

# **The Prophetic Call to a Healthy Community And Our Response to Immigration**

**By Rev. Daisy L. Machado, Ph.D.**

**An immigrant from Cuba, Daisy Machado, is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); she is the Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.**

## **Preface**

*This theological reflection was presented to the Central Kentucky Council on Peace and Justice at their Annual Dinner and Fair on February 18, 2007. The biblical call is for a healthy community able to offer hospitality to the sojourner, to the immigrant, to the stranger and the best way to express that hospitality is by helping to create a society that honors justice, mercy, and compassion.*

- Daisy Machado

The issue at hand is immigration and there is much to be said about this hotly debated reality. From the Minutemen on the southern U.S./Mexico border to lawmakers to activists to the citizen on the street to the immigrants themselves, the voices are many and the call for a response is urgently needed. What I want to share with you today is one way to look at the issue of immigration from my social location which means that I cannot speak in any other way than as a Christian minister, as a church historian, as an educator and also as an immigrant. My parents and I are part of that history of immigration that is core to the soul of this country yet the reality of immigration has been and continues to be one that evokes a sense of ambivalence that has permeated this nation's relations with its immigrant arrivals. So the question becomes, how can we make it different in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I will attempt to provide a response by first asking what I think are two very basic and important questions: 1) What has Christianity to say about the immigrant, and, 2) What theological insight and guidance can the Christian community lift up to the nations who receive that never ending flow of human lives?

I begin with a very brief examination of the words of the prophet Zechariah who joined the prophetic tradition of Israel in trying to provide an answer to the questions: What makes your faith special? What is it about your faith (theology) that should claim my loyalty? Ever since the prophets first emerged in ancient Israel, early Judaism with its monotheistic focus found itself competing with a myriad of other religions. And in seeking to respond to the two pivotal questions I have posed — what makes your faith special, and, what is it about your faith (theology) that should claim my loyalty — the prophets presented the Israelites some foundational teachings in order to help them understand how they could provide their neighbors with a model for living that would serve as a beacon in the midst of the harsh realities of their time and place — poverty, economic exploitation and oppression, war, unjust rulers, and the reality of the immigration of people from land to land seeking some hope for a better life.

Often folks today think that the problems related to the global movement of people is a new problem and especially for those who live in the southwestern borderlands of this country, these folks see the problem specifically related to Mexico and nations to the south. However, Robert P. Carroll, writing in the *Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, reminds us that:

*The grand narratives, even the metanarrative itself of the Bible are about deportations, little and large, real and symbolic,*

*and the constant hope of return, of restoration, of homecoming...  
the whole Bible itself may well be regarded as the production of  
such diasporic experiences. (p. 103)*

It is important to frame the issue of immigration within this broader context of the Bible itself as a metanarrative not only about immigration (physical and spiritual) but more importantly about the hope of restoration — whether that hope be the actual return of the immigrant to her/his homeland or the ability of that immigrant to truly find a new home, a new place of welcome, safety, and flourishing. By placing immigration within this more encompassing biblical understanding we are also saying that immigration is not a criminal act that undermines our national security, as our current immigration policy holds. Instead we see that immigrants are in reality an uprooted people who leave their countries because they must, not because they simply wake up one morning with a desire to become “illegal,” undocumented, criminals. No decision to leave one’s nation is done easily. To leave behind all that is familiar, to rip out the roots sown by those who loved us and helped to shape us in order to migrate, is a decision of great emotional and spiritual consequence.

Within the prophetic writings, there was a particular concern to respond to the questions of why the faith of Israel had something distinctive to offer humanity. The prophet Zechariah, whose writings I am using, lived in the sixth century BCE, approximately 520-518. His teachings focus on specific themes that are developed in the first eight chapters of the Book of Zechariah. However, Zechariah also focuses on three additional themes that are common to the other teachings of the Hebrew Bible and these are: 1) poverty, 2) the stranger, and, 3) the widow and the orphan. And so we find in verses 9, 10 of chapter 7 the following teaching: “Administer justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.”

However immediately following this teaching in verses 11, 12 of the same chapter Zechariah proclaims the following: “But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen...” These words represent a warning against the attitude the post-exilic community had adopted in regards to the teachings given to them by the prophets. Zechariah knew that if the Israelites were to create a society that would stand-out from those of the neighboring nations, that if they were to truly become the people who lived in obedience to the divine mandates, they could not continue to remain impassive to the teachings that had the power to make their community a healthy community, one capable of being a signpost for those seeking hope and comfort.

