

No Taste of Disgrace

Joshua 5:9-12

It is said that history is written by the victors—the ones who win the battles. That’s usually true. Except, what it does not mention is that history is still made by those who don’t. No one’s life is unaccounted for, even if history doesn’t remember them or writes a different record.

Howard Zinn demonstrated this thirty years ago in his now-classic work, *A People’s History of the United States*, where he wrote the story behind the story of different periods in American history. It begins with a review of the accounts when Columbus “discovered” the new world, only Zinn didn’t portray it in the glowing and heroic terms of American folklore and tradition, but from the view of the expedition’s own journals and the storytelling of the indigenous Arawak natives. From this perspective, it hardly appears to be the same story, since the record shows that the natives were mercilessly treated and often slaughtered by Columbus (as well as subsequent European expeditions) in a quest to pilfer the land of its resources and gold. Instead of noble Christian explorers, most of them were the aggressors—greedy and brutal marauders—with little regard for the humanity or welfare of the native population. That’s not something I learned in elementary school!

Zinn’s account was one of many that have made a profound impact on how history is now reported on many critical events in American life. We’re learning an entirely new narrative based on fact, not fiction. Zinn explained his endeavor to hear the voices of the silenced in order to recover our nation’s self-proclaimed ideals:

My history... describes the inspiring struggle of those who have fought slavery and racism...of the labor organizers who have led strikes for the rights of working people... of the socialists and others who have protested war and militarism. My

hero is not Theodore Roosevelt, who loved war and congratulated a general after a massacre of Filipino villagers at the turn of the century, but Mark Twain, who denounced the massacre and satirized imperialism.

I want young people to understand that ours is a beautiful country, but it has been taken over by men who have no respect for human rights or constitutional liberties. Our people are basically decent and caring, and our highest ideals are expressed in the Declaration of Independence, which says that all of us have an equal right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The history of our country, I point out in my book, is a striving, against corporate robber barons and war makers, to make those ideals a reality — and all of us, of whatever age, can find immense satisfaction in becoming part of that.¹

As you might imagine, Zinn had his critics, as do most writers and historians who uncover the truth. But it reminds us that the cultural folklore of our nation is rarely told from the perspective of those who are victimized by those who have established and control the reins of power in society. History, as we often learn it, is ideology, more than we often realize. Reality is usually less self-glorifying.

This thought came to me recently in the ongoing public debate about immigration. Most of what we hear as news and views in the public arena is surprisingly toxic and scary as to what is said about undocumented immigrants in our society. The widespread perception is that immigrants who enter this country illegally come with the intent to harm us in some way—if not directly threatening our personal safety, then by stealing jobs intended for native-born Americans.

Where did this idea come from? Where is the hard evidence for these claims? Where are the facts that justify the xenophobia and punitive approach to foreigners?

Obviously, by its nature, securing accurate data on undocumented people is somewhat difficult, but there appears to be little aside from a few

¹ Quote from, “A People’s History of the United States,” Wikipedia.org

highlighted incidents that back up this fearful perception. The FBI crime statistics don't report it as an unusual and worrisome trend, or even as a notable issue; nor do other reliable crime data sources. Even common logic would suggest that people who come into this country illegally are not likely to want to get themselves into trouble with the law, if it can be avoided. So it appears that ideology is the primary driving force behind the public debate on immigration.

Truthfully, when we take immigration from the realm of being a hot-button political issue to the underlying human story that each person presents, in all but a very small percentage of cases, there's nothing nefarious about their presence here anyway. On the contrary, many undocumented immigrants are the ones who harbor fear for their own safety, far more than native-born counterparts. Most live under dreadful circumstances that few of us would ever desire or accept—where they barely scrape by (many sending money home to support other relatives), where they fear the INS and deportation, and where they are subject to disgrace and abuse by those who take advantage of their vulnerable situation virtually every day of the lives.

Frankly, for the undocumented, there are few open arms offering a welcoming hospitality, let alone safety. We do hear stories of what it's like from those on the front lines offering support services (e.g., the Church of the City in New London), or individuals who come out from under the radar, or who have relatives who share their story. When you grasp the reasons for why people are so desperate they will leave their native countries and take risks to arrive here—those who cannot enter through the legal means because they lack sponsorship, or educational visas, or guaranteed job offers—you can't help but wonder what any of us would do.

All we have to do is look back through recent generations to recognize those who have come to this country as refugees, or looking for a better life, or searching for their freedom—ancestral stories we lionize for the courage to leave their homeland for a better life in America—one their descendants enjoy. We take great pride in being a land of immigrants. So, why do we mischaracterize, stereotype, and suspect foreigners in this time who come here by any means they can?

The irony is not lost on me that many who are the most punitive pronounce themselves to be good Christians. They lift up the Judeo-Christian foundations of this country, yet reject one of the principle biblical standards for virtuous behavior, i.e., watching out for and protecting foreigners, largely because they are so vulnerable. Likewise, one of the great expressions of righteousness in Scripture is in offering the gift of hospitality to strangers. The combination of these two things could be writing the history of our time if we want to remain true to our religious heritage and principles, but of course, it isn't. We're rejecting that in favor of building walls and stepping up deportation, shaming and punishing immigrants.

