

“Reframing the immigration debate: we are all guests”  
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Well, that’s a *lovely* story. This is what we might call Jesus’ angry phase. He gets hungry and curses a fig tree. He tells a series of stories that sound like they belong more to Grimm’s let’s-terrify-our-children fairy tales than they do to Jesus’ good news.

Personally, I also am not crazy about going to weddings, but I have yet to hear of a wedding so awful that it warranted murder. I also feel that this king has some anger issues, and a little Xanax or yoga might help him chill next time he wants to slaughter a whole city or cast someone into the outer darkness.

OK, so we get that this is a parable. It’s not meant to be taken literally. It’s recorded by Matthew, during a period of conflict within the Jewish community: some people are following the Pharisees, others are following Jesus’ disciples. Rome has burned Jerusalem. Tensions are high. Matthew wants to bolster the morale of his community by promising justice, and he wants his opponents to know that their actions will have consequences.

Tragically, this internal Jewish debate would later be twisted by Christians looking to exclude Jews (you know, like Jesus) from salvation. It may have even unintentionally planted seeds for later violence.

So you’ll understand when I say that I didn’t want to preach on this parable. Couldn’t I just choose an easier passage to talk about immigration—one of those nice passages about caring for the stranger? But I felt led to stick with it, because it *is* difficult—and so is the topic of immigration. Maybe we need to wrestle with the complexities of this story in the same way that we need to face head on the complexities of the immigration debate.

What’s hard is that the story doesn’t make sense.

On the one hand is the claim for universal acceptance. All are invited to the feast, good and bad, poor and rich, familiar and foreign, the most unlikely of people. The feast is meant to be shared. But the parable ends with a guest being thrown out because he was not wearing the right clothing. Early church theologians suggested he was not clothed in Christ, or in righteousness, or in gratitude. But whatever the reason, the parable that so grandly moved toward abundance and inclusion ends on a strict note of exclusion and regulation.

The story never resolves these tensions, just as we have yet to resolve the same tension in our own immigration debate. We know we have to have laws and regulations; we need systems that provide order and stop terrorism, drug cartels, and human trafficking. But we also want compassion. We want a legal path to citizenship. We want to live up to those beautiful words of welcome on the Statue of Liberty. We want to be good Christians and care for the stranger.

Jesus does not reconcile these tensions. All we know is that somehow welcome and law must both be considered, just as justice and love co-exist in the heart of God.

But there is something in this story that may help us gain clarity on our debate.

Jesus tells a story of people who refuse a banquet because they insist on leading private lives, each going his own way, one to his farm, another to his business, none wishing to share his time or celebrate another's happiness. They don't want to go to the king's feast because they don't want to acknowledge that someone else is their lord, that they are not in charge.

After telling this story, Jesus will look out over the city of Jerusalem, and he will weep. He will cry for a city that kills its prophets and stones people who gather at its gates. He will cry for a city that doesn't understand the ways of peace and mercy, but is full of greed and self-indulgence. He will cry for leaders who think they have the right to decide who belongs to God's kingdom and who doesn't.

Would he cry for us, do you think?

In an episode of *This American Life*, called "White Haze," a reporter interviews members of the Alt-Right who want to keep out immigrants, and these individuals say something very important. They speak of *their* country, *their* land, *their* culture.

And I cannot help but hear in their words the same attitude held by the guests who refuse the banquet. We think the banquet is *ours* to do with as we please.

We who are US-born citizens hear Jesus' story and think we are the king, and immigrants are the outsiders, invited in and thrown out.

But we are not the king. The feast is not ours. We did not make all of this. We did not speak existence into the world, nor did we kneel and breathe life into humanity. We did not make the rivers run or the mountains rise. We did not hang on a cross or rise from the dead. God did all of that. God is the king. We are guests no different from immigrants—all recipients of unearned grace. And yet now, we want to pretend that we are God and shut the door.

The good news in Jesus' story is that the king doesn't give up. He sends his servants into the streets and the alleys. They look under bridges and in prisons. They bring the addicts, and the homeless, and the migrant workers, and the Spanish-speaking, and the LGBTQ teens who have been kicked out of their homes. They bring anyone who will come, tattooed, pierced, undocumented, or wearing a turban, a burka, or a yarmulke.

The feast goes on, undeterred by violence or selfishness.

In the same way, the feast all around us goes on. Immigrants pile into churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. Research shows that immigrants create jobs, raise wages, and make the US economy stronger. Statistically, they are far more law abiding and less likely to commit

crimes than people born in the US. They serve as soldiers, doctors, farm workers, parents, and artists. They bring laughter and song to the feast of American culture.

They might even save your life—like William Ramirez, a father of two from Colombia, a maintenance worker, who, when he saw a man trying to shoot a Miami police officer, drove his van into the line of fire, shielding the officer and pulling him to safety. Or Jesús—*Jesus*—Manuel Cordova, who when he was crossing the border from Mexico into the United States (illegally) found a 9-year-old American boy in the Arizona desert, stranded after his car crashed, killing his mother. Jesús stayed with the boy and kept him alive.

And Jesus said, “You will know my disciples by their love” (John 13:35).

We will continue to wrestle with the tension between welcome and regulation, just as we will continue to wrestle with the tension in this parable. But we must, if we are ever to right the ship of this debate, re-evaluate our place in the story. It is not ours to choose who is invited and who is not. It is not ours to claim ownership over the feast. It is ours only to put on Christ, to appreciate and value the feast, and to love our fellow guests.

I’m not proposing policy here. I’m not a politician. I’m a pastor and a theologian. I speak only to those who seek to follow Christ. And I say that we must stop seeing immigrants as people who want to take what we have, and start seeing them as people who want to add to the feast.

There may be, right now as we speak, a man named Jesús crossing the border. His feet ache from walking thousands of dangerous miles; his throat burns with thirst. He is hunted. Some call him illegal, unwanted. He carries little, but for a small, wooden cross around his neck. But inside are dreams—vast, tumbling dreams—a bountiful feast. From beneath a red hot sun, he calls to us. And if we let him, he might just save our lives.

**Amen.**