



Listening to Immigrant Voices I am an Immigrant

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No one wants to be an immigrant. People leave their motherland and come into another country to live for a variety of reasons. The immigrant identity is unfortunately associated with negative generalizations. Immigrant becomes synonymous with poor, dirty, uncivilized, uneducated, and unproductive. Immigrant communities are forced to live their lives under a cloud of fear, suspicion, and hostility. “I am an immigrant” cannot be an identity claim, but is rather rendered a stigma.

My husband and I relocated to pursue theological education in the United States in 2005, and we decided to stay because my husband received a call to minister to the growing Chinese communities in Quincy, Massachusetts. I myself have a vocation for teaching and I am also elected to serve on the Church Council of the ELCA. My life in the U.S. is typically characterized by a mix of wonderment and unease. It never ceases to amaze me how open people in the U.S. are to innovation and how charitable they are whenever donations are requested. But I am also perplexed by those uncomfortable stares I received in school, grocery stores, restaurants, and subway stations. It is hard to make friends, let alone to have others accept you as their equal. As I process the cultural differences, I feel “othered” so quickly. It holds true particularly in the way I speak. I speak with a foreign accent. The inability to speak fluent and standard American English makes one less intelligent. Some immigrant parents I have encountered even ask their children to speak only English at home, so as to deconstruct their ethnic identity.

The shame ingrained in one’s accent and the immigrant status in general tells how racism successfully belittles the other and how prejudice permeates all aspects of society. It is not surprising to see that the presence of our congregation, a Cantonese-speaking one, can be a threat in the neighborhood. One morning our church received a call from a woman who complained about the sign against the fence just outside the church parking lot. It was a bilingual sign that had the name of this new Chinese church written in English and Chinese. In the seventy-five years of the Anglo congregation—where the new Chinese church is worshipping—this kind of complaint was unheard of. The woman first uttered two strong words with her native Boston accent: “Bad taste.” She went on to demand that the congregation take down the sign immediately, or else she would file an eyesore complaint with the City Council.

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Any act that attempts to erase the otherness of immigrants aims to subjugate the less normative group. Building walls, setting up barriers, and developing horrendous stereotypes against outsiders only legitimizes ideological exclusion. These forms of social control are commonplace to preserve the power of vested interest groups. Born and raised in Hong Kong, I belong to the majority-group. I have seen how immigrants and migrant workers suffer from systemic discrimination. I know how ugly strategic marginalization of immigrants can get. I understand how miserable a society is when it is built upon a history of immigration and now turns itself into one that advocates strict immigration enforcement. From being part of the majority-group in my birthplace to becoming one of the marginalized people, I have greater sympathy and empathy to the trauma of those invisible communities. I can no longer remain silent to bigoted remarks and rhetoric against immigrants. To share my story in Hong Kong does not aim to determine which society is worse in regard to immigration policy and thus incite feelings of guilt.

When it comes to rethinking the relationship between citizen and immigrant, it is not simply about being nice to immigrants. It is more about subverting the immigrant narrative. Situated in the space of in-between-ness, I realize the urgent need to re-imagine the immigrant discourse. The way you see people is the way you treat them. Identity reconstruction is a crucial step to do justice to the historically marginalized communities.

As we reread history, we start to question how society has shaped and constructed our idea of immigrants. Its biased and inconsistent portrayal of human beings is further confronted by the biblical accounts of humanity’s relationship with God and also with other people. Deeply rooted in the image of God, each

individual is created full of dignity for the glory of God. Inherent in *imago Dei* is the incontestable value of each individual regardless of language, culture, ethnicity, and religious tradition. “Made in the image of God” therefore seeks a new direction of understanding the immigrant identity by lifting up the intrinsic value of individuals. The claim that “I am an immigrant” becomes totally subversive: I am not inferior to you. I am created as beautiful as you are. The new identity challenges the dominant discourse on otherness that aims to demonize and denigrate. It further helps construct the selfhood in the marginalized individuals. “I am an immigrant” makes a powerful announcement that immigrants are an active participant in the human history. Immigrants are not a homogenous group of people waiting to be “saved;” instead, they are gifted individuals who bring positive contributions to respective societies and the world.

When we change the discursive system, we mean to bring in a new set of social behaviors that can build mutuality between one another. How do we speak rightly and justly about others and their unique talents and gifts? How do we affirm the subjectivity and agency of each individual through linguistic means? Humans are more than spiritual and corporeal beings. Humans are also created as social beings in relation to others. We need to build relationships. But we also need to build closeness. We embrace the life of one another, for we are part of God’s creation. We are

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morally and ethically responsible for the well-being of the other. To stand with immigrants means to shift the power relations in the currents of global immigration. To stand with immigrants means to reject any story that deprives a human being of being human.

“I am an immigrant” becomes a new discourse that breaks boundaries and dismantles exclusionary ideologies. The encounter with immigrants allows ourselves to be changed and our assumptions of the world challenged. Every immigrant story is a learning moment that opens new avenues to the faithfulness of God for all peoples. I can proudly declare that I am an immigrant.