

“A Look at Immigration”

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For months, I've known that I wanted to speak about immigration. I knew I wanted to share the story of Lizeth Morales. But, as I began to mull over this morning's sermon more seriously, I realized I wanted to know more about the history of our immigration policies. I also wanted to refresh my memory about a man named Bhagat Singh Thind, who was born in Punjab, India and came to the US in 1913. He became the focus of a landmark US Supreme court case on citizenship.

What I'm going to say this morning might seem a little disconnected at first. If we're all fortunate, it will make sense at the end! OK, I'd like to consider the results of a poll conducted by the University of Connecticut. The researchers say it demonstrates that “every immigrant population” in the US has been welcomed once it has been visible for about a hundred years or more. “By high margins,” the researchers say, “Americans are telling pollsters it was a very good thing that Poles, Italians, and Jews emigrated to America.” We're just going to keep that in the back of our minds. And let's also keep in our minds that immigration is closely linked to the right to become a US citizen.

Now, let's talk about race. It's important to recognize that even today, our understanding of “race” and what that means socially and scientifically, is still evolving. In the 18th century, at the time of the founding of our country, it was crude at best.

As we are well aware, this country was founded by so-called “white” Englishmen, who soon after they arrived, along with white women and children, began the inexorable genocide of the peoples who were already here. White Europeans had decided to call the native peoples the “red” race. The “whites” recognized two other races: the “Negro” race, referring to peoples from Africa, and the “yellow race,” referring to peoples from Asia.

It seems that the founders of this country had a vision of America as being peopled exclusively with citizens who looked and spoke like them. In their vision, neither the “redskins” nor the “Negroes” would be eligible for American citizenship. (For the record, African Americans were granted citizenship in 1868, and Native Americans, in 1924.) Concern with the so-called “yellow” race came later.

Benjamin Franklin didn't even want Germans to emigrate, even though they were white. He insisted that they wouldn't assimilate into the culture. But his view was in the minority, and in 1790, Congress passed a law allowing for naturalization of all "free white persons." In other words, "ONLY free white persons." This law remained, unchanged, until 1952. 1952!

So when the researchers at the University of Connecticut talk about the acceptance of the "Poles, the Italians and the Jews" into US society after 100 years (1913), "by high margins," I have to respond by saying, "Poles: white; Italians: white; Jews: white." And, while we're at it, "Irish: white; Germans: white, and so on." And of course all these groups suffered resentment, abuse and oppression when they first came; I don't want to deny that.

Bhagat Singh Thind, the man from Punjab, India I mentioned earlier, came to America in 1913 to study for his Ph.D. at the University of California. When America entered World War I, he joined the U.S. Army. He was honorably discharged on the 16th of December, 1918.

At the time, Indian nationals of the high caste, especially from the Indian states of Punjab and Kashmir were labeled as "Caucasian" by some. (Anthropologists had introduced the word "Caucasian" in an attempt to scientifically define the "white" race, but couldn't agree on who was "in" and who was "out".) Courts had already granted US citizenship to several applicants from India based on the "Caucasian" designation, and Thind, too, was approved by a US District court. He received his citizenship certificate on December 9th, 1918, wearing his military uniform as he was still serving in the U.S. army. However, four days later, the Immigration and Naturalization Service revoked Thind's citizenship on the grounds that he was not a "free white man".

Five months later, Thind re-applied for citizenship in the neighboring state of Oregon. The same Immigration and Naturalization Service official who had had Thind's citizenship revoked the first time, tried to convince the judge to refuse to grant him citizenship this time, but the judge did so anyway. This INS official appealed the decision and the case was eventually heard in the US Supreme Court.

On February 10th, 1923, US Supreme Court Justice Sutherland ruled that Thind and all "Hindus" (by which he meant natives of India) are "aliens ineligible to citizenship," based on the "common" understanding of "white" and "Caucasian," a decision which retroactively stripped all naturalized Indians of their US citizenship.

Thind remained in the U.S. though, and completed his Ph.D. He became a popular speaker and delivered lectures on religion and spirituality all across the nation.

Ten years later, in 1935, the 74th Congress passed a law allowing citizenship to U.S. veterans of World War I. Thind received his U.S. citizenship through the state of New York in 1936, taking the oath for the third time to become an American citizen.

Inside the Statue of Liberty is a bronze plaque with a poem on it, written by Emma Lazarus in 1883. The most often-quoted part of the poem is familiar to many of us, and here she imagines Lady Liberty saying:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

In 1882, a year before the poem was written, the Chinese Exclusion Act denied citizenship for Chinese immigrants and suspended their entry into the United States. It was not repealed until 1943.

