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God is an Undocumented Border Crosser

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Immigration is one of the biggest civil and human rights issues of our time. Global migration patterns reveal today that one out of every 35 people around the world (200 million; larger than Brazil or the fifth largest nation in the world) live in a region other than their homeland, while one of every seven persons residing in the United States is foreign born. Today, the total immigrant population living in the United States equals 47 million persons and undocumented immigrants represent nearly 12 million among them. In this brief essay, I will focus on the humanity of immigrant newcomers to American society who are tolerated as menial workers, deprived of equality that contribute to the good of society and have importance in the Bible. I will also consider the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies that target the Latinx community.

In some instances, immigrants of color are welcomed, but far more often the American majority expresses rejection of them, especially newcomers from Latin America and the Caribbean. Latino/a newcomers to the country. Immigrants are part of our communities, they attend weekly religious services, send their kids to public and Catholic schools, garden homes in various and different communities, and construct buildings like the new ones going up on many university campuses. Categories such as legality and illegality, citizen and alien, too often cast no light on economic, political and environmental realities forcing people to migrate and they confuse human rights and social justice concerns. Until we cross the Jordan, I would like you to consider Jesus who started life as a refugee and whom the gospel of Matthew recognizes as a stranger pitching his tent among the least among us.

In the United States, one often hears the simplistic saying “we are a ‘nation of immigrants’;” however, this naive comment “conceals the nation's consistent history of tension

over who we collectively regard as "real American, and... who we allow into our community."¹ The statue of liberty standing tall in New York City's harbor and for long considered a light to immigrants includes the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Compassionate treatment of outsiders appears to have become a thing of the past, although the United States never treated newcomers equally. You may remember in U.S. history the debate over who belongs and who deserves rejection found expression in a number of threat discourses such as the German language threat, the Chinese and Japanese newcomer threat, the Catholic threat, and the southern and East European threat. Anthropologist Leo Chavez argues the immigrant threat view targeted each group and their children, generating "alarmist newspaper stories...anti-immigrant riots, restrictive immigration laws, forced internments, and acrimonious public debates over government policies."² Immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa now represent the majority of strangers to the United States, which has caused a racist and xenophobic anti-immigrant backlash in many communities.

One of the oldest strains in American politics has been the vilification and fear of new immigrants to the country; however, Donald Trump is the first U.S. president in modern political history to deliberately flame racism and xenophobia toward nonwhite immigrants. In contemporary history, what we do know is the anti-immigrant right is a broad coalition of groups, including politicians, lobbyists, and grass roots organizations. Their messages are simple, rhetorically compelling, and especially focused on exclusion of immigrants of color. They share the president's message: immigrants are not you! They are animals and an infestation! In August 2019, Patrick Crusius, a 21-year-old white male armed with an assault rifle opened fire

¹ Bill Hing, "Immigration Policy through a Historical Lens" retrieved February 2, 2009, from https://www.abanet.org/publiced/insights/vol7_2/pdfs/article1.pdf

² Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p.3

on shoppers in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, killing over 20 persons and injuring many others. In a recovered manifesto, the hateful shooter stated his murderous shooting spree intended to respond to “the invasion of Texas by Hispanics.”

Crusius used white supremacist terms to justify violence against Latinos, including white nationalist language to register his opposition to “race-mixing” and justify ethnic genocide to achieve racial purity. The white male domestic terrorist stated in his posted material that the New Zealand Mosque shooting and the Californian synagogue shooting were inspiration for his act of violence against Latinos in El Paso. Sadly, the” us-against-them” language about immigrants and the Latinx community that has been a defining feature of the Trump administration has violent consequences for ethically innocent people. What Trump calls an invasion is in fact a humanitarian crisis. The majority of migrants from Central America are families who are turning themselves in to Border Patrol officers to request asylum, but they are denied the right to petition, criminally charged and separated while in custody.

