

Immigration Reform Principles as Viewed Through the Lens of Shalom and Justice

- Randy Chang, 2009

As communities of faith, we believe in the future reality and certainty of God's kingdom of shalom and justice for all of His creation. Rather than “pie in the sky” dreaming, or hopeful idealism, we believe that even now, He is ushering in His kingdom and calls His people to live in light of this reality. We submit the following immigration reform principles as viewed through the lens of shalom and justice.

The prophet Isaiah (chapter 32, verses 16-18) writes:

- 16 Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
- 17 The effect of righteousness will be shalom, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever.
- 18 My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places.

The Hebrew word shalom conveys completeness, wholeness, welfare, wellbeing, peace, and safety. God's shalom speaks of total and complete wellbeing everywhere and for everyone; all of creation is as He intends it. Walter Brueggemann writes that shalom is not authentic if it is experienced by only a few, or if it is achieved at the expense of others. ¹

In this Isaiah passage we see that the fruit of justice and righteousness is shalom. Many think of justice as enforcing what is legal; punishing those who commit illegal acts. Immoral acts that are legal may go unchallenged. But God's law is covenantal not contractual. It is about how relationships have been upheld or violated not about whether rules have been kept or broken. Abraham Joshua Heschel says “An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt”.² Walter Brueggemann refers to God's justice as securing and guaranteeing the livelihood, well-being, freedom, and dignity of every person in the community, not only those strong enough to insist upon it.³

How might this understanding of shalom and justice affect how we view reforming U.S. immigration policy, particularly how to handle the 12 million (approx.) undocumented currently in the U.S., and future immigration influx? What policies would promote the type of communities spoken of in Isaiah? Can there be enactment of justice where power is used on behalf of the poor and weak, not just the rich and strong?

1) Strong border enforcement and being compassionate are not necessarily incompatible with regards to immigration policy

Strong border enforcement and compassion can both serve the purposes of building shalom if strong border enforcement is directed at those who are intent on undermining the health of the community and being compassionate on those who wish to build up the community. At the U.S./Mexico border, drug lords are battling with each other, and with the Mexican authorities, while ordinary citizens on both sides of the border are terrorized and brutalized. In their National Drug Threat Assessment 2008, the National Drug Intelligence Center notes that Canada-based Asian drug traffickers have emerged as significant transporters and distributors of high-potency marijuana and MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as ecstasy) to markets throughout the United States. Border enforcement priorities should be focused on drug lords, terrorists, and violent criminals rather than on rounding up ordinary adults and children who are trying to live normal lives in their

communities. The majority of the undocumented immigrants in this country want to live and work, caring for their families, while contributing in positive ways to their communities and this country. There needs to be a pathway to legalization for such undocumented persons who have already demonstrated their intent to build up their communities.

2) There must be an immediate moratorium on ICE raids, detainments, and deportations

By their own admission, ICE enforcement policies are intentionally harsh so as to induce undocumented immigrants in the country to leave voluntarily, and to deter future immigrants from illegally entering. To the extent that these policies are intended to punish and make examples of detainees, these policies can only be called punitive. As communities of faith, we serve a God of justice, whose justice is absolute and demanding but not punitive. We decry the brutality of these policies, and the total lack of dignity and respect extended. These raids are not only tearing up immigrant communities, but the larger communities in which they work and live. Pressuring local law enforcement officials to help ICE destroys trust in communities, the opposite of what the prophet Isaiah speaks of. ICE's brutal policies not only harm immigrant communities, they harden the hearts and dehumanize those who carry out these policies. These raids are not contributing to shalom. Until immigration reform is enacted, there must be an immediate moratorium on ICE raids, detainments and deportations.

3) Maintain family unity as a priority in immigration policy

The importance of stable family structures to the creation of healthy individuals and strong communities is well established. What does it do to young children when their parents are violently taken from them and locked away in detention facilities, with little way of knowing what is happening to their parents? ICE raids, detainments, and deportations are a vivid picture of the antithesis of shalom. When breadwinners are locked up, the loss of income causes a downward spiral not only for the families involved but for the surrounding communities as well. What lessons are our children (citizens, documented, and undocumented) learning when they see the brutality with which we are treating one another? Don't we want the next generation to see and learn what true community looks like? Society benefits when families remain united rather than torn apart.

4) Immigrant workers (permanent and migrant) must be protected from unscrupulous employers who arrogantly violate labor and/or Environment, Safety & Health laws.

Immigration policy must be reformed so that unscrupulous employers cannot threaten workers with retaliation if labor and/or ES&H violations are reported. Currently, whistle-blower undocumented workers are deported before unscrupulous employers can be investigated. Employers who cheat workers of their wages, or sanction working conditions that violate environment, safety and health laws hurt the entire community, not just the workers. Wage theft and payment of substandard wages undermines the community. Unsafe working conditions resulting in disabled workers taxes the health care systems of communities. Were there to be provisions for migrant workers, safeguards must be in place so that "temporary worker" status does not create a "second class" category of workers that can be exploited (wage and or ES&H abuse).

5) Health care should be available to everyone in the community.

Universal health care should be a priority, so that no one is denied access to basic health services on the basis of their documentation status. The measure of the soul of a nation is based not on how well

those deemed to have greater worth are cared for, but rather how the most vulnerable in society (children, elderly, and non-citizens) are cared for. A national health care policy is needed to supersede individual states' efforts to deny undocumented immigrants, basic health care services. When everyone in the community is healthy, then the community benefits.

6) Granting amnesty to violators of immigration laws is an enactment of justice not a suspension of justice.

Desmond Tutu⁴ makes a clear distinction between impunity (no judgment or accountability) and amnesty where the perpetrators are judged and forgiven. Judgment refers to a finding of guilt and violation. It is not synonymous with punishment. In the current immigration debate the word amnesty is being tossed around as if it is a bad word, and is being treated as having the same meaning as the word impunity. For God's people, who have experienced and testify to the immense love and mercy of God, "amnesty" must not be treated as a bad word. All across the U.S., communities have been torn up and relationships violated. Do we want healing and restoration to come to our communities?

As a final note, the prophet Isaiah (chapter 65, verses 17, 21-22) further writes:

- 17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
- 20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
- 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
- 22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

The prophet Isaiah writes that shalom encompasses an end to infant mortality, a picture where everyone can live out long and full lives. In this picture of the future reality, everyone contributes to the good of the entire community, and all people are able to benefit from the fruit of their labors. In this country we gratefully enjoy the fruits of the labor of undocumented workers, yet seem to be unconcerned that undocumented workers are excluded from similar enjoyment. If the people of God are truly yearning for His kingdom of shalom and justice to come in its fullest, how can denying honest hard-working undocumented immigrants the opportunity to benefit from the fruits of their labor through legalization be consistent with what we profess? Are we willing to see justice in a different way, as a way to restore and heal, instead of a means to punish and exclude? Do we want shalom for only a few, achieved at the expense of others, or true shalom for everyone, everywhere?

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, United Church Press, New York, 1976, p. 21

² Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Harper Torchbooks/Harper & Row, 1962, p. 216

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, United Church Press, New York, 1976, p. 105

⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Doubleday, 1999, p. 50, 51, 54, 55