For the prophet, the three characteristics of the healthy community that lives in obedience to the divine vision for humanity are justice, mercy, and compassion and we find these three repeated in the Epistle of James 1:27 where they are now presented to the newly emerging Christian community. For the Jewish prophet, like for the writer of the Christian epistle, these are not abstract words filled with philosophical meaning but instead represent an ethical worldview that is intended to be practiced, to be lived out. Justice, mercy, and compassion are the concrete responses of the community that stands in covenant with God and wishes to provide the broken world we live in with hope and healing, justice, mercy and compassion, the basic characteristics of a healthy and vigorous human community.

Now you and I are about the work of helping to build and sustain healthy communities. This is a challenge you and I share — I do so in my work as a seminary professor and you do so as activists who do hands on work with the very communities I am describing to you. So the question is how do we continue to promote and lift up the vision presented to us by the prophet in regards to the fundamental characteristics of a healthy community? What has been our

national response to the three groups clearly identified in the Bible as those who need special care and concern and protection? Where do our communities stand in regards to the aliens/strangers in our midst? How is it that fear can make us so unwelcoming of those who like me or you or our parents and grandparents left their nations to seek a better life for themselves and their loved ones? I think our work begins by debunking the bad theology that is so easily found in our congregations and so easily exploited by those in political power.

We begin by unmasking the ineffectual mentality of the do-gooder that permeates what passes for charity in this country. The works of mercy require more than a food basket or donations to Goodwill. The works of mercy require risk taking because they require that the person reaching out in justice, compassion and mercy stand "with" and not only "for" the one who has been forgotten, who is vulnerable, who has been cast aside by society. The works of mercy reveal our own need for mercy, our own limitations, our own poverty of spirit.<sup>1</sup> Such revelation is more often than not frightening and something we would rather not deal with. That is why it is so much simpler to remain at the do-gooder level. However that is not what the prophet wanted from the people and this is certainly not what the Gospel is about.

I want to lift up how in my faith tradition, Jesus the Christ, who was also an immigrant in many senses of the word, and how he de-centers the center, those places of power and prestige and wealth, and now focuses on those who have been left-out, excluded, de-valued, pushed aside, ignored, dismissed. To do the work of justice, mercy, and compassion involves hospitality and healing. To seek to live as a healthy community is "an invitation into an interesting life, into an unleashing of one's inner power, into authentic community, into the possibility of fulfillment in an vacuous society."<sup>2</sup> And even more than that, it is about deep and abiding love, love that is there for the long haul, it is about a deep faith that will not be easily frightened or dismayed.

And in this summon to do justice and show compassion, to live with a sense of mercy and purpose what we discover is often a heartbreaking task.

*Dorothy Day spoke of the "harsh and dreadful love" demanded of her in her "long loneliness" of struggle for justice and devotion to the poor. No pursuit of justice is undertaken without sacrifice, risk, and loss. A cloud of emotional heaviness may descend. Now and again the temptation surfaces to give up, to abandon the struggle, to seek instead a life of normalcy, ease, and security for oneself and one's family. After all, one has to contend with the tentative nature of any "victories" in the public arena and the obdurate nature of systemic evil. Amidst such realities, what keeps one going...? The lament of Jeremiah puts it this way: "O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed....(Jer. 20:7-9)<sup>3</sup>*

Called to the deed, that is our praxis, that is the oxygen of our work on behalf of peace and justice. To say yes to the call made to us is to affirm life, it is to be healed and empowered, it is to be released from fear so that when we come to that woman, child, or man who stands before

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice, Congregations and Community Organizing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Jacobsen, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobsen, p. 96.

us as stranger/alien/other we will not look away, we will not pass judgment, we will take the risk and make ourselves vulnerable by reaching out. It means that we will be willing to share not because we give from what is left over but because we give of our best, of what is most precious to us. When we respond to this call to justice, mercy, and compassion we will be able to enter into new depths of sharing, mutual concern. We will be made hungry for the experience of living in a true community that shatters the privatistic, insular and individualistic notions of community where homogeneity is the rule and which I believe have the final result of making us incapable of true hospitality. From my perspective the theological response to this call is to learn to live in true solidarity. And what is solidarity? Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino defines solidarity as closeness, support, and defense of the weak. He says: "Solidarity is the tenderness of peoples."<sup>4</sup> Listen to this definition one more time: "Solidarity is the tenderness of peoples." To think of tenderness as a key component of our praxis, of our call as responsible citizens, is one of the challenges we must take on if we are to respond concretely to the realities of the world we live in. And one of the greatest challenges to our living lives of tenderness is the reality of immigration.

