Called to Journey, Called to Welcome

A Biblical Perspective on Immigration



CHURCH & SOCIETY
The United Methodist Church

Living FAITH Seeking JUSTICE Pursuing PEACE

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Called to Welcome

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Genesis 12: Called to Journey, Called to Welcome: A Biblical Perspective on Immigration

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- **Recognize the Call to Being Hospitable** – Explore how Abram's journey in Genesis 12 mirrors the experiences of immigrants today and how God's call to "go" includes the responsibility to welcome and care for the sojourner.
- **Understand the Principle of God's Blessing Beyond Borders** – Examine how God's covenant with Abram ("all peoples on earth will be blessed through you") challenges communities of faith to see immigrants not as outsiders, but as integral to God's vision of mutual flourishing.
- **Navigate Faithful Risk and Sacred Welcome** – Discuss the risks Abram took in leaving his homeland and how communities can embody faith by creating spaces of radical welcome for those seeking safety, opportunity, and belonging.

Time of Lesson: 75 minutes

Opening Story

Ivon Matamoros is a DREAMer who came to the United States from Mexico when she was 15 years old. She has lived in Arizona with her parents and sisters since that time. After graduating from high school in Phoenix, she got engaged and planned to marry in March 2011. Ivon has always been very active in her church, which is where she met her husband. She and her husband now have a nine-month-old U.S. citizen daughter named Zurisadai.

The day before her wedding, Ivon was arrested during a worksite raid conducted by Sheriff Arpaio's Maricopa County Sheriff's Office. Ivon was detained and charged with using false documents, which is a felony under Arizona law. She had no previous criminal convictions. Because Ivon came to the United States as a child, she is eligible to temporarily remain in the United States under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. She was working at the restaurant to earn money to pay for her DACA fees.

Ivon became ineligible for DACA and legalization because of her felony conviction under Arizona law. She now faces deportation and permanent separation from her family.

Source: Immigrant Defense Project ; Immigrant families: The Matamoros Family

Biblical Story

In Genesis 12, Abram is called by God to leave his homeland and journey to an unfamiliar place, relying on faith and divine promise. His migration is not just about personal destiny but about becoming a vessel of blessing for "all peoples on earth." This passage reflects the realities of immigrants today — leaving behind the familiar in pursuit of safety, opportunity, and a future shaped by faith and hope. Abram's journey reminds us that migration is a deeply spiritual act, often filled with uncertainty but also with the possibility of renewal and blessing. His story challenges us to see those who migrate not as strangers to be feared, but as fellow travelers in God's unfolding plan.

As people of faith, we are called to embrace the example set in Genesis 12 by extending radical hospitality to immigrants and sojourners. Just as Abram was welcomed in new lands and became a source of

blessing, we too are invited to create communities where the alien is not just tolerated but embraced as part of God's vision for mutual flourishing. Welcoming the immigrant is not an optional act of charity — it is a fundamental reflection of God's covenant with humanity. By standing in solidarity with those who journey in faith, we become active participants in the same divine story of movement, promise, and hope that began with Abram.

History

The narrative of Abram's migration in Genesis 12 provides a theological framework for understanding immigration as a sacred journey marked by faith, uncertainty, and divine promise. Abram's departure from his homeland mirrors the experience of countless immigrants who leave behind familiarity in pursuit of safety and opportunity. His journey is not solely for his own benefit but is deeply tied to God's covenantal vision, in which he becomes a blessing to all nations. This theological lens challenges contemporary faith communities to view immigration not merely as a political or economic issue but as a moral and spiritual concern. The biblical imperative to welcome the sojourner, embedded in Abram's story, underscores the ethical responsibility to support those seeking refuge and stability in new lands.

A historical parallel to this narrative can be found in the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which provided a structured yet imperfect pathway for refugees to resettle in the United States, particularly those displaced by World War II. Like Abram, these individuals embarked on uncertain journeys, propelled by the hope of security and a better life. However, legislative barriers and restrictive quotas reflect the tension between the ideals of welcome and the realities of exclusion. Examining this policy through the lens of Genesis 12 invites critical reflection on how contemporary immigration laws align — or fail to align — with the biblical mandate of hospitality. By engaging this intersection of

scripture and policy, faith communities can cultivate a more just and compassionate response to immigration, recognizing that, like Abram, today's immigrants carry not only personal aspirations but also the potential to contribute to the broader flourishing of society.

