amnesty, and refugee status regulations, the history of race laws, or the impact of NAFTA on the Mexican economy, it is clear that immigrants, are people. People first, with inherent human rights, then citizens.

Here's the story of one immigrant then, of one man. You may have heard of him. His name is Jose Antonio Vargas.

He was born in the Philippines. At 12, his mom sent him to live in the United States, so he could have a better life. Jose came to California to live with his grandparents. He learned English by watching Frasier. He won the spelling bee in 8th grade by spelling the word, indefatigable.

He fell in love with journalism in high school, worked for the local paper, and got a job with the Washington Post after graduation. He covered the 2008 Presidential elections - interviewed Al Gore, rode in Hilary Clinton's plane, and went pheasant hunting with Mike Huckabee. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Virginia Tech massacre.

Go back a few years.....when he was sixteen he went to the DMV to get his driver's license. The woman at the counter took his green card, turned it over, and told him, "This is a fake. Don't ever come back here with this again."

Jose went home that day and told his grandfather what had happened. That was the day Jose realized he was an undocumented immigrant. The day he realized he was what some people call, "illegal."

The first person he told was his choir director who was planning a choir trip to Japan. Jose told her he wouldn't be able to go because his family couldn't afford it. She said they'd make it work somehow. That's when Jose decided to tell her the truth. "It's not about the money," he said. "I don't have the right passport. I'm not supposed to be here."

So Miss Denney changed the choir trip destination from Japan to Hawaii. She said, "Jose is enthusiastic, he comes to class. My job is to help make better citizens of the world. Not to know what papers kids have, or don't."

Jose calls Miss Denney, and his high school principal, and the school superintendent, the beginning of his own personal underground railroad. He "came out" to the world last year and has started an on-line conversation about what it means to be an American. Jose's definition of an American is "Anyone who works hard. Who's proud of his country and wants to contribute. Who's not a burden on anyone." "I'm an American," he says. (www.defineamerican.com)

Is he or isn't he? And who gets to decide?

It helps me at this point, to remember, that defining citizenship, deciding who is allowed to be a citizen of the United States of America, has always been and continues to be fluid. For example, in 1790, naturalization was reserved for free white persons with at least two years residence. Did that include women? No!

In 1857, in the Dred Scott decision, our country decided no people of African descent could ever be citizens, whether slave or free. In 1882, we passed a law prohibiting Chinese people from becoming citizens in the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1940, Native Americans were granted birthright citizenship.

So we see, Mr. Vargas, is in a long line of people: women, African Americans, Chinese people, and Native Americans, who lived here, worked here, raised their families here, and were denied citizenship. Would most of those people have said, "I'm an American?" Yes.

Each of us has a story. I am bi-national and bilingual. I have two passports, as does each of my daughters. We are citizens of France and America. My mother is French, but came to this country on the Ethiopian quota. To this day, my mother speaks with a strong accent. I watched my mother study for and pass her citizenship test when I was in high school. Her father was tortured by German soldiers during WWII and escaped from prison the day before he was to be executed. He was Catholic. My other grandfather is Jewish. His grandmother died on Ellis Island. His father, the rabbi, tried to bring everyone here safely, but Ida was sick, and they wouldn't let her in. The rest of the family, turn of the century immigrants from Lithuania, didn't have papers, but they were granted citizenship nevertheless. I am an American.

When I consider the history of citizenship in this country, I am struck by how often I take my citizenship, and the rights granted to me by this country of ours, for granted. It was not until 1952, that our laws changed to say that citizenship shall not be denied or abridged because of race or sex.

Our democracy is an experiment in government, for and by the people. And the gift of citizenship that I've been given demands that I educate myself about the issues, that I engage with my friends and neighbors in conversation and debate, that I vote, and that I encourage other people to vote. One great irony is that not unlike Mr. Vargas, among the people I know, some of the most actively engaged participants in our democratic process are new citizens. They have not yet become demoralized, disenchanted, or disillusioned with our system. To the contrary, they are grateful to be here and eager to make a better life and to make a difference.

