

Presentation: Day at the Legislature
February 13, 2012
Immigration
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There seems to be a race to the bottom when it comes to the question of immigration. Candidates spar over who is the tougher when dealing with the questions of the recently arrived. After a while it becomes difficult to remember exactly what we're talking about, or who.

So let us push off to the side for a moment the specter of those undocumented immigrants that loom so large in our imagination here in Oklahoma and **focus for just a few moments on immigration - legal, sanctioned and desired.**

It is a truism to acknowledge that most all of us are here as the product of immigration to the US. That means we have immigrants in our past, those who pulled up stakes, left their homelands and came here to establish a new life.

When **my great-grandfather** came here from Missouri to buy a farm and settle, in 1890, he was warned about what a violent place this was, no doubt warned in the German he spoke at home and in public. "Don't go there, it's full of crooks and thieves." Alas, he did go, he found a farm and went back to Missouri to get his family and come here, with five of his brothers. As he got home the neighbors asked, "What's the death rate like there in Oklahoma?" "As far as I could see," he said, "the death rate in Oklahoma is running right at one death per person."

There is almost **no celebration of or acknowledgement of the difficulties of the immigrant** in our contemporary literature or entertainment. We bow our heads when we mention our ancestors coming from other places. But we almost never spend a moment imagining what it was like to make it from the place where they were known and understood to come to a place where they were strange, resented and often persecuted. **The dynamics of immigration have almost completely been rubbed out of our memory.**

I have a personal experience of this forgetfulness. My grandmother's father and mother were both from Germany; they came and settled between Okarche and Kingfisher and raised their family there. They had 13 children and raised them in Okarche.

A few years ago there was a family funeral and I joined my uncles in the Church there after it was over. They were standing in the aisle of the church they had attended all of their lives, bathed in the colors of the stained glass windows. Standing there I could see over their shoulders to the windows, and to the dedications under the pictures, which said things like, "Gewidmet von dem Altar Verein." (Donated by the Altar Society). I told them I was the pastor in Stephens and Jefferson counties around Duncan and that most of my people were from Mexico.

They stood there in the middle of the church and said: "Yeah, those Mexicans. They're nice folks, but **they just don't seem to want to learn English!**"

The country has been renewed over and over again by immigration. Just make a list of those magnates who were responsible for American dominance in manufacturing, mining, entertainment, science, technology and the military and note how many of them were from other countries or were the first generation children of those from other countries. The list is long and still growing. You can make your own list; just note that the men most involved in the theoretical work to develop the atomic bomb were all classmates at the same high school in Budapest, and they were all in the US. Immigration has pumped life into the sclerotic imagination of our country over and over again.

And immigration continues with all of the legal approbation we can muster. In fact, the loudest calls to increase the level of immigration are not coming from South Oklahoma City or even East L.A. They are coming from the boardrooms of the largest corporations in the country. The hunger for programmers, technicians and engineers seems insatiable and according to our business leaders it will only be satisfied from outside of the country. I'm not sure what that says about us but let me give you just one figure. The country of Mexico, that's right **Mexico, has 81,000** more students in four-year university engineering studies than there are engineering students in the US-and that includes all of the students from foreign countries in engineering programs here. **It would seem that other countries might actually have what we need.**

But of course, we all know the concerns we have lie with illegal immigration. And that immigration is of people from south of our border, mostly from Mexico. At least here in Oklahoma when we mention 'immigration' we're concerned about people from those places.

Just a side comment though: when President Reagan initiated the amnesty program for those who had entered the country without documentation the Catholic Charity agencies in the Northeast geared up for what they knew would eventually be a flood of people from the South. To their surprise on the opening day **they were overwhelmed by amnesty seekers from Ireland and Iran.** Things are not always as we see them.

But there is no question that people **from Mexico** have been coming into Oklahoma over the last generation in growing numbers. **We all have our stories of what this kind of immigration has meant but I'll give you one figure.** A Spanish language cable TV station from Los Angeles bought a cable station in Oklahoma City in order to broaden its market. This cable company published its study about why it decided to move to OKC. They said there were **44,730** households in Oklahoma County that preferred its media in Spanish. Take a moment to digest that figure; that's almost 200,000 people in Oklahoma City who prefer to watch television in cable in Spanish. Thank capitalism for responding to a market we might not know about.

And the presence of so many from the South who speak Spanish and are here without adequate documentation has prompted a great deal of anxiety from a number of places.

There are those who are afraid so many foreigners upset the balance of civil society.

There are those who are convinced that having so many here without adequate documentation is a security risk.

And there are those who are anxious about the ultimate impact of those whose values and experience are so different than our own.

Of course there are also those who are just upset that so many people are so different and that isn't good.

The recent laws passed have attempted to deal with many of these concerns, all focused on a need to deal with the impact of so many recent immigrants.

These concerns are, of course, real. The US cannot be the receiving country for the entire world. Indeed, it is a measure of our success as a country that many do wish to come here. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some of the concerns spoken and written about are misplaced.

