

**Outline of “Political Decisions and Our Vocation as Citizens,” by Darrell Jodock, Westwood Lutheran, September 23, 2020.**

**Grace note #1:** a word of gratitude to Rev. Robert Graetz Jr., pastor of Trinity Lutheran in Montgomery Alabama, who just died. He was the only white pastor there who supported the bus boycott publicly.

**Grace note #2:** When Luther explained biblical commandments, he went beyond the prohibition to say what it advocated—e.g. 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment = not only do not slander but also put the most positive construction on all your neighbor says and does. This encouraged creativity, opened new options, allowed for context, and made room for freedom.

The first presentation was about Luther and six theological principles that formed the framework for our vocation as citizens. The second was about ethical guidelines and guidelines borrowed from wisdom. Tonight we will explore how all of that comes into play when considering two topics. My purpose is to make connections. If something appears partisan, that’s not my intent.

**Issue #1:** Climate Change = a moral issue with political implications

Since 1955, the projections have been confirmed and lots of new information gathered. Greenhouse gases have, since round 1850, increased much more rapidly than ever before and are causing/will cause significant harmful changes. This not under dispute. We see the effects:

Melting ice in the Arctic & the Antarctic. Melting glaciers. Melting permafrost making things worse by releasing stored carbon. Rising oceans. More powerful hurricanes. Coral reefs dying from gases that make oceans acidic. Droughts. Wild fires. Heavier rain events.

Importance = it will keep on affecting all of us. Hurricanes and fires and rising oceans are not selective. Stopping the accumulation of greenhouse gases will serve the common good.

Some people are being/will be affected more than others. Esp. the poor who find themselves without food or homes.

One theological principle = the natural world is a gift of God. Second principle = we are called to steward it—to care for it and restore its health.

We need to reduce emissions 50% by 2030 and 100% by 2050 in order to keep global warming modest (1.5 degrees). (In MN 25% of electricity is from renewable sources—the result of a state mandate.) Some simple steps will help (such as socially responsible investments and reinstating higher mileage standards for automobiles and reinstating regulations regarding smoke stack emissions). But this will not be enough. Massive shifts are needed--e.g. from a “linear” economy to a “circular” economy where what is left over from one industry (water, energy, materials) is used by the next. Note Copenhagen where 11 industries are linking in this way.

Change is not free, but neither is inaction—note the expense of rebuilding from fires and hurricanes, the medical cost of air pollution, and the cost of increasingly scarce fresh water.

Theological principle = God is active in the world fostering whole, healthy relationships, including between humans and the rest of creation—so we are called to participate in God’s project.

Another principle—God interacts in two ways. The second involves setting limits on the destruction of nature and fostering more sustainable practices. We are called to help the government do this. Given the complexity of humans (another principle) push-back can be expected.

The task can be overwhelming but Christians bring the gift of hope and the gift of a community of discernment and encouragement.

And finally, we are called to seek common ground with others in order to create the support politicians need for massive shifts.

**Issue #2:** Immigration. The issue may appear to be partisan, but neither party has done well with this one. So I consider it an ethical and political problem but not necessarily a partisan one.

What is strange is that, for a nation of immigrants and their descendants, we've had a puzzling tendency since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to object over and over again to "new" immigrants: the Chinese, Asians and Pacific Islanders, East European Jews, the Irish, the Italians, Catholics from anywhere, Germans, Mexicans, Muslims, Central Americans. I'm at a loss to explain this oddity. Muslims who have been here 30 or 40 years with degrees and professional jobs report being told to "go back where you came from." Mexican-Americans who have been here for 4 or 5 generations hear the same word.

Let's begin with our biblical tradition. A command to welcome the stranger and sojourner occurs 39 times in just the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 books. 92 times in the OT immigrants, orphans, and widows are identified as vulnerable people whom God loves and expects us to do the same. In Matthew 25 the Son of Man commends those who welcomed strangers. He says, if you did it to one of them, you did it to me.

