



ELIZABETHTOWN CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Taboo Topix, Pt 1: Get Smart! Philoxenia vs. Xenophobia

Hebrews 13:1–3

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INTRO TO TABOO TOPIX SERIES

It's a bit of hyperbole, but I'll say it: this little buzzer almost caused three otherwise happy couples to pursue marital counseling. Story of Walters and Laszakovits and Taboo. Bring out the Taboo buzzer. Get smart! I bring this up to show that there are times when we can get so amped up, and competitive that we totally lose who we were and what we're about. We forget that we are children of God. Now this is in the case of a silly game.

We're embarking on this Taboo Topics series because that is what often happens to us when we talk about Taboo Topics; we lose who we are as followers of Jesus by acting poorly, or by taking a position on a topic that is more rooted in our own self-interest, of feelings of insecurity, that we forget who we are as followers of Jesus.

In this series we're going to take God and our scriptural tradition seriously while hopefully not taking ourselves too seriously like in that fateful game of Taboo. We want to remember who we are, at our best, as God's people.

So, for the next five weeks we're going to talk about Taboo Topics because they are important. We're not going to shy away from important topics just because they have been politicized. We are going to talk about these topics as people who want to follow Jesus. Remembering that Jesus tackled similar, thorny issues that had also been politicized. (even to the point he was killed!) Bottom line is that we are going to let our faith shape our views on these topics rather than the other way around. Let's get smart!

TODAY'S TABOO TOPIC—IMMIGRATION, TREATMENT OF THE STRANGER

Today's topic is immigration, but not immigration. Immigration is the political trigger word. What is really at stake for us is what the Bible names over and over again as the treatment of the stranger or foreigner. How do we treat the stranger among us?

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LET'S GET SMART! PHILOXENIA VS XENOPHOBIA

I want to teach you a couple of words that will make you look really smart at any Labor Day picnic you plan to attend. They're right there in your bulletin in the title of the sermon: philoxenia and xenophobia. Big Greek words. But maybe not as difficult as you think. It's really just three different Greek roots put together in different patterns.

Now, we live close to Philadelphia and it is literally called the City of Brotherly Love. *Phileo* is one of the many words used in the Bible that we translate as love. It means a deep affection for someone, a fondness. *Xenos* is stranger. *Xenia* is hospitality to a stranger. And we all know what *phobia* means: fear.

So let's take what we've just learned about those root words and put it together.

Philoxenia—Deep affection/Love + Stranger. Love of the stranger.

Xenophobia—Stranger + fear. Fear of the stranger.

TEST TIME! PHILOXENIA OR XENOPHOBIA?

"Those who come hither are generally of the most ignorant Stupid Sort of their own Nation. ... Few of their children in the Country learn English. ... In short unless the stream of their importation could be turned from this to other colonies, as you very judiciously propose, they will soon so outnumber us, that all the advantages we have will not in My Opinion be able to preserve our language, and even our Government will become precarious."

—Benjamin Franklin on German immigrants, 1753

Who knows, Franklin may have had some of our religious ancestors in mind. We know he was a business and printing rival with Brethren printer Christopher Sauer, who was of German descent.

You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.—Deuteronomy 10:19

"We have people coming into the country or trying to come in, we're stopping a lot of them, but we're taking people out of the country.

You wouldn't believe how bad these people are,...These aren't people. These are animals."

—President Donald Trump, May 2018

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

—Leviticus 19:34

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. —Romans 12:13

"I would build a wall of steel, a wall as high as Heaven, against the admission of a single one of those Southern Europeans who never thought the thoughts or spoke the language of a democracy in their lives." —Georgia Gov. Clifford Walker at a Ku Klux Klan rally¹

*The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

—Psalm 146:9

'Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'

—Deuteronomy 27:19

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. —Romans 12:13

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all. —Colossians 3:11

I know it makes us nervous to show quotes from politicians, especially one who is currently in office. I want to be clear—the point here is not to bash a particular person or party, but to draw attention. And before any of you Democrats get too high on your horses, you do well to remember that the Obama administration deported more people than the current administration. It's not about politics, this is about scripture and who we are as followers of Jesus.

¹Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*

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There are many, many more Biblical references that have clear instructions for how to treat the stranger.

Showing hospitality to the foreigner and stranger is an ethic that runs beginning to end and *throughout* the Bible. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible this ethic appears in the law, the minor prophets, and major prophets, in the wisdom literature and the poetry. Same goes in the New Testament, where these scriptures are found in the gospels and the letters.²

These compassionate scriptures are rooted in the experience of God's people who were so often foreigners and outsiders themselves. Abraham and Sarah seeking a place to prosper and grow. Moses and the Israelites in Egypt then the desert fleeing a brutal, genocidal dictator. Ruth and Naomi were environmentally displaced persons, migrant workers forced to cross borders to eke out a living because of drought. The Israelites taken in slavery to Babylon. Jesus and his family were political refugees who fled to Egypt! Thank goodness Egypt didn't have a family separation policy.