I would like to mention just a few.

It is not true that immigrants come here and get on welfare and bleed our communities dry. In fact, without documentation it is not possible for immigrants to qualify for anything except for help in the most extreme situations. In fact, the most common reason for people to come to the US from Mexico is to work. Anyone who hasn't seen that hasn't seen the immigrant community. They work.

Immigrants do pay taxes. Documents are not necessary. The truth is that most immigrants without adequate documentation have some kind of social security number, which means they pay into a system from which they will never draw benefits, to the tune of billions of dollars every year.

But leave that to the side: any person from any place who walks into a 7/11 and buys a Coke is a **one hundred percent economic citizen**, contributing to the profit margin and paying all of the taxes involved in that business. Multiply the houses rented, the sales taxes and property taxes paid, the gas purchased, the cars bought, the excise taxes realized on these transactions and we get some notion of what immigration realizes in Oklahoma. Or do we really want 40,000 householders to abandon their homes, quit their jobs and leave their neighborhoods? Is that the pathway to prosperity in Oklahoma County?

I need not mention that the emergency rooms, classrooms and police squad rooms are all paid for by taxes collected from every person who exchanges anything over 15 cents. These are taxes levied by voting citizens on **everyone**. If they are not enough, if we somehow resent that our schools are full, then we have to realize they are being paid for by the taxes we voted on for everyone to pay, including those who fill them. If the taxes are not sufficient then we can of course vote to raise them.

Ultimately the question comes to this: **are we better off without these people in our presence?** Some would have us believe we are. They insist these people are breaking the law and therefore are not fit to live among us. Let them become legal residents and then they will deserve the right to be here. There are two problems with this position.

The first is this: there is virtually no way for an ordinary person to become a legal resident from Mexico. The average person who desires to immigrate legally has virtually no access to the process. No serious criticism of undocumented immigration can simply insist on having people get in line when there are no lines, to initiate a procedure in which there are no procedures and to look forward to realizing the goal of residency where there is no prospect of ever achieving it.

The second is: as Ruben Navarrete says, we greet people at the borders with two signs. One says “Keep Out” and the other says, “Help Wanted.” People come here to work. We can’t imagine they are an occupying army that got here and forced us to let them pour our concrete, pick our apples, care for our children and mow our lawns. And critique of lawless immigration has to take into account our collective willingness to employ large numbers of people to do hard work for low wages.

And we should remind ourselves, this is not some new phenomenon that has just poked its head in our door. I have been ordained for more than 30 years and I have worked with as many undocumented people as documented beginning my first day at the altar. And we have not been bothered by it terribly.

In my first assignment in the Oklahoma Panhandle I visited and had services for a feedlot in which about 20 men from Mexico worked. They lived in a lean-to attached to the working barn where sick cattle were doctored. They had a series of bunk beds, two couches, a stove and a picnic table and they were locked onto the feedlot six months at a time. I saw it with my own eyes. **Any complaint about those who work has to include what the price of their work includes.**

And we have to acknowledge that the work done by those without documents or with inadequate documentation is not a fringe phenomenon; it has included some of the largest corporations and some of the largest enterprises in our state. We should pause for a moment and ask ourselves, what do we think of when we think of agriculture, meat-packing, construction, oil well servicing and janitorial maintenance? If we don't say we think of brown faces then either we haven't been around these industries or we're not honest.

Anxiety about undocumented immigration is certainly appropriate. But we have to acknowledge it isn't all just about those who have made it north of the border recently. **It has something to do with the structure of how things are done, a structure we citizens have built.**

When considering the question of immigration we should keep in mind several facts.

1. **Immigration is about people.** We can talk about this in statistics and worries, but our words come down to people. When we begin to talk about what must be done or how the laws should be written we're dealing with the lives of people. Many of the provisions of the laws recently passed have as their consequence the intentional immiseration of people, including making miserable citizens born here who are as American as George Bush but are too young to complain.

2. **Immigration from Mexico has been a fact for a long time.** It has reached a tipping point in which it has recently come to the notice of people in a big way, but it has been present in Oklahoma for at least 30 years, to which I can testify. When talking about dealing with undocumented immigration, do we really want all of those who have come to leave? **Or do we just want the number to go down to where we're comfortable?** That is, what is it we're really asking for?
3. **Are we worse off because these people have come here?** Look around at Oklahoma City and ask whether the presence of those from Mexico and Central America has been a net negative or a net positive. Drive out to the towns in Western Oklahoma and ask the people there whether their towns would be better off without those whose roots are one day's drive and one generation's south of the border?