Trump’s attack on four congresswomen of color and the North Carolina rally chant of “send her back” was partly copied by Crusius’ manifesto that spoke in favor of the idea of sending immigrants of color and legal U.S. citizens born on foreign soil back. You recall, Trump started his 2016 election campaign calling Mexican immigrants rapists, declaring Haitians have AIDS, and Nigerian immigrants would never “go back to their huts” after seeing life in the United States. The president has consistently portrayed nonwhite migrants as security threats, invaders, animals, criminals and a plague to America. Most disgracefully, he railed against immigration from “shithole countries,” by which he meant Haiti, El Salvador, and African nations, and asked why the U.S. couldn’t admit more people from countries like Norway. Immigrants of color are in Trump’s

view racially inferior to Americans of European descent—a normalization of white supremacist views in political and legal life.

Racist and xenophobic organizations, politicians and conservative media commentators have normalized the view that immigrants of color, especially Latin American and Caribbean newcomers, are a drain on the economy, a national security risk, politically and culturally threatening. Conservative political analyst and former Senior advisor to Ford, Nixon and Reagan, Pat Buchanan is not surprisingly among those who believe the browning of America is perilous. Buchanan fears immigration from the Middle East because the majority of terrorism in his view is committed "by children of immigrants and immigrants themselves from Islamic countries." In his book "Suicide of a Superpower" Buchanan complains,

"... peoples of European descent from the steppes of Russia to the coast of California have begun to die out, as the Third World treks north to claim the estate. The last decade provided corroborating if not conclusive proof that we are in the Indian Summer of our civilization... *"[W]hite America is an endangered species..."*³

Buchanan, panic-stricken over the changing demographics of American society, is wrong. As I think about difference as the problem of the 21st century, I conclude that "honoring our distinctions, as peoples with a particular cultural heritage and individuals with particular gifts, is far different from the...construction of a vision of society based on group homogeneity that allows no disagreement or distinction within and can maintain itself only as a fortress against threatening 'enemies' from without."⁴

Instead of feeling threatened by the browning of America and retreating to the pretensions of ethnic superiority, we should hear the varied carols of America singing to make the nation a great democracy. Buchanan should remember these words written more than 100

³ Patrick Buchanan, *Suicide of a Super power*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), p. viii.

⁴ Franklyn H. Adler, "Antiracism, Difference and Xenologica. In *Cultural Values*, (Oct 99), 3/5

years ago by Walt Whitman, "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. These United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem."⁵ In America, having different views on how to address immigration to the nation should never be based on racism, hatred of nonwhite and Muslim humanity and violence.

The nearly 12 million undocumented from Latin America who are especially targeted by presidential dehumanizing rhetoric and policies come because life in their homeland has become impossible. Drug cartels and gangs terrorize their families; they cannot feed their children. Sadly, the normalization of white nationalist hate tossed about by politicians in high places results in hate crimes, social violence, and death. The current assault on Central American migrants to the United States, including an escalation of workplace and community raids, detentions and deportations, racial profiling, new surveillance systems, police abuse, family separation, caging of children, and dehumanizing discourse feeds hate crimes against Latinx migrants and citizens. In this kind of world, remember what Dr. Martin Luther King counselled: "the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be... The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists." Chris Wright reminds Euro-Americans that "Five hundred years ago, Europeans decided to migrate. En masse they exported themselves all over the world, sometimes conquering, sometimes colonizing, often both. They asked no permission and needed no visas. They just went and took and stayed—for centuries." He adds "it should at least generate some humility and less moral superiority in the way we try to talk about the issue, and pray into it."⁶

⁵ Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855 Edition*. New York: Dover Publications, Incorporated, 2007.

⁶ Chris Wright. "Response: Migration Through the Eyes of Faith." In *World & Report*. February 16, 2017. In IFES(International Fellowship of Evangelical Students) web site. <https://ifesworld.org/en/journal/response-migration-through-the-eyes-of-faith-revd-dr-chris-wright/>

European immigrants were mostly welcomed with food, medicine, showers and beds on Ellis island a century ago, but not too many citizens wish to meet today's mostly non-White newcomers, especially undocumented Latinos/as. Instead, today's non-white newcomers are met with military aircraft, border agents and vigilantes, all aiming to keep them out of the country. Of course, the 13 million new immigrants who came from southern, eastern and central Europe between 1846-1925 were considered inferior to White Nordic stock. Up until that point, people considered white generally hailed from England, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany and Scandinavian countries. Southern, eastern and central Europeans worked hard over time to "whitify" in America, as David R. Roediger documents in his book *Working Toward Whiteness*.⁷ In America's immigration history, newcomer groups—Irish, Italian, Southern and Eastern European—succeeded in "becoming American" (integration) by becoming White, which is not true for Black, Brown and Yellow newcomers who are told to "go back to where you came from" and treated like undeserving citizens.