Statistics:

- *Only 37% of all immigrants and a mere14% of detained immigrants have legal representation in court. (www.immigrantjustice.org)*
- *Approximately 70% of organizations provide long-term services for immigrants at their final destinations, while 50% offer short-term assistance, such as temporary housing or transportation, upon release from detention. (www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org)*

United Methodist Resources:

Resolution 4271: Welcoming the Migrant to the US
Accompaniment Guide

Actions That Can Be Taken:

- Action Alerts: Protecting Sensitive Locations Act
- Learn about the local detention centers in your area
- Develop a trauma-informed care ministry

Reflective Questions:

1. What concrete steps can my church or faith community take to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for immigrants?
2. How can we shift the public narrative about immigration to reflect a theology of mutual blessing rather than fear or exclusion?

3. What specific policies — such as pathways to citizenship, asylum protections, or humane border practices — should I advocate for in alignment with biblical principles?

For Further Reading:

1. Pastoral Letter Addressing the Plight of Migrants, Immigrants and Refugees in the US Epiphany 2025
2. *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong* by Karen Gonzalez

Leviticus 19: Faithful Justice: Immigration, Holiness, and the Call to Righteousness

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- **Examine the Ethical Call to Holiness** – Explore how Leviticus 19 connects holiness with social justice, emphasizing fair treatment of immigrants.
- **Analyze Systems of Exploitation** – Identify contemporary economic and legal structures that harm immigrant communities and compare them to biblical principles.
- **Cultivate a Theology of Advocacy** – Develop faith-based strategies for resisting unjust immigration policies and supporting immigrant rights.
- **Practice Radical Hospitality** – Learn practical ways to create inclusive and supportive spaces for immigrants within faith communities.

Time of Lesson: 75 minutes

Opening Story

Rosario Ortiz was among the earliest to receive Deferred Action for Labor Enforcement (DALE) protections in Las Vegas. (Approved applicants receive a work permit and temporary protection from deportation for two years.)

The 39-year-old came to Las Vegas from Veracruz, Mexico, more than two decades ago. He spent time working in a restaurant and as a handyman. Then, seven years ago, he got a job with a painting company called Unforgettable Coatings.

The problems started with his first paycheck. He says he wasn't paid for two days and also hadn't earned time-and-a-half for overtime, despite working more than 60 hours a week. In fact, Unforgettable Coatings had been cited by the U.S. Labor Department five years earlier for illegal pay practices.

Ortiz says his coworkers were angry but also fearful. When they complained to supervisors, he says, they were rebuffed.

"They said that we had to be grateful to the boss for giving us work, and that because we were undocumented, not everyone would give us work," Ortiz says in Spanish. "We had to thank him."

In 2019, a small group of workers began talking with labor investigators. The threats continued, according to Ortiz.

The following year, a federal court issued an order, prohibiting the company from retaliating against employees who cooperated with investigators. The court found the company had "more likely than not" made statements "intending to quash cooperation."

After President Joseph R. Biden came into office, the Arriba Las Vegas worker center wrote to the Labor Department, asking that current and former employees of Unforgettable Coatings be given protection from deportation so they could testify.

The workers' participation in the investigation eventually led to a settlement in January 2023.

Cory Summerhays, founder and CEO of Unforgettable Coatings, agreed to pay more than $3.6 million in back wages and damages to 593 workers across four states.

Source: Andrea Hsu, NPR (Read full story)

Biblical Story

Leviticus 19 is a profound chapter outlining the ethical expectations of God's people. Leviticus 19:33-34 explicitly commands: *"When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. 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."* This passage highlights that God's holiness is expressed not only in worship but also in social and economic justice.