In the midst of all the percolating concerns about lawfulness and procedure, has any of the greatness of our capitol city or and of the dynamism of our state had to do with the drive, the work ethic or the desire of the most recently arrived? We might note that one of the complaints of people everywhere is **that the American Dream is dying. Curiously, it seems most alive in those most newly arrived, except of course where it has been deliberately deprived of them.**

4. **How we treat our immigrants is a measure of our greatness as a people.** I'm not just making that up; that comes directly out of the Book of Deuteronomy. We may make the case that we're not really responsible for what happens to these folks since we aren't really responsible for having them here. That may be true enough, but the bible doesn't really give us much room. We are responsible for those who come among us from another place because they are the most vulnerable and the most easily exploited. **They are also the most easy to blame and the most easy to forget about.**

It's not just in the Book of Deuteronomy. Look in the opening chapter of the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel suffered at the hands of the Egyptians because of threats invented by the Egyptians. Truth and social policy based on truth seem as hard to implement now as then. But the fallout from policies based on fearful anxiety is just as devastating today as yesterday.

In case we need to be reminded, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Jonah, Ruth, David and, indeed, the whole nation of Israel, were all immigrants. So were Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Paul, Peter, the apostle John and John Mark. It is not only the US and not only our time in which immigration is a concern.

5. Would anyone come to a place in which they were despised, their language and religion were suspect, their practices pitied, their values attacked and their presence resented, where they will live and die and be buried away from the culture, language and people they are related to, **unless they had to?** Would you?

6. **The generational transitions of those who have come follow the same patterns as previous immigrants.**

The first generation is monolingual, the second generation is bilingual and the third generation is monolingual, just as happened with the Czechs, the Irish, the French, the Slovaks and the Germans. Well, except for the Germans. In my family they spoke German for a hundred years after they arrived. Not so with the Spanish speaking. You want to know what the parents from Mexico who gather together for parties and reunions yell to their kids? They yell, Speak Spanish!

The Catholic Bishops have proposed a series of immigration reforms that try to deal with the concerns present among us. Their principles are:

- A. **A workers' program with rights and protections** – If people are seeking employment and there is employment here then it would seem to be a match beneficial to both. We are in the odd position in which capital flows freely across borders but labor does not. This is not the first time capital and labor have different rights and that preference is given to money over people, but employment programs could work for everyone.

B. **Secure Borders** – Every country has the right to secure borders. We certainly do as a people. To secure our border is in the interest of our country. There is a notion that goes around that our border, stretching from San Diego to Brownsville, is somehow slanted toward the interest of Mexico rather than us. We might at least acknowledge that the border was established by the US, and the US Army, to our intent, benefit and purpose by conquest. It was not established by the people of Mexico.

C. **An earned pathway to citizenship** – There should be a way for sincere people with sincere interests to earn their way to citizenship in the country. **Now that pathway is closed off to millions. This includes many young people who are educated here, including through college, who have no way of ever becoming legal residents.** Many of them were brought here as infants and know no other country, some know no other language than English, and they have no realistic way of becoming a US citizen. There should be some means to earn a way to citizenship, not as a gift but as an acknowledgement that participation in the life of the country is a value, for those who would like to achieve it as well as for those of us who already have it.

D. **Family unification** – Families split apart by immigration policies are not good for the commonweal. This includes families who are all US citizens except for one spouse, who can be deported any time.

This is also important in that **we normally imagine we know the contours of foreignness and the boundaries of good order, when in fact we often do not.**

A friend of mine was born in Oklahoma. When he was three months old his mother took him to live in Mexico. He came back when he was in the 10th grade and finished high school here. After graduation he enlisted in the Army. He did two tours in Iraq and was held up as part of the Army's stop-loss program. After his enlistment time was over he spent an additional four months in Iraq on a third tour. Then he got out he married his high school sweetheart. She is a woman born in Mexico whose parents moved to Oklahoma when she was three months old. She looks and sounds American; he looks and sounds Mexican. Any presumption of who belongs here is exactly reversed in fact. She is the one who needs a pathway to family reunification because she is the one who still needs to have her immigration status updated. I think he has earned the right to have his wife's case expedited.

Of course there is the concern about those who have broken the law in coming here and staying here. Indeed, this has been so deeply felt that not complying with immigration laws are now regarded as criminal felonies rather than as misdemeanors. And good order is, of course, vital to the exercise of a good life.

But we should also ask whether good order is subject to good sense. During the twenty years in which the federally mandated maximum speed in the whole country was 55 miles/hour, did you ever exceed it? Did you ever acknowledge that the speed limit was posted at 55 but was really something like 62? When the speed limit was raised to its current 70 or 75 did you rejoice that finally good order would prevail in society and we could get our country back from the grip of lawless men who flaunted the law at every turn? Or were you happy that a foolish law honored by almost no one was finally changed to conform to appropriate circumstances?

We might take a lesson from another time not so long ago when patently illegal immigration was regularized, and it was based on the impossibility of undoing what was already done. It was a kind of legal amnesty. The laws were adjusted to make those already here legal residents. The immigrants were even valorized.

If you'll remember, when it came to **those** illegal immigrants we fixed up, we didn't just call them citizens, we called them, "Sooners".

451,000 engineering students in Mexico vs 370,000 in the US.

The bishops' program includes:

Comprehensive immigration reform –

- A workers' program with rights and protections
- Secure Borders
- Earned pathway to citizenship
- Family unification