The biblical basis in protecting foreigners and strangers (outlined in Leviticus and Deuteronomy and poignantly highlighted by Jesus' teachings in Matthew 25 and the Good Samaritan story) wasn't simply because it was a nice thing to do. It's not a value that arises solely out of a kind heart. It's written into the moral laws of Moses from the earliest times and is basic to the gospel, because it characterized the experience of Israelites themselves. They were sojourners; they were not native to the land of Canaan. They were foreigners, coming into a strange land. Though this isn't new to us,

what may be revelatory is that the Israelites entered their Promised Land, not as conquerors, but as immigrants! Let me explain.

As much as we view the stories of Joshua as a divine claim upon the land of Canaan and that under Joshua's command, Israel's entrance into the Promised Land was militaristic as conquerors, driving out the native population with a vengeance, massacring them by the thousands, that's a false narrative. In fact, these accounts are folklore shaped by ideology. They were composed by later generations, who came up with these stories to justify their own conquests of neighboring lands centuries later.

How do we know this? For one thing, there is no archeological evidence to back it up—nothing to prove the accuracy of any of these stories in Joshua. Most credible archeologists (many of them Jewish and Israeli) have concluded that none of these stories of conquest hold up under scrutiny. Jericho didn't have walls that could come tumbling down; there are no signs of destruction in any the areas during the times listed in the accounts of Joshua. Several of the cities Joshua "conquered" didn't even exist until centuries later!

In other words, what we have in the book of Joshua is not a record of history, but compiled folklore militarized and glorified in another time when Israel's kings had the means and power to dominate their region. A militarily successful "history" was largely created to validate and glorify the ambitions of later generations. It's little more than political ideology rewriting and reinterpreting Israel's early history. The victors got to write the story.

The more likely scenario is that Israel arose from a nomadic tribe of shepherds, who settled at some point into the fertile region of Canaan, assimilating into the local cultures and agriculture and eventually

expanding their numbers and influence. That, typically, is how immigration works—how it occurs today and how it has always been. Foreigners are welcomed into a peaceful setting and become workers and then neighbors. No one but the greedy and powerful want to do it any other way. Immigrants seek a better, more peaceful, life that provides for their family and allows them to survive and prosper.

Actually, that's what these few verses I read earlier from Joshua 5 symbolize (in their best sense)—that the long sojourn of the Israelites was finally over and they could settle in the land of Canaan—eating from the harvest they did not plant. There they celebrated the Passover, which told of their story of deliverance from tyranny, their quest for identity and freedom, so that they would not forget where they had come from. They had left the lands which brought hardship and found a place that welcomed them, where there was no taste of disgrace anymore. This was what was so liberating and redeeming. A conquest history, that a later generation imposed upon them, would have betrayed the very truth of their experience and the meaning behind the land that offered them freedom, hospitality, and self-determination.

A similar story is told in many places in this country—not something we hear about unless we listen to the history told by those who are on the underside of life. I mentioned earlier about the ministries of the Church of the City in New London, where Senior Pastor, Daniel Martino, leads a team of clergy, staff, and volunteers to aid in every way possible, undocumented immigrants living in southeastern Connecticut. They do remarkable work there.

Another example of this is occurring in Greensboro, North Carolina, where David Fraccaro and the good folks at FaithAction International

House provide ID cards for undocumented residents (something that is occurring with greater frequency around the country, including New York City and New Haven). What's so satisfying about this in Greensboro is that the local police department works with FaithAction because they want the large population of the undocumented to have some form of legitimate ID. Even though the Governor and North Carolina legislature recently passed new laws prohibiting the validation of these IDs, the local community and city officials have resisted that and maintained the program.

As one writer conveys the story:

It's remarkable to see the number of people—city employees, law enforcement, community agency representatives—standing in front of this group of immigrants, many of whom may not have any documentation regarding their legal right to be here. Everyone is offering to help.

The ID program affirms and assumes the basic goodness of people. That's what makes it so powerful: the assumption that each person has an identity—a name, a face, a story, and inherent worth—and that we can work together to build a stronger community. In Greensboro, as in the nation, racial-ethnic diversity has increased dramatically over the past generation. “Will we fear one another as strangers?” asks Fraccaro. “Or embrace one another as neighbors?”²

That's a good question in these times—a very provocative and revealing question.

For me, though, this story represents what's good about this nation of immigrants—when we want to be at our best, we will offer hospitality, help, and hope. There's no taste of disgrace in this new state and place that offers care in the way God would have us do and Jesus affirmed in spirit and truth.

The interesting thing is, this is the kind of history most people want to see written; these are the stories we want our young people to read and tell about the times in which they live. They are part of the history experienced

² Lee Hull Moses, “Names with Faces,” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 133, No. 2, January 20, 2016, pg. 26.

by victims and those on the margins of mainstream life. They are the stories that may haunt us in one moment, but stir us to bring out much hope as well. If they are our history—they should be the record of reality, with good hearted people helping the vulnerable find a new and better life—one with an identity and a name.

Should we join in and do our part to make this story come true, then it just might be commonly told someday. That will be a noble story—one which offers the best taste of grace for everyone.

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