Today, immigrants face significant hardships, including unfair wages, poor working conditions, and legal vulnerability. Exploitation is rampant in industries that rely on immigrant labor, from agriculture to domestic work. The biblical mandate in Leviticus 19 calls for justice, urging us to reject practices that dehumanize and oppress.

As people of faith, we must confront the systems that enable exploitation and advocate for policies that honor the dignity and contributions of immigrants. Loving the stranger is not an optional act of kindness; it is a divine command rooted in our shared history of displacement and deliverance.

History

Leviticus 19 presents a radical vision of justice that resonates throughout history. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, waves of immigrants arrived in the United States seeking opportunity. But they often encountered prejudice and systemic barriers. The exploitation of Chinese laborers during the railroad expansion; the poor working conditions faced by Mexican farmworkers allowed temporarily into the U.S. under the Bracero Program; and the ongoing struggles of undoc-

umented workers all reflect the failure to uphold the biblical call to fairness and love.

One historical parallel is the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which, while ending racial quotas, failed to address the economic vulnerability of immigrant laborers. Today, policies like family separation, exploitative guest worker programs, and anti-immigrant rhetoric continue to violate the principles outlined in Leviticus 19. Faith communities must respond with advocacy, demanding just labor protections and pathways to legal status for those who contribute to society yet remain marginalized.

Statistics:

- Immigrants make up **73% of U.S. farmworkers**, yet many lack legal protections and face wage theft and unsafe conditions (National Agricultural Workers Survey).
- Undocumented immigrants contribute **billions in taxes** annually but are often ineligible for social benefits (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy).
- Immigrant workers in meatpacking and agriculture were **three times more likely** to contract COVID-19 due to lack of workplace protections (CDC Report, 2021).

United Methodist Resources:

- **Resolution 4271:** Welcoming the Migrant in the US
- **Resolution 4276:** The United Methodist Church is a Sanctuary Church
- **Immigration Accompaniment Guide**

Actions That Can Be Taken:

- Learn: Research local policies affecting immigrants and educate your community on the realities of exploitation.

- Advocate: Support fair labor laws, humane immigration policies, and protections for immigrant workers.
- Engage: Partner with immigrant-led organizations providing legal aid, housing support, and workplace protections.
- Resist: Challenge anti-immigrant rhetoric and economic systems that exploit vulnerable workers.

Reflective Questions:

1. In what ways does our faith community actively welcome and protect immigrants?
2. How do we challenge narratives that dehumanize and exploit immigrant workers?
3. What legislative changes should we advocate for to align our policies with the biblical principles of Leviticus 19?

For Further Reading:

- National Immigration Law Center
- United Methodist Church Social Principles on Immigration
- ***"Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal"*** by Aviva Chomsky

Deuteronomy 10: God's Love for the Sojourner

Learning Objectives:
By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- **Recognize the Divine Mandate for Hospitality** – Explore how Deuteronomy 10 emphasizes God's justice and love for the sojourner and how this call applies to communities today.
- **Understand the Call to Imitate God's Justice** – Examine how God's actions toward the sojourner set a model for human societies to follow.
- **Apply Theological Principles to Contemporary Immigration Issues** – Discuss the ways in which faith communities can embody God's command to welcome and protect the sojourner in modern contexts.

Time of Lesson: 75 minutes

Opening Story
I was born in Honduras in 1992. My father left for the United States when I was five, leaving me with my mother and sister. Our life was marred by poverty and domestic violence, especially after my mother partnered with Faustino, a man who frequently drank and became abusive.

One night, when I was 12, he assaulted me. When I confided in my mother, she didn't believe me and sent me away to work as a servant for his relatives. At 14, desperate for a new beginning, I persuaded my father to take me to the U.S. Our journey spanned over a month, during which I faced harrowing experiences, including being assaulted by armed men on a bus in Guatemala.

Upon reaching the United States, I hoped for safety and opportunity. However, the challenges persisted. Navigating life as an undocumented immigrant presented its own set of hardships, from the constant fear of deportation to limited access to basic services. Despite these obstacles, I remained determined to build a better future, drawing strength from my resilience and the hope that had fueled my journey.