Of course we know Jesus preached even more radical hospitality and inclusion of the poor, hungry, naked and imprisoned. The example of hospitality and faith was, in fact, a foreigner who gave generously to foreigner. We know it as the parable of the Good Samaritan. Simply said, ...extending hospitality and love to everyone is the Biblical mandate, from the beginning to the end of the Bible. That hospitality and love supersedes any human-made borders and boundaries.

HEBREWS 13.1–3

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were

²Ezekiel laid down a Biblical Dream Act for the children of immigrants "So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. "You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God." Isaiah implores us "Give advice, offer counsel ... Let Moab's outcasts find asylum in you; be a shelter for them."

in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

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Up to this point in Hebrews, the writing is focused on encouraging listeners to remember that through Christ they have direct access to God and to have confidence in this new way of living. Chapter 13 is the conclusion of the letter and shifts into instructions for how to live: don't fall in love with money, remember the leaders who led us to where we are today, don't get caught up in rules and regulations about silly things (food in this case). After the encouragement and background, it is the part of the letter that says: "Now here's what I want you to do." And pay attention to the way it starts.

V 1. Philadelphia. Love your sisters and brothers.

V 2. Philoxenia. Literally, "love the stranger". Mutual love and Stranger love.

Now, since you all are so smart now you know what this new work philoxenias means. Philo is love, xenia is stranger. It's pretty simple. Love your sisters and brothers in Christ. And/ then love those you don't know. Don't get wrapped up in yourselves.

Get smart! We have something at stake too. One scholar I read noted that this love of stranger may not have only been something that nice, an ethic, for followers of Jesus, but something that made them better along the way. Something that really made them Christian.

RUBBER MEET ROAD

Now, having looked at dozens of scriptures, I'm not sure I can clearly suss out what the Bible might have to say about 100% open borders, or deportation of those who commit serious crimes. On the other hand, we know very clearly what scripture would say about separating families, caging children, depriving detainees of simple necessities such as toothbrushes, and arresting undocumented workers in factories and letting the bosses go home with no charge.

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And we know how we should act as Jesus people.

I am so proud to be part of a congregation that gets it. A philoxenia congregation! A sanctuary congregation in the 80s, a body that has resettled family after family regardless their country of origin, language, or religion. A congregation that saw a need and met it. And is still doing that today.

For over a year now, our **Immigrant Support Committee** has responded to the strangers among us reaching out with *philoxenia*: relationships with those in our community, a fund set up to assist those targeted, accompaniment to court dates, a caring hand extended. These simple, Biblical acts have garnered public attention. We've spoken at public events, been featured in the newspaper. In October I have the honor of representing our congregation at a Parish Resource Center event to encourage other congregations to do the same. Stay tuned for an upcoming opportunity to donate detainee care kits. This group is the embodiment of *philoxenia*.

A FAMILY'S STORY

Many people in this very room today would not be here if not for immigration. So to close, I want to tell you a story of a family of immigrants, pushed from country to country by circumstance, and saved by love of stranger/*Philoxenia*.

A young woman, we'll call her H, was born in Honduras. When H was in her early teens gang violence forced her family to flee to Guatemala where she and her family waited until the government regained control before returning to their village. However, the new, corrupt local governing powers began a systematic scapegoating of H's family. So at the age of 12, H and her family were placed under house arrest.

H feared what might happen next, so she escaped in the middle of the night and was given sanctuary and hidden by a local Catholic priest and his sister for several years. When that situation became too tenuous, she moved to a refugee camp close to Guatemala. At this refugee camp she met a handsome young Guatemalan man named R when he was delivering food and provisions to the camp as part of a ministry with

his church. R would be the love of her life. And their story of family, international migration, and eventual US citizenship is for another time.

Like I said, it's an amazing story of love, and love extended to the stranger, by the priest and his sister, by the countries that gave her safe refuge, by her husband-to-be and his congregation. Yet still, some might think that H's family should have tried harder to create systemic change in Honduras, that her escape from house arrest was questionable because it was illegal, that she and R should not have attained US citizenship because it's not this country's responsibility.

But here's a question: would it change the way this story is heard if I told you H's real name was Hilda, and this real story took place 75 years ago. And that Hilda was not from Honduras, but from Slovakia. That it was the Russian army that detained her? And that R is not Guatemalan, but Austrian and his real name is Richard. And that Hilda and Richard were my grandparents. Would your level of compassion change? I know it changes mine.

Philoxenia or Xenophobia? We know what the Bible says. What do we say?