Today, what is routinely ignored about the history of Latinx migration is that endemic violence and crime are a driving force, especially for Central Americans. Doctors Without Borders reports that in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador women and children are murdered with impunity, kidnappings and extortion are daily occurrences and non-state actors perpetuate insecurity, forcibly recruit individuals into their ranks, and use sexual violence as a tool of intimidation and control. In an ideal Mesoamerican world, there would be no migration—but migrants will tell you paradise was long ago lost; meanwhile, Christian duty on the southern border requires the church to declare good news by advocating a politics of crossing cultural and racial borders to humanize strangers and secure values that contribute to achieving a more perfect union.

⁷ Roediger, David. *Working Toward Whiteness*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.

For many years, the news has reported stories of a rising tide of immigrant newcomers, their trials and tribulations, and the widespread repression and hostility they face from restrictive policies and racist publics. Because it is the responsibility of the church to tell the truth, we should remind Christian citizens that historically targeting specific populations by saying they come from “filth,” referring to them as an “infestation,” or criminalizing their existence because of a belief that they are inherently violent or inferior only sets the stage for enslavement, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. When migrants of color are stripped of their humanity, xenophobic violence follows and more domestic terrorism driven by nativist ideas bloodies the American landscape.

In my conversation with migrants in detention centers, it is clear to me that the God who is close to human suffering, the God of the least of these, the God who waits for us, accepts us, receives us as a mother takes her children into her arms and comforts them, expects us to strive for a life together in which “there are no strangers and aliens, but...members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). Christ in strangers invites us now to welcome asylum seekers who carry to our shores the memory of the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the six Jesuits in El Salvador, their co-workers Julia and Celina, the four American churchwomen, and tens of thousands of Central Americans dead at the hands of military governments once supported by the United States, poverty and gang violence.

Trumpian piety holds that Jesus stands against the poor, strangers, asylum-seeking women and children, and loathed nonwhite human beings. Sadly, Trump's theological views, flamed by white nationalist ideas, have not provoked a widespread crisis of ethics in America's dominant culture churches. The nagging questions posed by Trump's southern border policy are not the ultimate concern of a mainline Christianity selfishly engaged in institutional survival.

There is subsequently widespread collusion of mainline denominations and associations like the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Association that acts like nothing nefarious is happening on the southern border, in American detention facilities and the White House. Hateful politicians, citizens and Christians annoyed by the U.S. Constitution need reminding: "Yahweh, who does what is right, is always on the side of the oppressed" (Psalm 103: 6).

Immigration is linked to the imperatives of a global capitalist system crossing borders into poor nations to unfold profit-driven strategies of development, while people who live in the punishing economic conditions created and fleeing gang violence are largely kept from migrating to find work and a better life. It is no surprise to see Central American migrants coming to make a border crossing since the United States has utilized the World Bank and the IMF to pursue a neoliberal agenda for decades in the region, which intensified poverty and violence and enriched corporations and banks. Instead of demonizing migrant newcomers or undocumented human beings who manage to cross borders in search of a better life, we should make connections between migration and global economic practices as well as admit newcomers make society a better place for all.

In contemporary America, the criminalization of undocumented Latinx migrants makes them vulnerable, deportable, subject to conditions of super-control, exploitation in labor markets and hyper-surveillance. The church's theological perspective should challenge the public discourse that constructs a hostile view of immigrants due to their complexion, limited English-speaking abilities, or cultural traditions. The campaigns blaming undocumented migrants for job losses, declining wages, crime, and public health crises, must be contested by facts. Blame-games targeting vulnerable migrants excuse state economic policy and the inequalities produced by global capitalist structures; clearly, the US population's reasons for feeling vulnerable needs

unmasking: downsizing, outsourcing, stagnant wages, labor union decline, military costs, the steady loss of medical and retirement benefits, and the ongoing transfer of capital to the wealthiest Americans.

