

**You Asked for It: A Nation of Immigrants**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**2 July 2006**  
**Text: Hebrews 13:1-3**

The Daugherty brothers from County Killarney, Ireland, came to this country in 1827 to escape abject poverty and famine and make a new life for themselves and their families. They settled in southern Ohio, tried to coax crops from the rocky hills, and were prolific in childbearing, good Catholics all. They were my ancestors, on my mother's side. Though genealogical research done by my cousin revealed their early passion for whiskey and fighting, eventually they settled down, became bankers and merchants, and Methodists. As a young man, my grandfather played AA baseball for a Pittsburgh farm team, until he realized his head for figures was stronger than his pitching arm. We tell these stories at family reunions, so that each succeeding generation identifies themselves with this family. The backdrop for my family's story is, of course, the United States of America, sweet land of liberty. My forebears were inspired by its vast bounty, and thrived on its freedom and opportunity. And unless you trace your lineage from the native people who populated these shores when the settlers arrived, your family story is also one of immigration, of coming to this land from somewhere else. Some came by choice; others were forced and were brought here as slaves without benefit or blessing. All these facets reflect important parts of the story, America's story, and our identity as a nation of immigrants.

We've always had some ambivalence about it. Immigrants were often relegated to ghettos in large urban cities, called demeaning names, and had their native culture ridiculed or dismissed. For example, I can tell you at least three insulting names by which my Irish-American relatives were called, and that's true for most other ethnic or racial groups. My ancestors were only too eager to become "American" and blend indistinguishably from their neighbors. America, the melting pot.

The person who requested "immigration" as a sermon topic wondered about the current immigration experience, and new legislation being debated in Congress. She knows that over 2500 persons, mostly Mexican nationals, have died getting to "El Norte" by way of the desert because of more strictly guarded border crossings and check points. She has witnessed the protests this Spring against proposed laws that would turn undocumented workers and their families into felons, liable to detention and deportation, and has seen the National Guard be deployed to strengthen security at our southern border. *Does the Church have a perspective to share about these developments?--she asked. What biblical or faith resources might guide our thinking?*

The United States has always regulated the total number of immigrants and distribution by originating country through the Immigration and Naturalization Service. On balance, this system has worked well by allowing flexibility in responding to particular situations—for example, the influx of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1980s in the wake

of the Vietnam War. Two phenomena have upset that equilibrium. Since 9/11 the mindset of our country has changed. Having witnessed the falling towers and the crashing jetliners, we're more concerned now about homeland security and the threat of terrorist activity on our soil. The other phenomenon is the reality of globalization. Expanding markets have blurred the borders between nations. Developing nations have shifted their limited budgets from the agricultural to the industrial sector, leaving little money to provide even basic social services. Farmers find it increasingly difficult to support their families on the land, so they head for the cities to work in factories where they will spend 70 percent of two wage earners' salaries to feed a family of five. Many conclude that it would be better to go north to the U.S. to wash dishes, clean houses, or work for a landscaper. [Rick Ufford-Chase, "Dying to Get In" in *The Christian Century*, August 2004] Of the estimated 11 million "illegals" in the country, at least one-half are from Mexico [from *The Thoughtful Christian* product summary of "The Immigration Debate: What's a Christian to Think?" by Chris Iosso, 2006]

Interestingly, there is no lack of Biblical material about immigration. The Law given by God to the covenant people in the Old Testament consistently requires them to show justice and mercy to the most vulnerable in the community—categories that haven't changed much since then: the widow, orphan and stranger. Typical texts: *You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. [Exodus 23:9] You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. . . .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....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. Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.* The people's own experience of oppression and immigration was to shape their practice in the promised land of milk and honey. Hospitality was a primary value, and to allow even a stranger to be deprived of basic necessities was unthinkable. We cannot forget that Jesus and his family were immigrants, forced to flee from Judea and King Herod's murderous intent, settling in Egypt for two years before they were able to return to their home. The text I've chosen is one among the concluding exhortations of the letter to the Hebrews. Following a sophisticated theological discussion of Jesus as the mediator between God and humanity, the author of the letter offers some down-to-earth advice about practicing faith. Listen for God's word to the Church in the reading from the letter to the Hebrews, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, at the first verse. [Hebrews 13:1-3]

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Cleveland was known as the "city of hope" because of its popularity as an immigrant destination. Eastern Europeans, Russians, Chinese, and later, Southeast Asians and Latinos left behind the struggles of their native lands to find bright new opportunities for freedom and economic gain. The exponentially-growing city eagerly embraced the newcomers, and our city today is richer for the ethnic diversity found here. Enthusiasm has waned—here and across the nation—for the new wave of immigrants and been replaced by fear: fear that there won't be

enough, fear that these newcomers will take more than their share, fear that their presence will impact the community adversely.

I applaud President Bush for taking strong steps to address this concern. He recognizes the failures of the present system, and the extent to which our industrial, service, construction, agricultural and food-processing sectors rely on a largely undocumented immigrant workforce. The president sees the impossibility of creating a healthy economy while 11 million undocumented workers reside among us. He understands that real homeland security hasn't a chance when people's quest for economic survival is regarded as criminal. In raising this concern to the national agenda, President Bush remarked that "our ability to assimilate newcomers" is one of the "defining strengths of America."

The proposed Immigration Reform legislation that was developed at the president's request has been tabled while congressional leaders hold hearings throughout the country, presumably to let citizens weigh in on the different House and Senate Bills. Some believe these hearings were largely an avoidance measure that will guarantee the legislation will not make it to the floor before mid-term elections in November, protecting candidates from constituent anger over controversial decisions. The current debate cuts across party lines, with both Republicans and Democrats supporting each of the House and Senate versions.

What I think the Church can contribute to the conversation is an antidote to fear. A number of you have commented on the irony of questioning the action of the Israeli government erecting the security barrier and deploying troops to guard the borders to keep Palestinians out, when this is exactly what the United States has done at the Mexican border. Religious communities counter fear with faith. We are called to choose our actions based on the rule of love—concern for the well-being and good of neighbor, family and self alike. This is completely compatible with the social contract of a free and democratic society pledged to ensure "liberty and justice for all." Hospitality rather than hostility should be our impulse, because we remember our own immigrant roots. Because as people of faith we remember that the good things we enjoy are gifts given by God's grace—not entitlements due to our nation of origin. Our nation is far down the road towards creating a global economy; people of faith must call it to build a global community as well. The author of the letter to the Hebrews described the benefit of hospitality to strangers as "entertaining angels." That spiritual blessing yields practical ones as well in the enrichment of our culture through multi-culturalism. Not a melting pot of uniformity, but a colorful salad of variety, spice, and nourishment. Someone who heard this sermon at 8:30 pointed out that because of our country's falling birth rate, we need immigration to fill the population hole and corresponding income and taxation gaps, and ensure continuous economic strength. Blessings multiply when shared.

Nowhere do we see this demonstrated more vividly than at the Lord's table. Here, people from east and west and north and south are invited to sit together as one family. Here, there is enough and more than enough for all. Here the walls that fear has built come down, and we see each other as we really are: equally beloved of God, equally in need of God's mercy and grace. Strangers no longer, but sisters and brothers. May the God who

calls us to this table together, who nourishes us with all we need for life, also give us courage and love to extend that hospitality to immigrants.

**NOW TO THE RULER OF ALL WORLDS, UNDYING, INVISIBLE, THE ONLY GOD, BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.**

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