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FAMILIES, NATIONS, AND IMMIGRATION: WHO COMES FIRST?

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The Politics of a Shared Meal

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“The family meal is the nursery of democracy.” – Michael Pollan

“All great change in America begins at the dinner table.” – Ronald Reagan

It is a Sunday evening, the first week of Lent, and I find myself in the dining room of a family I do not know, just a few blocks from the state capitol building in central Phoenix.

We eat chicken tacos served up with a generous helping of rice and fresh avocado, topped with lettuce and crema and washed down with a refreshing orange drink. It is a delicious meal.

It is also a gamble for everyone involved.

It’s a gamble on the part of this family, whose actual names I can’t share, because some of them are undocumented and are (understandably) afraid. It’s a gamble on the part of the group I’ve come with, from my Anglican church in a different part of town. And it’s a gamble on the part of Neighborhood Ministries, the local organization that has brought us together.

Living as we do in a time of anxiety, division, and fear, the wager is this: that something important can happen around the dinner table that is unlikely to happen anywhere else. Put simply, that sharing a meal is not only a matter of lived theology but is also a profoundly political act.

Our group is participating in a pilot project called “Neighbor’s Table,” a six-month discipleship program designed to incorporate the sharing of a meal and conversation with an immigrant family into a study of the Bible’s teachings on God’s heart for the immigrant. The project has been spearheaded by Kit Danley, founder of Neighborhood Ministries; Dennaë Pierre, executive director of the Surge Network;

and Doug Kelley, professor of social and behavioral sciences at Arizona State University, who secured a small grant to make the project possible.

Just before dinner, we had gathered with pastors and members of three other churches – a Southern Baptist church plant, a multiethnic church affiliated with The Gospel Coalition, and a non-denominational megachurch – for a brief time of orientation and teaching.

In her introductory comments, Dennae Pierre reminded us that while white evangelicals may have a variety of opinions about issues related to immigration, the families we were about to meet didn't have the luxury of abstraction. For them, immigration policy was very often a matter of life and death – it was about fathers and mothers, daughters and sons.

“When these families open up and tell us their stories, we enter a sacred space,” she reminded us. “Let's honor these stories.”

Kit Danley then invited us to consider the narrative of the Bible and to pay particular attention to the themes that repeat themselves, including God's special concern for the sojourner in our midst and the insistence that we have more in common with “the foreigner” than we may think:

“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)

“Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.” (Deuteronomy 24:17-18)

“He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)

“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:34)

These passages, Danley notes, have at least two themes in common. First, we are commanded to *act justly* toward the immigrants among us. “Do not oppress,” “Do not deprive,” “You are to love,” and “Love them as yourself” – taken together, the injunction is far-reaching and beyond dispute. Second, we are commanded to *remember* where we came from. The Hebrews were oppressed foreigners in Egypt; they of all people ought to know what that experience is like and, in turn, wish it upon no one.

These themes continue in the New Testament as well. Jesus, whose parents took him to Egypt as an infant to escape violence in their home country, later identifies with the stranger we have or have not welcomed – using uncomfortably strong language to do so (Matthew 25:31-46). And as the mysterious author of the letter to the Hebrews writes, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (13:2).

Translating these teachings into public policy is where things get tricky. It is right for the federal government to create and uphold immigration law, but as Christians, we have the responsibility to

advocate on behalf of the foreigners in our midst – especially when the very integrity of families is on the line, as it is under our nation’s current laws.

Which brings us back to the dinner table – a learning lab for neighborliness and citizenship, the place where we might just learn to act justly and to remember rightly.

Our dinner hosts tell us of fleeing their home in Mexico in 2003. It had been nearly impossible to find work sufficient to support them. And due to the ever-growing presence of drug cartels in their town, the need to leave soon became urgent. First came the father, alone and on foot. The mother and their three children came a week later, also by foot. Two children have since been born in the United States, making them a family of seven.

One son, who we’ll call Carlos, is now in his early twenties. He tells us in perfect English of the moment he understood what it meant to be undocumented. Along with some eighth-grade classmates he had worked diligently on a competition at school and his team won. The prize? It was huge: the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go watch the NFL Draft in New York City, some 2,500 miles away. But Carlos didn’t have papers, so he couldn’t go. It crushed him.

Later on, Carlos graduated high school, and after the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy was established in 2012, he was able to attend community college. That education gave him the skills he needed to start his own photography business, where he specializes in portraits. He also helps run the Barrio Works bike shop, which repairs, refurbishes, and sells used bicycles while teaching hands-on skills to other young people, some of whom have stories similar to his own.