Source: Soledad Castillo, excerpted from an article in The Guardian

Biblical Story

Deuteronomy 10:17-19 declares:

"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. 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."

The command to love the foreigner is rooted in Israel's own history. The Israelites were once foreigners in Egypt, experiencing the hardships of displacement and oppression. God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt was not only an act of salvation but also a reminder that their experience as strangers should shape how they treat others who are foreign among them.

This historical reminder serves as both a moral obligation and a theological directive. Just as God extended grace to Israel when they were oppressed foreigners, they are called to extend the same compassion and justice to those who find themselves as strangers within their own land. The call to love the sojourner is thus not an abstract principle

but a deeply personal command — because the people of Israel were once in the same vulnerable position.

This passage reveals a central truth: God's love extends beyond borders, demanding justice for those who are most vulnerable, including the immigrant. The call to love the sojourner is rooted in Israel's own historical experience of being strangers in Egypt. Just as God provided for them, they are commanded to care for others. This divine expectation remains relevant as societies wrestle with questions of migration, justice, and belonging.

History

The command in Deuteronomy 10 reflects a broader biblical narrative that consistently centers the experiences of migrants, exiles, and refugees. From the Exodus to the Babylonian exile, the people of God have experienced displacement and divine provision. The ethical imperative to care for the sojourner is not a mere suggestion but a requirement tied to God's own character.

A historical parallel is found in the 1980 Refugee Act, which established a framework for refugee resettlement in the U.S. Despite this, fluctuating policies and enforcement measures have shaped an inconsistent welcome for those fleeing danger. Examining this through the lens of Deuteronomy 10 calls faith communities to advocate for policies that reflect God's justice, ensuring that immigrants are treated with dignity and care.

Statistics:

- Immigrants make up approximately 14% of the U.S. population, yet they face disproportionate barriers in accessing legal protections and basic services. (American Immigration Council)

- Over 26 million people worldwide are refugees, with many seeking asylum in countries that have increasingly restrictive policies. (UNHCR)

United Methodist Resources:

- **Resolution 4271:** Welcoming the Migrant as a Biblical Mandate
- **Resolution 3332:** Global Racism and Xenophobia: Impact on Women, Children, and Youth
- Immigration Accompaniment Guide

Actions That Can Be Taken:

- Advocacy – Engage with local representatives on policies that support humane immigration reform.
- Community Support – Partner with local organizations providing legal aid, housing, and employment assistance to immigrants.
- Educational Initiatives – Host discussions and Bible studies on the theological call to welcome the sojourner.

Reflective Questions:

1. How does Deuteronomy 10 challenge common assumptions about immigration today?
2. What steps can my church take to actively reflect God's love for the sojourner?
3. In what ways can we advocate for policies that align with biblical principles of justice and hospitality?

For Further Reading:

- *Strangers in the Kingdom: Ministering to Refugees, Migrants, and the Stateless* by Rupen Das and Brent Hamoud

- *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* by M. Daniel Carroll R.
- National Immigration Forum
- UNHCR

Ezekiel 47: Welcoming the Stranger in the Flow of God's Justice

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- **Understand Ezekiel 47 as a Vision of Inclusion** – Recognize how the passage speaks to God's expansive justice, where even foreigners are granted inheritance among God's people.
- **Connect the River of Life to Migration** – Reflect on how God's flowing presence brings restoration and inclusion, calling us to advocate for immigrants and displaced people.
- **Explore the Church's Role in Immigration Justice** – Identify practical ways faith communities can be places of welcome, sanctuary, and advocacy for migrants.

Time of Lesson: 75 minutes

Opening Story

In March 2003, the Homeland Security Act set into motion what would be the single-largest government reorganization since the creation of the Department of Defense. One of the agencies in the new Department of Homeland Security was the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, now known as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

Congress granted ICE a unique combination of civil and criminal authorities to better protect national security and public safety in answer to the tragic events on 9/11. Leveraging those authorities, ICE's primary mission is to promote homeland security and public safety through

the criminal and civil enforcement of federal laws governing border control, customs, trade and immigration.

