

“Attitudes on Immigration”©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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When I was a youth it seemed like all of the adults in my community knew everyone who lived in town as well as all of the farmers who lived in the surrounding countryside. I say that because no matter where I was, or who was around, if I did something I wasn't supposed to, my parents always knew all about it before I got home. Growing up in such a community had its advantages and its disadvantages. I always had the sense that I would be protected and sheltered from harm. Most of the time I was sheltered from the harsh realities of life, realities that I now realize were important for me to become aware of.

But there were times when the community's usual way of life would be disrupted. For a few months every year there would be an influx of strangers to the community. The strangers looked and acted differently than almost everyone I knew. Their skin was darker than mine and the way they dressed wasn't like anyone who lived in the community. Not only that, they spoke a language that I couldn't understand and neither could any of the adults I knew. It was obvious these people were “outsiders.”

These people were migrant laborers who would come to work in the fields each summer. The migrant laborers weren't just men, whole families came. Wives and children worked the fields along with husbands and fathers. They lived in what were commonly called “migrant shacks” because that was what they looked like, shacks. They were square, one room buildings with no running water and a single incandescent light hanging in the middle of the room. There was no privacy and sometimes two or three families would have to share one “shack.” Most of those who came were from Mexico. They would begin arriving in June, just a few of them. By August though there were hundreds of them. That was a lot for a county with a population of less than 35,000. Then once the crops were harvested in September they would all leave.

From the time I was very young I could tell that the people of the community didn't like these strangers. I could tell it by the looks on people's faces and by the way they would speak about these visitors but they wouldn't speak to them. The message most evident in the community was that the people who had come to work in the fields weren't appreciated and they weren't welcome. Before I reached my teens I had learned the mannerisms of disdain and the disparaging words that were so often used by the people I knew. I used the mannerisms and the words myself back then. Back then I believed the people I knew must be correct. These strangers somehow deserved to be treated poorly. They were using up the limited local services in the area and taking job opportunities from the people in the community. But, like so many things I believed earlier in my life, I came to discover that not everything I was taught was true or right.

My discovery began the summer after I turned fourteen. By that time my two older sisters had their driver's licenses. I was beginning to fantasize about getting my license and being able to drive whenever I wanted to. But there was a problem. Unless I could somehow buy my own car I would be relegated to fourth in line for use of the family vehicle. I was desperate to earn money and begin saving. The only means of transportation I had available to get to a job were my two feet and a one-speed bicycle. Neither of these would get me very far and both were a slow way to go. Then a friend

told me of a great opportunity. Six days a week a farm truck would come to a bank parking lot just a couple of blocks from my house and pick up anyone who wanted to work in the fields. The truck would take people out to the job and bring them back at the end of the day and there was no cost for the ride. Initially it seemed to be exactly what I was looking for. It sounded too good to be true - and it was. In order to get the ride, you had to be on the truck by 6 in the morning and it didn't bring you back until 6 that evening or sometimes even later. If the weather was really hot and sunny or if it rained cats and dogs you were out in it all day. As much as I wanted to earn money that summer, I could never seem to get myself up and moving in time to be ready to catch the ride. Several of my friends had claimed they were going to ride the truck and work in the fields that summer. I later learned that not one of them ever did so. There was more I discovered as well. If you took the truck to the fields you earned money the way the migrant laborers did, by how much you picked, not by how long you worked. If you weren't really speedy you could work all day and only make a couple of dollars. While the wage requirements have changed over the years the pay is still very low and the work is dirty and physically demanding. I know because I spent the summers when I was sixteen and seventeen working in the fields, weeding fields of beans and pickles, and bailing straw and hay. But I got paid by the hour, not by the job. Being paid by the hour meant that when I would stop to take a break I was still getting paid.

By the time I graduated from High School I had come to realize that without all of those people who worked in the fields many of the local farmers wouldn't be able to harvest their crops. Without the cheap labor they wouldn't be able to afford to farm. Over the years

a number of the farmers I knew had to sell their farms or lost their lands, not because of anything involving the migrant laborers but because of the fluctuation of crop prices. Farming is a tough way to make a living, whether a person just works on the farm or owns it.

When I was young, those who migrated to work in the fields would typically return to their home countries for several months a year. That was long before we began fortifying our borders. Today, most of the people who come seeking such work go to great lengths to get into this country. A 2011-12 National Agricultural Worker survey found that of the approximately 2.5 million farm workers almost half don't have proper legal documentation to be here. Today, most of these people don't return to their native country out of fear of being caught when attempting to return here as they seek to provide for themselves and their families. Some people say these people need to abide by the law of our land and should only be here after going through proper channels and obtaining the necessary paperwork. That sounds reasonable, until you begin to look into specific requirements within immigration law. When you look into the details it very quickly becomes evident why the immigration system is not working. It is obviously not working for those who want to immigrate. But it is also not working for the employers these immigrants work for. These employers are put in the position of breaking the law when they hire a person who doesn't have the paperwork to be in this country legally. And what about how the undocumented person and the employer are treated if they are discovered by the authorities. Being in the country without proper documentation and hiring such a person are both considered civil offenses. Neither is considered a criminal act. The employer is required to pay a fine for the civil offense they committed. The

undocumented worker is immediately put in detention, provided minimal opportunity for legal review and eventually deported, sometimes after weeks or months of being locked up. Once they have been deported there is no possibility for them to legally immigrate.

I have been focusing primarily on those who feel compelled to come here for economic reasons but there are a variety of reasons that people seek to immigrate. Some people want to be with family members who are residents or citizens of our country. Others are fleeing from war or armed combat in their homelands. Some are members of groups that are persecuted in their home countries. And there are those who no longer want to live under oppressive regimes and want to live in a land where freedom and justice are highly valued. There are others as well. All of the ones I have mentioned seem to me to be reasonable motivations for wanting to immigrate to this country. I find all of these reasons congruent with our UU Principles. Because of how I understand our Principles, as a delegate at the 2010 UUA General Assembly I voted in favor of the proposed Congregational Study/Action Issue titled "Immigration as a Moral Issue." The issue was approved by a significant majority. Since then I have made it a point to educate myself and others further on this topic. If you are interested in learning more about the immigration issue I encourage you go to the UUA website and review the study guide titled "Immigration as a Moral Issue."

From what I have learned it is clear to me that our current immigration laws and policies as well as the prevailing sentiment in our country convey the message that was so prevalent in the community of my youth. Strangers are not welcome here. Those who are from foreign lands and are struggling will find little if any compassion for their plight in our immigration system. I believe the immigration situation in our country today provides us an opportunity to look at what we consider to be important, at what we value.

The home town I grew up in provided me with the safety, the stability and the security I needed to become the person I am. The migrant laborers who came each summer and the immigrants I later came to know provided me with the opportunity to recognize that while safety, stability and security are important, there are other things that are just as important and maybe even more so. These are the things that have been spoken of by spiritual teachers for centuries. In the Book of Matthew we find that Jesus responded to the question "What is the highest commandment?" with "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The Buddha, who recognized that suffering is a part of everyone's life, instructed those who came to him seeking the path to enlightenment to develop and demonstrate compassion for everyone they would encounter.

I don't claim to have the answer of how to solve the current problems regarding immigration. I know that safety, stability and security are important to and for everyone. I also know that love and compassion are important. What seems clear to me is that when our interest in safety, stability and security supersedes our capacity to show love and compassion our humanity is diminished and the world becomes a bit more impoverished. My hope, yes, my desire, is that we can somehow find a way to consider those who would seek to live in this country as our neighbor. And that we can someday learn to love our neighbor as ourselves and show compassion to everyone we encounter.

May it be so.