



Listening to Immigrant Voices

Welcome, Identity, Belonging

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I am keenly and painfully aware that my reflection on being an immigrant in The United States of America will be viewed by the reader as both particular to me and resonant with the stories of many. I expect that *my* story will evoke in countless “others” memories of their own and their families’ stories which are particular and, also, share commonalities of joy and delight, and of pain and sadness. Indeed, following the news about immigrants and the movements of people to borders and across borders presents us with challenging questions concerning the meaning of welcome, identity, and belonging.

I was born into the post-World-War-II world of the British Empire. I was born and raised in British Guiana, which, since 26 May 1966, has been the independent, English-speaking nation of Guyana on the northeast coast of South America. Around the 1850s, 1880s, and 1890s, my ancestors were brought as indentured immigrants from Uttar Pradesh in northeast India to the British colony, which was regarded by many then, and for years afterward, as a “backwater” place.

With the effectiveness of the Abolition Movement in Britain and the pressure of economic forces, 1834 was to mark the end of African slavery in the British colonies. However, through pressure from the plantocracy and its supporters in the British Parliament, an ineffectual and short-lived system of apprenticeship to prepare former slaves to be “free” workers that began in 1834 was ended prematurely in 1838. Without a large and steady labor force, the sugar plantations across the Caribbean would be ruined. The need for cheap, manipulable labor to work on the sugar plantations was acute. The “best” scheme that was devised was indentureship, which included small numbers of both Portuguese emigrants from the island of Madeira and Chinese emigrants, and overwhelmingly large numbers of emigrants from India. The scheme, characterised by the subtle and obvious use of the principle of “divide and rule,” saved the sugar plantations from ruin; and it engendered racial-ethnic divisions and conflicts among the diverse population comprised of six racial-ethnic groups.

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Born and socialized in that hybrid milieu, to know what it means to be “immigrant” and to long to belong are part of our DNA. In the “divide and rule” world of colonialism, physical and other characteristics—obvious and hidden—filled us with elusive questions of identity and belonging, of superiority and inferiority. Concomitantly, those questions continue to prompt the ethical and moral question: How will you make judgements about “others,” whom you have been “raised” to see as your superior who has power over you or as your inferior over whom you have some measure of power? We internalize structures of power and make decisions based on that internalization. Stereotyping of self and others becomes endemic.

Back in 1974, when I received the welcome letter of admission from Wartburg Theological Seminary to which I had applied to study for the Master of Divinity degree, and saw on the accompanying I-20 form that I was granted a full scholarship as an international student, I did not act on my delight, which my family, friends, members of the church, missionary pastor, and spouse shared; and I did not immediately begin to prepare for the trip to the U.S.A. Instead, I placed the envelope among my books and went about the routine of the closing of the school year of the high school where I taught history and mathematics. As the days progressed in early July, my father asked me, “Son, why don’t you want to go to the seminary? You have always wanted

to be a pastor.” I replied to him, “I don’t want to take the scholarship, for people will think that I am going to sponge off them!” After a short time of silence, my father replied, “Son, that’s not the only reason.” I said, “No, Daddy, if it were Jamaica, where people look like you and me, that would be okay. If I go to the States, people will look down on me.” My father gently said, “Son, don’t judge people before you meet them. People are people.” This was from a gentleman who, along with his older brother, as a soldier in the Royal Air Force, had served King and Empire during the Second World War and had experienced racism, about which he did not tell us. It was many years later after he died that my mother shared a wee bit about what he had told her about his experience in England. In 1986, in Jamaica, I met one of my father’s RAF mates, named Winston, who spoke warmly about their friendship. They had last seen each other when they parted in England, at the end of the War, in 1945, and his mate left for Jamaica.

Recognizing for oneself that the immigrant from many parts of the world is seen as “other” is crucial to one’s liberation. However, one needs to resist the notion that thereby one has nothing to give, that one is an inveterate taker, and an undeserving one at that! This is a resistance for the sake of one’s well-being, and it is for the sake of all those who are lumped together as “other” who are inferior. In the power dynamics that are evident in social exchanges with both those whom you know and those who are strangers, one might turn the experience of being “other” into a positive. Let me say that that strategy is not universally applicable, but its usefulness may arise in situations of “privilege” to which the “other,” albeit an immigrant, may have access.

By appearance and through my Guyanese-Caribbean-English accent, I am asked from time to time, “Where are you from? Are you Indian? You remind me of someone from....” Several years ago, as I took my seat on a flight (as I recall from Newark, New Jersey, to Chicago O’Hare), the chap sitting next to the window and I acknowledged each other. He must have heard me speaking to the flight attendant, for, after a while, he asked me, “Are you Indian?” I replied, “Yes, but not quite.” He asked, “Are you from Trinidad?” I replied, “Not quite, I am from Guyana, about an hour’s flight from Trinidad.” I knew why he had asked me about Trinidad as my country of origin, so I asked him why Trinidad. He shared, “My wife is from Trinidad.” My conclusion was that his wife was an Indo-Trinidadian. As we continued our conversation, I learned that he was a scientist on the faculty of one of the most prestigious universities in the U.S.A. He was travelling to attend a meeting in California as a consultant. He, in turn, asked me what I did. When I told him that I teach theology in a Lutheran seminary, there was a long pause. Eventually, he turned to me and said, “I gave up on the church a long time ago. Scientists (he spoke in underwhelming terms about himself) have telescopes

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and can see galaxies upon galaxies; you mean to tell me that the only ones God is concerned about are human beings!?” In cricketing terms, he had bowled me a googly (a ball deceptively bowled to turn in the opposite direction than the arm action of the bowler would indicate). I responded with, “Christians are beginning to pay more attention to texts in the Bible like Colossians where the writer says, “... in [Christ] all things hold together” (1:17b). After a pause he said, “Why doesn’t the church say that some more?”

As an immigrant, I know that I am part of a confluence of stories that form the history of the nation. When we look at our histories—local, national, and global—and their aftermaths; when we look at our contemporary world, we are keenly aware of the unavoidable existential reality that well-being, mutual respect, and support have existed and exist together *along with* conflict, war, hatred and resentment, violence and destruction, division and separation.

Through the lens of being immigrant, the stories of Ruth, a Moabite; of Esther, a Jew in Persia; of the baby Jesus, whose parents took him to Egypt for protection (Matt 2:13–15), who eventually grew up in Nazareth (Matt 2:19–23), about which Nathanael asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46)—among other stories in Scripture—offer hope and liberation.

As immigrants, we come from contexts that share commonalities. We come from contexts—local, regional, national, and global—that are significantly different from one another. When we speak of hope in God, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are speaking of the new creation that God offers to all, for Jesus came for the whole world; we are speaking that message of hope, the Gospel, the good news, to people in diverse settings divided and separated by socio-political, economic, and ideological forces. We are witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that does not call us to ignore those forces and pretend that they do not exist. We acknowledge the reality of those forces, but we do so in light of God’s promise in Jesus Christ, who broke the power of death and offers life and wholeness to all.

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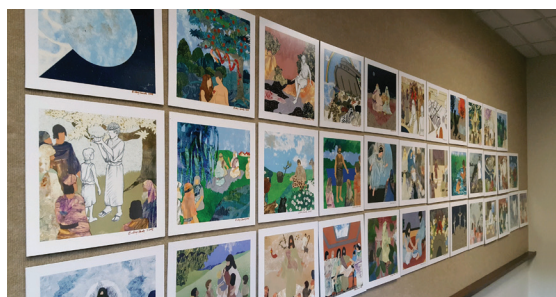
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