The Trump administration's brutal immigration policy must be subjected to thoughtful analysis and denounced for its lack of human values; indeed, the policy of serving the interest of the super wealthy and the Trump vision of America predicated on a white representation of society as well as hiding behind a Wall from poor and suffering people should be repugnant to the people of God. The anti-immigrant ideology associated with our nation's zero-tolerance policy helps turn attention away from the crisis of global capitalism and the historically negative role played by the United States in Latin and Central American societies. In the face of Trump's sadistic immigration policy, let us remember the migrant Jesus who was born on the road, had nowhere to lay his head, lived each day in the shadow of death, called followers to serve those who are thirsty, hungry, ill and rejected. Christians who see Christ reflected in the face of strangers stand by the message that God the border crosser in the human flesh of Jesus Christ came into the world to comfort the despised, reject exclusionary practices, defend the poor, heal the sick, feed the hungry, love strangers, disclose the extravagant hospitality of God and save us from abusive powers.

For Christians, disquiet about immigration begins with reflection on scripture. Justice and compassion for the vulnerable is a persistent theme in the scriptural tradition. "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself...(Lev. 19-33-34). Psalm 103: 6 tells us, "Yahweh, who does what is right, is always on the side of the oppressed." Isaiah warns in 10: 1-2 "Woe to the legislators of infamous laws, to those who issue tyrannical

decrees, who refuse justice to the unfortunate and cheat the poor among my people of their rights, who make widows their prey, and rob the orphan.” Bringing justice to the poor is for the prophets a certain way to experience God, “He judged the cause of the poor and needy. . . Is not this to know me? says the Lord.” (Jer. 22:16). In the gospel narratives, the rich and powerful sit comfortably at their tables enjoying a good meal, have the choice places in the sanctuary, and spend their time judging others; meanwhile, the poor, the vulnerable, the uprooted, the homeless, the hungry, the sick, women, children, and the despised come to Jesus from all around seeking healing.⁸

The God who asked Abraham to leave his homeland for a place unknown, the God of Joseph in Egypt, the God of Daniel in Babylon, the God merciful to enslaved Hebrews, the God who guided the people in Exodus and Exile, the God of foreigners and outcasts, the God who accompanied a displaced Galilean family into a foreign land when they fled persecution, the God nailed to a tree for preaching a gospel of radical love and inclusivity, this God loves outsiders, embraces strangers and calls us to their side. This God in Christ explains, “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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36). The Word made flesh is the divine act of a God who refuses to be God without us, a God who weeps for us, a crucified and homeless God who is criminally executed yet redeems us.

In these dark times, we should recall these words of scripture, “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and

⁸ Donald Senior, “‘Beloved Aliens and Exiles:’ New Testament Perspectives on Migration,” in Groody and Campese eds., *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008, 27-28.

accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” (Deut. 10:18-19). Churches have a duty to be compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving and capable of seeing God in the face of strangers. They must denounce false prophets who cry peace where it is not detectable and not remain silent in the face of the violation of the human rights of persons divinely created. Pastors ought to remind their congregations that the risen Lord who continues to Cross borders with an offer of salvation comes to us now in American society in the form of detested nonwhite strangers. Central American migrants and detested members of the Latinx community are the crucified bodies of Christ in American history---crucified bodies marked by poverty, oppression, inequality, injustice and dehumanization.

Parable of Good Samaritan

What can the church do to depose the immigrant threat narrative and anti-immigrant practices? Will Christians courageously challenge the Trump administration that does not speak of mercy, justice and love, but rather reflects the imposition of pathologies of violence acted out especially on Central American migrants? What does it mean to follow a Savior who brings down walls of division? The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) directs Christians to be compassionate toward strangers. The parable offers good news by telling us one way to overcome a divided world is to show mercy to badly treated people. The principle of mercy disclosed in this story describes how to restore hope and deliver justice to a person separated from society by cultural rules and social practices. The Good Samaritan narrative asks us to struggle with what it means to be a good neighbor and notice right action is disclosed by a

member of society's suspect class, a Samaritan perceived by the status quo to be racially inferior and religiously heretical.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is about breaking the social norms that make some people outsiders. The story is also about exercising justice toward the less powerful. In Luke's narrative, Jesus suggests the ideal human being acts in the world against ideologies that divide people and social conventions that say "neighbors" are the people tied to us by race, ethnicity, language, or membership in the same group. In a socially divided world, Jesus requires his followers to be "good neighbors" to unloved people. The parable's message clearly states the world cannot be divided into strangers and friends, instead human beings are to discover God by getting close to the excluded.

