Blessed Are...
Naomi knew. The Moabites were enemies. Their practices threatened the foundations of her land. Ruth did not belong; she was the foreigner and the enemy. Her story was told when the country was polarized between those who saw fidelity to the law as a means of securing safety and salvation as God’s elect or fidelity to love of neighbor and love of God.\(^1\) They knew, but they crossed those national borders. But what of the others--did the Good Samaritan know the identity of that wounded man on the road when he offered him a cup of water? Jesus certainly had to know when he healed the Centurion’s servant that the Centurion commanded an occupying military that sustained puppet-dictators like Herod. Did Jesus know when he fed the five thousand that some in the crowd might be Zealots, those guerrilla fighters seeking liberation from Rome through terrorist activity? If they knew, did it alter their respective ministries, their healing or their compassion to love their neighbor?

Today, we are asked to add a wrinkle to the biblical injunctions to love our neighbor. Congress and judges enforcing our immigration laws ask us to first investigate whether those we offer food, water, and shelter do not have the blessing of the state with lawful authorization to live in this land or whether those we assist might be linked to terrorist activities. Those laws have long singled out certain characteristics such as contagious diseases and crimes or aggravated felonies to preclude a person’s admission or to require deportation should that event subsequently occur. As our nation engages in a so-called war on terrorism, Congress has hardened those laws as one public display of resolve.

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Two developments raise challenges of loving our neighbor. Recent House bills criminalize unauthorized status and make those offering shelter or food subject to criminal penalty jeopardizing all ministries. Passed under the ongoing emphasis to gain control of our borders and reduce the risks of terrorism, such provisions provide no exception for de minimis or totality of the circumstances protection for those that serve the marginalized regardless of lawful immigration status.

Second, case law now holds that refugees in war zones, especially in guerrilla-type wars, face the unholy choice of providing food or shelter to both warring parties as conflict in civilian areas defines much of guerrilla wars. In some lands, warring parties demand civilian “war taxes” to feed combatants with the threat of death or torture for failure to pay. Yet, if those refugees are fortunate enough to escape with their lives, they may be denied relief for providing material support. Government attorney have acknowledged could be for simply offering “a cup of water”² or as one refugee lost because he provided food and tents for religious meetings in his homeland.³

As one reads through the words of Jesus, one is hard pressed to find the kind of distinctions contained within United States immigration laws. Blessed are those with government authorization to live in the Untied States does not convey the same tone as blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who flee persecution, but do not grant asylum if under duress a shopkeeper gave guerrillas some food or set up tents for religious meetings. Nowhere is the defining element of blessed found by reliance on national boundaries or lists of grounds of exclusion or removal. Nowhere does blessed

² Singh-Kaur v. Ashcroft, 385 F.3d 293, 313, (3rd Cir. 2004), Fisher, Circuit Judge, dissenting.
³ Id. at 296.
find its meaning in citizenship or suggest that peacemaking occurs only after checking passports.

The blessed place their full trust in God. Those who recognize their need for grace are truly blessed. Jesus promises this blessing to all who live their lives with absolute dependence on God. Jesus neglects to add all the criteria that immigration laws include when naming those whose privilege permits them to be blessed. The Constitution’s Preamble and First Amendment’s religious liberty language make it clear that in securing the common defense and promoting our general welfare ensures that biblical injunctions may never be the appropriate grounds for legislating immigration law. But that does not mean that followers of Christ need not advocate for more humane laws. Nor does it mean that we should neglect our ministries in the purported goal of national security. While those elected officials hide within their white-washed alabaster buildings in Washington, D.C. claiming to provide greater security through tougher immigration laws, those who model their lives on discipleship of Christ find their security in their dependence on God. Naomi’s welcoming of the alleged enemy into the homeland reveals the abundance of God’s love and the undermining of a dubious reliance on technical laws that divide communities. Jesus preaches a similar hospitality to the marginalized who rely on Providence instead of harsh technical laws that and set one against the other.

Our legislators and judges respond that governments cannot rely on Providence, but must be pragmatic. Yet, pragmatism disguised as tough immigration laws has not

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4 I thank Rev. Warren Wiggins for suggesting this interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.
6 See generally, LaCocque, *supra* for a discussion of Ruth as example of an immigrant bringing blessings to a community paralyzed by a strict interpretation of the law of the powerful.
worked. The alleged problem of three to six million undocumented persons commenced “let’s get tough on unlawful immigration” laws in 1986. Subsequent legislation increased penalties for unauthorized presence and expanded the number and scope of crimes making many subject to removal. Congress tinkers with “material support” provisions and neglects to provide exceptions for support under threat of persecution. Recently, the House sought to criminalize all undocumented and make all citizens potential felons for providing homeless shelters, medical clinics, or soup lines. Increased enforcement of our southern border and strategic enforcement policies channeling the undocumented into more dangerous terrain increased deaths on the border with the ironic consequence that fewer will try to return home. Notwithstanding the “pragmatic” efforts to tighten our borders and increase security, the alleged problem has grown to over twelve million undocumented in our nation. The combination of physical walls at our border and “legal” walls making return more difficult failed to achieve what the pragmatists promised.7

Blessed, therefore, are those who know where their security comes from.
Blessed, therefore, are those who are open to the gifts of the sojourner, to those like Naomi who see in our sisters and brothers, Ruth and Boaz, the true gifts of God in our

7 See e.g., Douglas S. Massy et al, Beyond Smoke and Mirrors, Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration, (Russell Sage Foundation., N.Y., 2002) on how political bluster for tough immigration laws has resulted in a broken immigration system: “A perverse consequence of draconian border enforcement is that it does not deter would-be immigrants from trying to enter the country so much as it discourages those who are already here from returning home. The end result of a border buildup is typically longer trip durations, lower probabilities of return migration, and a shift toward permanent settlement.” Id. at 128-29.
midst. Blessed, therefore, are those like Ruth that open our eyes to the failures of our laws that simply seeks the rhetoric of security without considering the totality of the circumstances of why that person stands before us. Blessed, therefore, are those who welcome the sojourner without confirming identity and vocation prior to offering assistance. We are blessed when we build our communities that grow together through love of neighbor.