Carlos still lives at home with his parents and younger siblings, but he is now engaged and will soon be moving out. Life doesn’t stop when your legality is in limbo. Time is democratic that way; it keeps moving, whether we have papers or not.

The father of the family, Rafael, works at a company that manufactures embroidery machines and is the main breadwinner for the house. Changes to his immigration status years ago gave him permission to work legally – for now – though the family fears his status could be revoked at any time.

The mother, Valeria, meanwhile, cares for the younger kids at home (and makes delicious tacos, as we already know). She wishes she could work at a daycare center to earn some extra income, but doing so would be illegal, and getting in trouble with the law is something nobody in this family can afford to do.

This warm, soft-spoken woman who has invited us into her home describes the experience of living in constant fear of the unknown – mostly in the form of scrutiny from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. This fear has curtailed their ability to move about freely. And even here, in this home and around this table, they do not feel safe. “When someone knocks at the door, there’s always fear,” she says. “If we make one mistake, we’re done.”

Through all of this, Valeria has maintained her composure. The moment tears come to her eyes is when she tells us about the nephew who died unexpectedly back home in Mexico. She desperately wanted to be with her sister and mother and other family during this time of grief, to comfort them and offer practical kinds of help, but because of her immigration status, returning to her hometown is simply not an option.

One of the ways the staff of Neighborhood Ministries have found to walk in solidarity with these families is to organize memorial services for relatives who have died in Mexico or elsewhere, whose bereaved sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles are unable to travel for the funeral. In this way, families commemorate the lives of those they have never stopped loving, despite the many miles – and years, or even decades – that have separated them.

Valeria is clearly grateful for the opportunities living in the United States has afforded her family, rudimentary as those opportunities may appear. Her two youngest children are citizens. The older children have DACA status and her husband remains employed – although, again, there are no guarantees. “Despite all the bad,” she says, “coming here was still the best decision.”

There is at the same time a weariness in her voice. When someone asks her how she responds to the kinds of things the president has said about immigrants, she responds matter-of-factly, without all the emotion I’d expect. Valeria says all she can do is to tell her story, to let people like us know that families like hers aren’t doing harm to this country we love. They simply want the opportunity to live safely together in one place, to be good neighbors, and to build a better life.

As for change at the policy level, Valeria knows there’s only so much she can do. “We don’t have a voice,” she says. “We cannot vote. So we depend on you.”

Following dinner at our respective host homes, we reconvened for a time of discussion about what we had just experienced. One participant shared about a couple that has been dating for nearly 20 years. They have kids together but have waited to get married because doing so could negatively impact their employment status. But in a big answer to prayer, their papers just arrived, and now they’re planning their long-awaited wedding.

In our discussion we also talked about the overall sense of vulnerability moving across the dinner table in both directions, with immigrant families bravely opening up to strangers about their legal situations, while visiting group members risked asking questions that may have exposed their ignorance about some aspect of immigration policy or the overall experience of being undocumented.

We discussed the excruciating decisions so many of these family members have been forced to make, between seeking better opportunities apart or choosing a much more difficult way of life that would enable them to keep the family together, if they could survive. One thing was clear: sacrifice is an unavoidable way of life for these families. It’s just a matter of which kind.

The “Neighbor’s Table” project remains ongoing. Over the coming months, this small group from our church will meet together to continue to process what we have experienced. We’ll ask the questions that are haunting us, we’ll listen, and we’ll pray. We’ll also continue to study the Bible’s teaching on God’s heart for the immigrant. At the end of this time, we will gather once more with participants from other churches to share what we have been learning and how we are being led to befriend our immigrant neighbors and to advocate on their behalf.

It remains to be seen what changes will occur in our lives, our churches, our neighborhoods, and in halls of power. This project is a gamble, after all. But what if?

What if the simple act of sharing a meal and hearing each other's stories can begin to bridge the gaps between us?

What if the catechesis of cable television can begin to be undone when humans meet other humans – over chicken tacos, perhaps – who render narratives of fear untrue?

What if Christians in this country, even just a few of us, were to extend our concern for the family – “the most basic of human institutions,” as the Center for Public Justice Guideline on the Family puts it – to protecting and preserving the families of the most vulnerable among us, whose lives have all too often been torn apart by policies that cannot be reconciled with a biblical understanding of justice?

What if all great change in America really does begin at the dinner table?

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