The salient point in the story is that a theologian was instructed about finding God present in the needs of an unjustly suffering person. The theologian was instructed to see the world from the perspective of the despised, the suffering, or those considered untouchable and worthy of death in a ditch off the main road of life. The theologian was told that relationship with God consists in living for others and caring for the specific needs of detested, discriminated, neglected, and defenseless human beings. Anyone who claims to know God cannot live on the basis of apathy and blindness in the face of suffering in social reality; instead, they must feel moved to pity or what Jon Sobrino calls primordial mercy---do something about the situation.

Although Jesus tells the shrewd theologian (Luke 10:29) to engage in God-talk from the edges of society, the challenge goes further. The religious leader in the story is going to learn a lesson about justice and neighborly love from a Samaritan. For the theologian, a neighbor could be a Levite, a priest, someone from his own class, race or group, but never an ethnically different

and religiously questionable Samaritan. Nonetheless, Jesus invites him to consider that a Samaritan who is a member of a group considered by legitimate society worthy of exclusion would instruct him about being a neighbor. The theologian was to learn from a Samaritan how to set aside a limiting worldview in order to evolve a more complete vision of God and human community. The Samaritan who comes from a first century despised group and not the priest or Levite in the story provide one with an example of how to love others.

What did the Samaritan do? The Samaritan was willing to stop on the side of the road to help the victim of robbers. The Levite and the Priest did not stop in order to follow the requirements of the law. These religious officials who kept the cultural rules failed to fully grasp God's perfection. God refuses to make persecuted people invisible. God does not allow persons to remain outcast on the basis of race, culture, laws, gender or religion. It took a member of a despised racial group to name the basic contradiction between faith in God and avoidance of brutalized humanity. For the Samaritan real knowledge of God means acting in the world God aims to save and loving those whom God asks us to love.

The parable reveals what matters to God. What finally matters is not religious orthodoxy—the basis of the reasonableness of the religious officials' action toward the victim of robbers on the side of the road—but right action. In other words, our actions correspond to the reality of God when moved by compassion to serve the needs of the vulnerable who are especially disfavored in the wider social and religious order. How did the Samaritan act right? The Samaritan “had compassion . . . bound up the victims wounds. . . set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn . . . took care of him. . . took out two denarii [the equivalent of two days' wages for a laborer] and gave them to the innkeeper” (Luke 10:33-35).

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is the excluded of this world—either in the form of the assaulted stranger left to perish after suffering violence or the racially despised and religiously heretical Samaritan—that make God historically present in bad news situations. The Samaritan acted with mercy. For him the question was not who deserves my love, but what must I do for a human being in a situation that will surely deprive him or her of life. The Samaritan acted with mercy to become a voice for the voiceless, a comforter to the injured, a friend to the despised and a merciful servant of God. In today's anti-immigrant climate, the church must climb into a deep ditch where immigrants of color suffer in detention facilities, in neighborhoods overshadowed by the daily fear of raids and deportation and in the discourse environment universalizing dehumanization, criminalization and hate.

The church is faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ when it sees the world from the perspective of the loathed humanity on the southern border and bears public witness to the vulnerability of migrants, including families devastated by the loss of loved ones and children left alone when parents are removed from them. I cannot think of a better time in our country's history for churches to judge themselves by the way they treat the least and most vulnerable among us. In strangers among us, the church must confess that God yet hears the cries of abused and threatened people hankering for mercy, justice and love. The church is called to the side of despised immigrants, to keep them from dying in the wilderness, in detention camp cages, in work place exploitation, at the hands of domestic terrorists or the church's betrayal of its Crucified God. It is time to build a more generous immigration system by living awake in the gospel of a border crossing God who invites us to stay close to human suffering.