ICE now has more than 20,000 law enforcement and support personnel in more than 400 offices in the United States and around the world. The agency has an annual budget of approximately $8 billion, primarily devoted to three operational directorates – Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) and Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA). A fourth directorate – Management and Administration – supports the three operational branches to advance the ICE mission.

Source: ***History of ICE***

Biblical Story

In Ezekiel 47, the prophet describes a river flowing from the Temple, bringing life to the barren lands. The river deepens as it extends outward, signifying God's increasing reach beyond Israel's borders. The passage culminates in a striking command: foreigners dwelling among the Israelites are to be treated as native-born and granted land as an inheritance (Ezekiel 47:22-23).

This vision radically expands the understanding of belonging. In an era where land and heritage were tightly controlled, God declares that those who migrate into the land — those who were once strangers — must be embraced as family. Unlike earlier laws in the Torah, which permitted the fair treatment of sojourners but did not grant them inheritance, Ezekiel envisions a new reality where immigrants are fully incorporated into the people of God. This directly echoes Leviticus 19:33-34, which calls for treating the stranger as one's own, but Ezekiel extends this to the granting of land—a key signifier of belonging and security in ancient Israel.

Furthermore, this river, flowing from the temple and nourishing the land, symbolizes the presence of God extending beyond national borders. The water's increasing depth represents divine abundance, signaling that God's justice is expansive and inclusive. In the same way that this river transforms desolate places into fertile ground, so too does God's justice transform communities when immigrants and refugees are embraced rather than excluded.

History

The boundaries described in Ezekiel 47 match those outlined in Numbers 34, reaffirming God's promise to the people. However, Ezekiel introduces a theological innovation: Sojourners are not merely guests but full members of the community, receiving an inheritance alongside native-born Israelites. This was a radical departure from earlier inheritance laws, which strictly limited land ownership to the twelve tribes of Israel. Ezekiel's vision suggests that a just society is one in which outsiders are not just tolerated but fully included in the economic and social fabric of the nation.

Similarly, in the modern era, the criminalization of migrants and the militarization of borders contradict this biblical vision. The 2003 creation of ICE as a response to 9/11 fueled a false narrative of immigrants as threats, leading to expanded deportation powers under the Patriot Act. This narrative has contributed to inhumane detention practices, family separations, and increasing migrant deaths at the border. The militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border — through operations like Hold the Line and Gatekeeper — has forced migrants into more dangerous routes, leading to record numbers of deaths. The El Paso sector alone reported 195 deaths in 2024, up from 143 the previous year, while New Mexico saw a tenfold increase in migrant deaths over two years.

The criminalization of immigrants also contradicts historical data. A comprehensive 150-year study found that immigrants have consistently had lower incarceration rates than native-born citizens. The idea that immigrants pose a heightened threat to public safety is not supported by empirical evidence but has been used as a political tool to justify harsh immigration policies.

Ezekiel's vision of full incorporation stands in direct contrast to the realities of mass deportations, indefinite detentions, and legal structures that deny immigrants pathways to citizenship. Just as the Israelites returning from exile were called to embrace sojourners as kin, so too must modern societies move beyond exclusionary policies and recognize the rights and dignity of immigrants.

Statistics on Immigration

- Over 117 million people worldwide are forcibly displaced due to conflict and persecution. (UNHCR, 2023)
- Nearly half of the world's refugees are children. (UNICEF, 2023)
- The U.S. asylum backlog now exceeds 1.5 million cases, leaving many in prolonged uncertainty. (TRAC Immigration, 2024)
- Despite political rhetoric, studies consistently show that immigrants have lower incarceration rates than native-born citizens for over 150 years. (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2023)
- Border militarization has led to increasing migrant deaths: 108 people died at the New Mexico border in 2024 — a tenfold increase in two years. (The Guardian, 2024)