Which makes me think of Isabel Castillo. Isabel was brought to this country from Mexico by her parents when she was 6 years old. They had jobs in the poultry industry in Virginia, and Harrisonburg is where Isabel started first grade.

Unlike Jose, Isabel's high school teachers and staff didn't have much experience being a personal underground railroad and so when all the scholarship books in the college counselor's office said, "Requirement: U.S. citizen or legal resident," she got a job as a waitress instead.

But Isabel, who had graduated with a 4.0, was determined, and eventually found a Mennonite University that accepted undocumented students. She graduated in 3 and ½ years with a degree in social work.

And found herself stuck again. In an interview with Amy Frykholm she says, “I wanted to give back to my community. I wanted to start life and my career in the real world. But I was not able to work legally. I had two options. One was to wait for laws to change. The other—as clichéd as it might sound—was to be the change that I wanted to see.”

Isabel went to D.C. for a DreamAct conference and came back to Harrisonburg to start organizing. Their first campaign was to pass a local resolution in favor of the DreamAct. They worked hard, and eventually, over 30 businesses and hundreds of individuals signed. At the final council meeting, the vote was a unanimous yes, in support of the DreamAct.

At that council meeting, Isabel kept her face away from the cameras. She didn’t want to put her family at risk. But since then, she has decided that the more public she is about her status, the safer she is, the safer her family is.

Isabel says, ‘I remember a point when I was depressed. Our parents risked so much for us, and you wonder if you can give back. You think, ‘I can't work; I can't go to school; I can't help my family.’ It is not a mistake, what my parents did. They risked everything, left everything behind, their culture, home and family. They did this for the sake of a better life for us. My parents are my heroes.

I told the governor of Virginia my story. At first, he acted impressed. He said, ‘Wow, a 4.0 in college,’ adding that more students like me were needed. Then I said, ‘But I am undocumented.’ The room got quiet. So I asked, ‘Would you support legislation like the Dream Act so that students like myself can have a future?’ He said, ‘No. That's like turning a blind eye to people who have broken the law.’ People applauded when he said that we have to round up every illegal immigrant and send them back to their home country.

Finally I just said, ‘I am an American. Virginia is my home.’”
(www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-02/out-shadows)

Many of us get stuck, just where the governor of Virginia is stuck. “But isn’t that true,” you may think. “Isn’t that like turning a blind eye to people who have broken the law?” I am, after all, a law-abiding person. The safety and security of our nation depends on respect for the rule of law.

Yes, and at times laws themselves are unjust, and we must have the moral clarity and resolve to change them. How do we know, beyond fact finding, beyond issue analysis and paralysis, when fundamental human rights are being denied rather than protected?

This is where it matters most to me that I am also a religious human being. Where I turn, not just to history, but to sacred texts, to be my guide. Where I turn to the words and deeds of prophets, past and present, to help me find my own inner moral compass.

The Hebrew and Christian scriptures are full of explicit teachings on how to treat the foreigner, the stranger, the exile, the alien. Which only makes sense, since Exodus, is a story about how God delivered the oppressed Hebrew immigrants, out of Egypt, to the Promised Land.

First, the Hebrews migrated to Egypt to escape famine. And there, as refugees, they became guest workers for several generations. They were enslaved by Pharaoh because their presence created a dilemma. As guest workers, they provided cheap, slave labor. But as their population steadily increased, they were perceived as a threat to the ruling class. Sound familiar?

But it's not just Exodus. You could read the whole story from Genesis to Revelation as one continuous story of Immigration, Emigration, and just plain Migration. You could read the whole story, as a history of refugees seeking political asylum, exiles seeking refuge, migrant laborers seeking work, and one tribe of people marrying with another, mixing and changing ethnicity, race and identity.