1. If a person fears for their life, crossing the border is not illegal. A treaty gives asylum seekers the right to step across and ask for asylum. Recently most have come from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, the most dangerous countries in the world (that are not at war). Unfortunately, asylum seekers are currently not allowed to cross the border.
2. Refugees are persons who are not safe in their homeland and have permission to enter or stay in the U.S. The limit has dropped from 110,000 to 18,000, and fewer than that are being admitted.
3. 4 categories of immigrants: (a) sponsored by a close family member, (b) sponsored by an employer (only very highly skilled), (c) a refugee, and (d) a person who wins an online lottery.
4. 10.5 million people are here without documentation. 2/3rds have been here 10 years or more, 1/2 15 years or more. The number declined 14% from 2007-2017. Why did they not follow procedures? Documents not available. Slots not available. Takes too much time. With no food for children or a threat to one's life, migration is an act of desperation.
5. Nearly 1/2 (42%) of those without documents did not come over the border. They came legally and overstayed a visitor's visa in order usually to take care of a family member. (Otherwise they cannot return to the U.S. for at least 6 years.) Quite fixable, but polarization gets in the way.
6. Several studies have shown that immigrants have a lower crime rate than people raised in this country. (Unfair to allow one or two crimes—even if horrific—to be representative of the whole.)
7. Economists tell us that immigration is good for our economy here in Minnesota.
8. It is not unusual for a person to work in the U.S. and send money back to his/her family. Problem is that they cannot return to visit. Not a good way for our neighbors to live.
9. One piece of good news: MN has a reputation for welcoming refugees.
10. Refugees receive a one-time grant of \$1,175. They need extra help from churches to resettle.
11. Immigrants in MN pay ca. \$793 million in state and local taxes. Several studies have shown that across the U.S. immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in any kind of benefits.
12. The "dreamers" who came here as children and are now working young adults have permission to stay but it could be withdrawn at any time—not a good way for our neighbors to live.
13. There is a big need for workers in some segments of our society—e.g. farms of various kinds.

14. Some groups—e.g. from El Salvador after an earthquake or from Liberia after a civil war—have permission to be here, but it too can be withdrawn at any time—not a good way for our neighbors to live
15. I think we can reasonably expect refugees to become good citizens—because of gratitude for being welcomed when their lives were in danger.

Theological principles of gratitude and vocation mean the sojourner is loved by God and is to be treated as a neighbor, not as someone who doesn't belong.

Theological principle = humans designed to be part of a community. To exclude immigrants from full participation in community is to undermine their full humanity.

Theological principle = God active in the world, active in and through migration and our response to it. The biblical call for us is to be involved in caring for the sojourner/immigrant/stranger.

Theological principle = God interacts in 2 ways. The 1<sup>st</sup> way is to show love and mercy. We can do this individually and also support Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service in its effort to reunite families, connect them to communities, and provide legal counsel for asylum seekers. The 2<sup>nd</sup> way is to craft limits that keep others from being harmed. We are called to help revise regulations, some of which are harmful, and to help reform enforcement—to end needless harassment, family separation, inadequate care for children, and overly quick or overly delayed decisions regarding asylum.

Theological principle = humans are complex and fallible. We do need rules against, for example, human trafficking at the border and other restrictions, but these need to be humane. Lives are at stake.

Ethical guideline = here as elsewhere pay attention to who will benefit and who will be harmed.

Ethical guideline = seek common ground with others and then together provide political support. Politicians currently find little support from their core constituencies for meaningful immigration reform. Only when it is there will they act.

Our sense of the “common good” needs to expand to include those on the other side of the border as well as those in this side. Recently more Mexicans/Mexican-Americans have been crossing into Mexico than crossing into the U.S. Things are good enough there to make this possible. The same needs to happen for Central America (and elsewhere). U.S. policies helped produce their present problems. We need to help undo the damage so that the countries are once again livable.

I've tried in this presentation to show how the theological principles and guidelines apply to two issues. What I suggest is that each of us identify a group that needs help, join with others, learn, listen to the stories of people in that group, formulate a plan that will help, and then work with others to get it passed. Action that fosters justice and ends harm to others is part of our calling as citizens.

Thanks for listening!