United Methodist Resources

- **Social Principles (Political Community, Section G):** "We affirm the dignity, worth, and rights of migrants, immigrants, and refugees, including displaced and stateless people."
- **Resolution 4271:** Welcoming the Migrant to the U.S.
- **Resolution 4273:** Global Migration and the Quest for Justice
- **Resolution 4106 on the U.S.-Mexico Border:** Condemning human rights abuses by the U.S. Border Patrol and ICE
- **Resolution on Global Migration and the Quest for Justice:** Addressing concerns of border militarization and deaths

Actions That Can Be Taken

- Support Local Immigrant Rights Organizations – Partner with groups providing legal services, housing, and advocacy.
- Advocate for Just Policies – Engage in policy efforts for pathways to citizenship, asylum protections, and an end to family separations.
- Educate and Engage – Host discussions, Bible studies, or documentary screenings on migration issues.
- Research Local Law Enforcement Cooperation with ICE – If your city cooperates with ICE, advocate for non-cooperation.
- Expose Border Militarization and Its Consequences – Contact legislators to push for humane border policies and highlight the increasing migrant deaths caused by current enforcement tactics.

Reflective Questions

1. Ezekiel 47's vision of the sojourner gaining a perpetual inheritance contrasts with the U.S. criminalization of undocumented immigrants. How can this biblical vision help reframe conversations about immigration today?

2. How can faith communities take seriously the abuses and deaths suffered by migrants due to ICE and Border Patrol policies?
3. How does the narrative of immigrant criminality contradict historical data on incarceration rates? How can we challenge false narratives about migration?
4. What would it mean for our churches to live into Ezekiel's vision, ensuring that migrants are not only welcomed but also fully included in our communities?

For Further Reading & Engagement

1. *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate* by Matthew Soerens & Jenny Yang
2. American Immigration Council
3. Global Refugee Advocacy Resources (UNHCR)
4. ACLU Report: 20 Years later, It's Time to Overhaul the Department of Homeland Security

Matthew 25:31–46 Lesson: "Welcoming Christ in the Migrant"

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- **Recognize Jesus in the Faces of Immigrants and Refugees** – Understand how Matthew 25 frames the experience of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees as sacred, and how welcoming them is a direct encounter with Christ.
- **Embrace Hospitality as Divine Mandate** – Reflect on Jesus' teaching that acts of compassion — feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick and imprisoned— are essential to faithful discipleship, especially in the context of immigration justice.
- **Cultivate a Community of Protection and Solidarity** – Explore ways churches can become communities of sanctuary, accompaniment, and advocacy for migrants and asylum seekers.

Time of Lesson: 75 minutes

Opening Story

Hugo is a DREAMer who came to the United States at ten years old in 1995. His parents brought him and his brothers and sister to go to school. He grew up in a Christian home and has always known the United States as his home country.

He didn't know about his status until he got to high school and his other friends were getting driver's licenses and he couldn't. After he

finished high school, he started volunteering for a non-profit organization called Young Life where he worked with at-risk youth. He was a mentor for students who were struggling in school and at home. During that time, he was working as a server at a restaurant.

He married his wife, Leslie, who is an Arizona native, a U.S. citizen and works for the state's Child Protective Services.

In the summer of 2011, Hugo was arrested by the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, which was conducting a worksite raid at the restaurant where he worked.

He spent three months in county jail. His wife was pregnant with their first child while he was in jail. He was charged with attempting to use the identity of another, a felony under Arizona law.

He would like to apply for DACA, and his brother and sister have already been granted temporary deportation relief under DACA.

Hugo and his wife now have two children, Jayden and Hailey. He would like to go to university and study public relations.

He is now in removal proceedings and faces permanent separation from his family.

Source: Immigrant Defense Project; Immigrant Stories: The Carrascos Family

Biblical Story

In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus declares that the righteous will be separated from the unrighteous not by doctrine or dogma, but by their treatment of the most vulnerable: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. What is startling is that Jesus

identifies himself with these groups: “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

In today’s world, that stranger may be an asylum-seeking mother crossing a desert with her child. It may be a refugee fleeing war and waiting at a border. It may be a man held in immigration detention, without access to legal representation. The call is clear: to welcome them is to welcome Christ; to ignore them is to reject him.