We are called to be agents of change. We are called to be examples of empathy and compassion. We are called to see ourselves in the faces of those who cross our borders seeking life, seeking shelter, seeking safety, and offer them hospitality and healing. I believe that all of us possess the gifts needed to help our communities to rediscover how they can respond to the immigrants around us and to offer an alternative way of responding to those who fear and reject the immigrant. We need to challenge the idea that immigrants are criminals first and human beings second. We need to see beyond the legal arguments and seek to understand the forces that create immigration. We must refuse to accept the easy claims that only talk about immigration in light of economic loss and gains. We must stand firm and claim the importance of justice, mercy, and compassion. It does not matter that you are or are not Christian or even religious. The prophet's call to a healthy community is ultimately about a social ethic that shapes and guides how we conduct our lives as citizens of a nation and how we respond to those who live in difference whether due to poverty, race, gender, or country of origin.

Let me share with you a *New York Times* Editorial called "They are America" (Sunday, February 18, 2007):

*Almost a year ago, hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers and their families slipped out from the shadows of American life and walked boldly in daylight through Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, New York and other cities. "We Are America," their banners cried. The crowds, determined but peaceful, swelled into an immense sea. The nation was momentarily stunned. A lot has happened since then. The country has summoned great energy to confront the immigration problem, but most of it has been misplaced, crudely and unevenly applied. It seeks not to solve the conundrum of a broken immigration system, but to subdue, in a million ways, the vulnerable men and women who are part of it. Government at all levels is working to keep unwanted immigrants in their place - on the other side of the border, in detention or in fear, toiling silently in the underground economy without recourse to the laws and protections the native-born expect.*

*The overwhelming impulse has been to get tough, and tough we have gotten:*

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Sobrino, "Redeeming Globalization through its Victims," in *Concilium 2001/5, Globalization and its Victims*, Jon Sobrino & Felix Wilfred, eds. (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 111.

**Border enforcement.** *What little the last Congress did about immigration was focused on appeasing hard-line conservatives by appearing to seal the border. President Bush's new budget continues that approach, seeking 3,000 more Border Patrol officers and another \$1 billion for a 700-mile fence, adding to the billions spent to militarize the border since the 1990s.*

**Federal raids.** *In December, federal agents stormed a half-dozen Swift Meat packing plants, rounding up hundreds of suspected illegal immigrants and exposing the secret that is no secret: America's dirtiest, hardest jobs are done by people too desperate to shun them and too afraid to complain....*

**The web of suspicion.** *The Justice Department wants to expand routine DNA collection to include detained illegal immigrants, creating a vast new database that will sweep up hundreds of thousands of innocent people....*

**The rise of hate.** *The Anti-Defamation League, acutely sensitive to the presence of intolerance, has detected an increase in Ku Klux Klan activity around the country, much of it focused on hatred of new immigrants....*

And then the writer of this editorial ends with this statement:

*Enforcement of laws cannot be ignored. Punish immigrants who enter illegally, make them pay back taxes and fines, restrict their ability to get work through deceit and false identities. But open a path to their full inclusion in the life of this country.*

*The alternative - the path of immigrant exploitation, of harassment without hope - will only repeat the ways the country has shamed itself at countless points in its history.*

The bottom line is that for a nation that has so easily claimed Christian roots and Christian values, the reality of immigration has done little to show how these roots and values can function. As the editorial writer clearly says, this country continues to “shame itself” in how its current reaction to immigration and to the failure of its immigration system and national policy. Yet we do not have to seek blindly for a way to respond, the prophets of old have given us a response: to show compassion, to extend mercy, to be loyal to our beliefs and ethical values, and to live in hope. The world is waiting to hear a word of hope, a word of solace, a word of encouragement, a word of invitation to community, a word of welcome. May we continue to answer God’s call to collaboration and continue our work of justice, loyalty and compassion on behalf of the immigrants who are the most vulnerable.