In 1917, Congress designated Asia as “a barred zone,” and prohibited immigration from all Asian countries except Japan and the Philippines.

Between 1921 and 1930, thousands of Mexican workers, including many U.S. citizens, were deported.

In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act created a national-origins quota system favoring immigrants from northern Europe and banning immigration by persons “ineligible to citizenship,” a provision that primarily affected the Japanese.

Between 1942 and 1945, the United States interned 120,000 Japanese American citizens.

From 1942 to 1964, the “Bracero” guest worker program was begun to meet labor shortages. It brought close to five million farmworkers, predominantly Mexicans, to the United States.

In 1954, “Operation Wetback” deported more than a million Mexican immigrants.

I don’t want to pick on Emma Lazarus, who was a person of her times, and who wrote the poem specifically for an auction to raise funds to build the Statue of Liberty’s pedestal. She never anticipated that it would appear 17 years later inside the Statue. But, the poem would more accurately reflect this country’s history if it read:

“Give me your tired white people, your poor white people,
Your huddled white masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched white refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless white people, tempest-tost to me,
I, a white woman, lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

In 1965, the Immigration Act finally eliminated race-based admission criteria and instituted ones based on a person’s skills, profession, or relationship to family in the United States. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act granted amnesty to about three million undocumented immigrants and instituted sanctions for employers who hire undocumented workers.

Then, in 1996, three acts of Congress—welfare reform, immigration reform, and antiterrorism legislation—significantly reduced immigrants’ access to social safety-net programs, toughened border enforcement, closed opportunities for undocumented immigrants to legalize their status, made it difficult to gain asylum, stripped many due-process rights, reduced access to the courts, and greatly expanded grounds for deportation.

And, now, I want to tell you the rest of Lizeth Morales’ story, in the words of her husband. (I have edited his words for clarity and brevity’s sake.)

“They took her in a van. And they picked up eight other people, all handcuffed and shackled for this criminal offense. She went to Immigration. They were treating her, all the people, horribly. The officials said, ‘If you go back [to Guatemala] tomorrow, we will let you go.’

“They had her sign a paper saying all these things were explained to her in Spanish. Nothing was explained in Spanish.

“So, I called a lawyer who called ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement] and asked, ‘What is her bail?’ And they said, ‘There is no bail. She’ll be gone tomorrow or in 8 days.’ I called two hours later and [was able to talk to my wife]. She said, ‘Come and get me. They’re going to let me out with an ankle bracelet.’ [So I went and got her.]

“She [isn’t here at the rally] today because she was afraid it would get too much press and she would lose her job. She is working under a valid Social Security number. She has paid taxes for the last 16 years and they want to kick her out of the country. They will not give us a hearing. They have denied our appeal. They have denied the stay of deportation and they have denied the motion to reopen.

“So far, I’ve paid the lawyer \$3000 and the money aspect is concerning. Because we’re worried –I depend on over \$1000 a month of her money to support the family. I’ll lose my health insurance when she’s deported.

“Hispanics have said to me, ‘You don’t know what we feel.’ Well, I do. That knock on the door and them being there [in my house] making this ache deep inside my chest. When they hauled my wife away in that van, I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know where to turn.

“The judge denied her motion, and I had to explain in a second motion that she said, ‘She doesn’t think she’d be in danger if she want back for a visit, but if she went back and stayed, her life would be in danger because of this political group that had problems with her. If she stayed very long, word would get out. And the judges don’t understand the conditions.

“I went down to Guatemala last year to help my mother-in-law come back and visit grandchildren she’s never seen.

“I hear people say all the time, ‘They should do it legally. They should go through the process legally instead of [just] coming over.’ Well, I’ll tell you. My mother-in-law applied three times legally. \$300 each time. Four hours on the bus to get to the city to apply at the US Embassy. She was turned down each time. It was, ‘No.’ And with her son-in-law from the United States, it was, ‘Hell, no.’

“So I want you to know that this wasn’t my story to start with, but now it is my story. I’m involved. I have faith that everything will work out, but it’s up to us. It’s up to us to combine together and say, “This is unjust. This is wrong. We need immigration reform.”

I could not have said it better. The history of our nation's immigration and citizenship policies makes me angry. It makes my stomach turn. We are a nation built on racism and our current immigration system is a reflection of that racism. Still. In 2013. Will it take a hundred years before today's immigrants are accepted into our society? God, I hope not. I pray that enough of us will "combine together" and say, "This is unjust. This is wrong." And call our nation to accountability.