Jesus does not ask whether they came with documents or not. He asks whether they were received with dignity. This passage places a holy demand on the Church to reorient our response to immigration as a spiritual matter — not just a political one. It reminds us that in the faces of migrants and refugees, we meet the living God.

History

This text echoes in the memory of the Sanctuary Movement, which began in the 1980s when churches across the U.S. offered safe refuge to Central American immigrants fleeing U.S.-backed wars and violence. Declaring their churches as sanctuaries, these communities lived out Matthew 25 by choosing divine law over unjust human laws.

Today, many churches are reviving this witness, providing shelter, legal assistance, and advocacy for families facing deportation or indefinite detention. Faith communities are stepping in where governments have failed, insisting that God’s justice prioritizes the vulnerable, not the powerful.

Matthew 25 offers a spiritual litmus test: How are we responding to the migrant in our midst? Are we acting as sheep who see Christ in the stranger — or goats who look away?

Statistics

- Over 117 million people worldwide are forcibly displaced due to persecution, war, or violence. *(UNHCR, 2023)*
- Only 37% of immigrants in removal proceedings have legal representation. *(Immigrant Justice Network)*
- Children and families make up an increasing share of asylum seekers at the U.S. southern border. Many flee credible threats of gang violence, political persecution, and poverty. *(Pew Research Center)*

United Methodist Resources

- **Social Principles:** "We affirm the dignity, worth, and rights of migrants, immigrants, and refugees, including displaced and stateless people."
- **Resolution 4276:** The United Methodist Church is a Sanctuary Church

Actions That Can Be Taken

- Partner with local immigrant rights organizations to offer legal clinics, temporary shelter, or transportation support.
- Advocate for:
  - Pathways to citizenship
  - Asylum protections
  - An end to family separation and detention
- Join or start a sanctuary or accompaniment ministry in your congregation.
- Provide trauma-informed care and pastoral support for immigrant families in crisis.
- Organize a church screening of a documentary, such as *"The Invisible Walls"* or *"Who is My Neighbor?"* followed by discussion.

Reflective Questions

1. What does it mean to see Jesus in the face of an asylum seeker?
2. How has my church responded to the crisis of immigration and refugee displacement?
3. What fears or myths about immigration do we need to unlearn in order to live into Matthew 25?

For Further Reading & Engagement

1. *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate* by Matthew Soerens & Jenny Yang
2. American Immigration Council

1 Peter 2:4–17 Lesson: A Chosen People: Building a Sanctuary of Justice and Welcome (Draft)

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- **Understand Our Shared Identity as Immigrants and Exiles** – Explore how 1 Peter names all believers as "strangers" and "aliens" in the world, connecting us deeply with the lived experiences of migrants and refugees today.
- **Reimagine the Church as a Living Sanctuary** – Reflect on how being "living stones" called to build a spiritual house means shaping communities of belonging, safety, and justice for the displaced.
- **Honor Everyone, Advocate for the Oppressed** – Consider how Christian witness involves honoring the dignity of every person and resisting unjust systems that dehumanize immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Time of Lesson: 75 minutes

Opening Story

Dana Forrester met her husband, Astley, while on vacation in Jamaica. Astley was working as a security guard at Dana's hotel when they met. She was grieving the recent loss of her mother at the time and discovered that Astley had also just lost his own mother; this brought them close together. After Dana left, they spoke on the phone every day, becoming extremely close and falling in love. She soon returned to Jamaica, and they were engaged. Dana became pregnant with their daughter, Lilla Lora, who is named after Astley's late mother.

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After applying for the fiancé visa for Astley to come to the U.S., immigration officials told them they should marry right away to secure the waiver needed to consider and waive his previous convictions. As an adolescent in Jamaica, Astley was convicted of possession of marijuana on two separate occasions. The amount was minimal; he was made to pay a small fine to the Jamaican Court and he served no jail time.

Dana and Astley got married in Jamaica but soon discovered that immigration officials had misunderstood the circumstances of their case and gave them incorrect advice. Because of these old and minor marijuana possession charges, Astley cannot come to the United States under any circumstances.