Think Moses, whose mother put him in a basket and set him afloat to cross the river, rescued by a woman in another land, who raises him as her own. Moses, who returns home only to be sent into exile to wander in the desert. Moses, who spends the rest of his life traveling with a band of migrant laborers, and dies before he can cross over a river again, into the land of promise.

Think Abraham and Sarah. They emigrated from Haran, were immigrants in Canaan, and traveled to Shechem, Hebron, and Bethel, where they lived as resident aliens.

Think Joseph, who is sold into slavery in Egypt. Who by his own wits, becomes so successful, he is made personal advisor and counselor to the Pharaoh. Joseph, who spends many years in detention, under arrest, then not only gains legal status, but is able to bring the rest of his family with him to his new homeland.

And when it comes to intermarriage and a mixed cultural heritage, think Jesus. Jesus, whose family tree includes Ruth the Moabite, Bathsheba the Hittite, and Tamar and Rahab the Canaanites – foreigners all.

Think Jesus, a political refugee from the persecution of Herod as an infant, who was granted asylum in Egypt.

Think the Good Samaritan, who takes care of one who is in need, in direct opposition to the mandate of current political status.

Think the prophet Isaiah who wrote, "Woe to the those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold

justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless" (10:1-2, NIV).

One story, with one moral, "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Lev. 19:34 NRSV) "There shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you." (Exod. 12:49. NRSV) "Such a person is granted the same rights and accepts the same responsibilities as the citizen." (Leviticus 17-22, NRSV)

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

Inherent in the governor of Virginia's position, is the assumption that our immigration laws and policies are just, fair, and worth following. But the Indian Removal Act of 1830 resulted in the Trail of tears. Under that law, 70,000 Native Americans were uprooted from their homes and their land at gunpoint. And about 4,000 Cherokees died on the forced march westward. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it a crime to help a slave. Both legal. As in the civil rights movement, sometimes, our own moral compass demands that we disobey the law and create new ones.

My family survived, indeed, I am alive today, because my grandmother disobeyed the law of the land, and did not line up in the streets when the order was proclaimed that all the Jews in Paris must wear a yellow star on their clothes.

For years, because of my mixed cultural and religious heritage, I was confused about my own identity. Even though I'm white enough not to provoke questions about my status as an American...it's not likely that a police officer would stop me and ask me for proof of status....when asked identity questions...questions of belonging, I would answer,

"I don't know. I'm first generation French Catholic on my mother's side and barely third generation Lithuanian Jew on my father's side. Does that make me an American?"

When I said that to my friend Kate Braestrup years ago, she paused and then asked me if I believed in the words of the Declaration of Independence. "Sure," I said. "Say them then," she came right back at me. And I did, as she joined with me, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Let's say them again together. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

"If you believe those words, then you're an American," she said, as my eyes filled with tears.

Today, I know I'm an American, not because of my passport and not because of where I was born. I know I'm an American because of what I believe, and what I give back.

What you believe about immigration matters.

“What will you do when a church choir member can't go on the choir trip because he doesn't have the right passport?”

What will you do when a graduating senior in your youth group doesn't qualify for in-state tuition because she isn't a citizen?

As we think about our undocumented neighbors, workers, colleagues, journalists, activists, may we remember where we came from and who made sacrifices to get us here.

As we remember where we came from and how we got here, may we be bold enough to welcome those who are still on the journey, opening our doors to the stranger, the alien, and the foreigner in our midst.

As we open our doors to those who are lost and wandering, because they still need to hide some part, any part of their identity, in order to survive, may we remember that each time one of us dares to tell the truth about who we are, it makes it easier for another person to step out of the shadows into the light.

Called by those who have come before us, our job is to recognize, honor and celebrate the complex nature of what it means to be an American and to make sure that no one who believes in freedom and is willing to work hard for justice, is denied their full civil and human rights.

This is a country founded upon principles of liberty and justice for ALL. Ours is a faith founded upon the principles of courage, connection and compassion FOR ALL. We decide together what it means to be an American, to take the “I” out of illegal, and treat all members of the human race, with dignity and respect.

May it be so. Amen.