

Sermon

by Luis González

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St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, San Diego CA

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9 - Year C

Isaiah 66:10-14; Psalm 66:1-8; Galatians 6:(1-6), 7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I am honored and humbled to be here with you today. Ever since Dean Scott and Rev. Allisyn asked me to preach today, I have been excited and a bit nervous. To preach today, on this 4th of July, is of special significance to me because, especially in this holy place, I can really mean it when I say, "God bless America."

Today we celebrate the birthday of the United States of America. 234 years ago today, the Declaration of Independence was signed by 56 men, some immigrants and some children of immigrants, and all subjects of the King of England. Their monumental act of treason was prefaced by these beautifully written words:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. 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.

With those words, the USA was born. By the turn of the 20th century, America was growing by the influx of immigrants from everywhere, and many arrived in this country through Ellis Island, which by 1954 had registered 12 million immigrants.

Most of us here, after reviewing our family tree, can probably count ourselves among the immigrant families that make up this country. Whether 1st generation, or 8th generation, we are all Americans. Today we celebrate America, and so today

in celebration I would like to tell you my story – the story of my American dream come true.

There is a saying in Spanish, “con el corazón en la mano.” The literal translation is “with heart in hand.” Figuratively it means, “with complete honesty and sincerity.”

And so, with my heart in hand, I have a confession to make and one I have shared only a few times in my life: I am an illegal immigrant. My family and I illegally crossed the border from Mexico and lived as undocumented immigrants for many years.

I was born in Mexico City. My father was a butcher. My mother was a hairdresser. Neither made it past middle school. When I was six years old, my father lost his job and was out of work for more than a year. With all hopes fading, my parents believed coming to the U.S. was the only answer to provide a future for their children. Like millions of immigrants before them, my parents came to this country pursuing opportunity and happiness.

They do not give visas to unemployed, uneducated butchers and hairdressers, so in order to give their children a good shot at their dreams, my parents did what so many had done before them to escape the poverty and lack of opportunity in their homeland – they broke the immigration laws of this country and illegally crossed the border into the United States.

I would like to read to you a slightly modified excerpt of an article I found on PBS:

Where could the unwanted, sometimes starving millions go?

Across the border lay a new country filled with promise. America offered land, jobs, opportunity, freedom, and new homes for millions of desperate people.

Immigrants, of course, were nothing new to this city. But this latest wave of immigrants was different. So many were coming, and they were coming so fast. Millions of immigrants have flowed through the city, changing the city forever.

The immigrants settled in separate neighborhoods. They built their own churches and opened businesses that sold goods they brought with them from their land. Some formed gangs to protect themselves from other gangs of other nationalities.

Big changes brought big fears to people already living in the city. Although these people were also the children and grandchildren of immigrants, the sight of large groups of new immigrants moving into established neighborhoods caused citizens to panic. Newspapers called the new immigrants "criminals."

Slowly, the new immigrants and the city began to adjust to each other. Both native citizens and recent immigrants founded charitable organizations which helped new immigrants with jobs and housing.

Like immigrants before and since, the newcomers and especially their American-born children began the slow process of assimilation, finding ways to fit into a new society and to unify as Americans.

I mentioned earlier I made some small modifications to the article I just read. I also edited out some dates and key places. I found this article very interesting because I could definitely read it as if it had been written recently. To divulge the truth, this article is actually about New York City in the mid-1800s. Between 1847 and 1860, more than 2.5 million immigrants flowed through New York City, mostly from European countries.

In our present, history repeats itself and my parents and my family are the "new immigrants" of today.

My parents brought us to this country to give us a chance to realize our potential. My sisters and I made the best of it. For my part, I started school in Los Angeles in the 2nd grade and worked my butt off through high school, never earning less than an A. My grades and hard work got me into M.I.T. with a full scholarship.

From there, most of you already know my story: I married a great woman; I have

a beautiful and intelligent daughter, and a handsome and smart son.

I am living the American dream.

I stand here today thanks to the compassionate, humane, and selfless work of many people, including the school staff who translated the school registration forms for us, and the health clinics who offered us medical care at a reduced cost.

I am living the American dream thanks to President Ronald Reagan, who on November 6, 1986 signed the Mazzoli-Simpson Act, also known as the Immigration Reform and Control Act.

President Reagan's statement on signing the bill into law closed with the following:

*The act I am signing today is the product of one of the longest and most difficult legislative undertakings of recent memory. It has truly been a bipartisan effort, with this administration and the allies of immigration reform in the Congress, of both parties, working together to accomplish these critically important reforms. Future generations of Americans will be thankful for our efforts to **humanely** regain control of our borders and thereby preserve the value of one of the most sacred possessions of our people: American citizenship.*

I became a naturalized citizen of the United States on June 14, 1996. I am a proud citizen and patriot, and I'm grateful for everything this country has offered me. It's easy to be a patriot on a day like today – with flags waving, people smiling, and fireworks lighting up the night sky. It's on a day like today that it becomes crystal clear that Democrats, Republicans, Liberals, the Tea Party, and the Coffee Party – we all love our country.

Likewise, on a day like today, sitting here in this beautiful church, in this holy place, surrounded in peace by friends and strangers alike, it's easy to be a Christian. It's also easy to forget that being a Christian is actually very difficult.

Doctors and nurses must find it hard to care for the injured drunk driver who just

killed a family, but they take an oath to practice medicine ethically and not play at God.

Public defenders must find it difficult to protect the rights of a murderer, but they take an oath to administer justice for the people with fairness and impartiality.

As law-abiding citizens of this great country, it's difficult to condone transgressions against immigration laws, but as Christians, we have a higher calling. We can't ignore the laws of the land, but we must always remember those affected by them.

This week's collect begins as follows: "O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection."

I believe this is our life's call and the reason it's so difficult to be a Christian. We are called to be devoted to God with our whole heart and to unite to one another with pure affection. "A whole heart" and "pure affection" – these are perfections that only God can achieve, but this must be our aspiration if we are to be good disciples of Jesus Christ.

I am blessed to have been a recipient of these affections. I am here today because a stranger loved God and so loved me. I am here today because a stranger cared enough to help. I am here today thanks to these strangers, these teachers and staff, these doctors and nurses, these persons who touched my life in ways I cannot repay.

On the subject of immigration reform, in 1986, President Reagan spoke of humane efforts, and this week, President Obama spoke of compassion.

The Bible also is clear of what our responsibility is towards immigrants. We are called to love our neighbor. And we are called to be laborers into the harvest of the Lord. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves."

As disciples, we are sent to cure the sick and proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God, and we are sent out with a warning that our work will be difficult and maybe even risky, like sending lambs into the midst of wolves. We are sent out into the world to perform the difficult, and our work is to cure the sick and do what is "right" – to serve all persons and to strive for justice and peace among all people.

Into the midst of society, into the midst of those who will disagree with us and may frown upon us, we are called to do what is right in the eyes of God, what is our duty as Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ.

A couple of weeks ago, Bishop Gene Robinson was here to talk about the church in public life and whether its responsibility is only to preach or also to meddle in public affairs. I was inspired by his words and so I believe that my responsibilities as a Christian do not stop at the door of the church.

I am comforted by the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, *"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."*

If I am to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, I must at every opportunity work for the good of all and remember my baptismal duty to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Amen.

Sources

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http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html

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<http://pbskids.org/bigapplehistory/immigration/topic1.html>

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<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/110686b.htm>