Dana cannot move their family to Jamaica as she is the primary caretaker for her ailing father and has a son from a previous relationship. She is struggling to take care of her family on her own without the support of her husband by her side. Astley calls Dana every morning to wake her up, and they drink coffee and read the Bible together.

Their daughter talks to him every day through Skype and often says that her "daddy is lost and can't come home." She has tea parties and plays games with her dad over the computer. Dana's son, Imanni, is nine years-old and is very close to Astley, seeking out his advice and help with homework.

The Forrester family is now forced to live their lives together through machines and electronic correspondence. They are waiting for the day that they can live together as a family.

Source: Immigrant Defense Project, Immigrant Stories: The Forrester Family

Biblical Story

1 Peter 2:4–17 speaks to a displaced, scattered community — people living under imperial rule, often marginalized for their faith. The writer calls them "aliens and strangers," yet affirms their sacred identity as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. These powerful words are not reserved for the powerful — but for the exiled, the vulnerable, and the faithful.

Today, immigrants and refugees are often cast aside by society, yet scripture reminds us that those on the margins are central to God's mission. In a time when border walls rise and fear-based policies dominate, 1 Peter calls the Church to be a spiritual house of radical welcome. To follow Christ, the "Living Stone rejected by mortals," is to align ourselves with those rejected today.

The passage challenges us to see the Church not as a fortress of privilege but as a sanctuary of resistance, where the dignity of migrants is affirmed, and systems of injustice are exposed. As people of faith, we must resist the temptation to conform to the world's definitions of worth and instead live into our calling to be a people of light, truth, and welcome.

History

The language of 1 Peter evokes a people in exile — dispersed, vulnerable, and often powerless. This speaks directly to the experience of global migrants today. Whether fleeing violence in Central America, persecution in Afghanistan, or climate devastation in the Global South, modern-day sojourners embody the exilic condition.

Historically, churches have risen to meet such moments. During the Vietnamese refugee crisis, countless congregations in the U.S. opened their doors to sponsor families, helping them resettle and find com-

munity. Similarly, in recent years, faith-led sanctuary movements have worked to shield immigrant families from deportation, offering legal support, housing, and advocacy.

1 Peter invites us to understand these acts not just as charity, but as worship. When the Church takes its place among the vulnerable and builds systems of care, it becomes the living temple God intends — built not with bricks, but with compassion, courage, and justice.

Statistics

- More than 50% of asylum seekers in the U.S. do not have legal representation, increasing their risk of unjust deportation. *(National Immigrant Justice Center)*
- Immigrants make up 13.7% of the U.S. population, and many are deeply involved in local churches, serving as pastors, lay leaders, and cultural bridge-builders. *(Pew Research Center)*

United Methodist Resources:

- **Resolution 4272** – *Faithfulness in Response to Critical Needs*
- **Resolution 4275** – *Concerning Immigration*
- **UMC Justice:** Faith & Facts Cards on Immigration and Refugees

Actions That Can Be Taken

- Offer civic and spiritual accompaniment to asylum seekers navigating the immigration system.
- Organize or support a "Sanctuary Congregation" network that offers protection and aid.
- Host Know Your Rights workshops in collaboration with local immigration attorneys or advocacy groups.
- Write letters or host meetings with elected officials urging:
    - Humane immigration reform

  - An end to family separation and detention
  - Full funding of refugee resettlement programs
- Encourage intergenerational storytelling events that highlight the migration stories within your own congregation.

Reflective Questions

1. In what ways have we, as individuals or communities, been "strangers in a strange land"?
2. How might the metaphor of "living stones" shape our call to build communities of safety and dignity for migrants?
3. What does it mean to "honor everyone" in a society that dehumanizes certain groups?
4. How is God calling our church to act as a spiritual sanctuary—not just in words, but in structure, policy, and practice?

For Further Reading:

1. *Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* by Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, and Dr. Issam Smeir
2. *No Longer Strangers: Transforming Evangelism with Immigrant Communities* by Eugene Cho & Samira Izadi Page



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