

My family and I went to a workshop about five years ago, a workshop on reentry and debriefing designed for families of long-term missionaries. It helped provide us with some of the tools we would need to adjust to life back in the US after a decade living abroad. Among some of the helpful things we learned from this conference was the concept of “hidden immigrants.” According to this theory, our two children were “hidden immigrants,” reacting and responding to their new home much like immigrants do, even though they don’t appear to be immigrants at all. When we returned to the US after 10 years away Simon, for example, was 10 and half years old. Yes, he had been born in the US, but he had never had a birthday there. He had never attended American schools, or even school in English before. But he looked pretty much like the dominant culture both in the US and in Minnesota. He spoke English fluently, without an accent, and all of his extended family with pretty much right here. So most people didn’t think of him as being new to the country—didn’t go out of their way to help or explain things, didn’t go out of their way to welcome him or ease his adjustment. He was hidden immigrant.

I thought about this term as we were preparing for this Local Mission Sunday, and especially as we decided to have the focus of this day be on telling our immigrant stories. In fact, when the Local Mission Partners team suggested that we lift up the stories of the immigrants among us, I even asked, oh, you mean the stories of Birgitta Rice, Chris Frost, and Wouter Van Bruggen? I was mostly kidding, of course, but then again, why not? See, while some people strike us as more obvious examples of immigrants among us, the fact is that our country is made up almost entirely of immigrants or their descendants, with the notable exception of Native Americans, that is. Actually, that quickly became the point of Local Mission Sunday this year, that it is not just the most recent arrivals nor the most obviously “different” from the dominant culture that constitute immigrants among us. No, we are all, or nearly all, immigrants or direct descendants of immigrants, by the degree of no more than a handful of generations.

In fact, let’s try something out here to help visualize this point. If there are any Native Americans here today, would you please stand and remain standing? Now, any immigrants, that is anyone here who was NOT born in the United States, please stand and remain standing. Great. Now, 2nd generation immigrant, that is at least one of your parents was an immigrant stand and remain standing. OK, 3rd generation, that is if at least one of your grandparents was or is an immigrant. Fourth generation? Your great-grandparents were immigrants to the US? Fifth generation and higher, that is your great-great grandparents or some earlier generation were immigrants—or is you just don’t know, or don’t quite fit the pattern or whatever, please stand.

Look around you, a room full of immigrants and their descendants. And before you take your seats, tell someone where your people immigrated from.

There are lots of reasons why people leave one country to live in another. Some flee a war zone. Some are seeking religious freedom—specifically freedom from religious persecution. Others are in search of economic opportunity. Advanced education. True Love. Over the years immigrants have come by ship, by plane, by bus and train, some even on foot. For some it is the fulfillment of a long-held dream; for others, it is the only available respite from a nightmare.

Our biblical witness holds up the special place of the immigrant, the foreigner, the alien with and among the people of God. We are commanded to show kindness and compassion toward them, to treat them as being part of our community, of working to meet their particular needs, to assure them that the same laws, the same protections, belong to them as belong to those of us already in the land. One of the reasons for such high regard for immigrants in the Bible is that several times in their history the people of God were strangers in a strange land—nomads before the settling of Canaan, alien slaves in Egypt before they entered into the Promised Land, and exiles in Babylon, before having their land restored once again. God calls the people to remember their immigrant stories both as a way for them to recall how God provided for them, but also as a way to build compassion for the marginalized people of this world. In today's reading from Jeremiah, the prophet shares the words of the Lord to the people about to be returned from exile. "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands, and I will bring them back to their fold and they shall not fear nor be dismayed, nor shall any be missing," says the Lord.

Our sister, Maria Tenorio is one of those whom the Lord God has gathered together into *this* flock, this fold from the remnants of other flocks of God's people scattered throughout many different lands. Maria came to the US in 2008 to escape from a violent relationship with her husband at the time, a man who struggled with alcoholism, which led him at times to be abusive with her as well as with their children. For years she had hid the situation of abuse from her family, since she was afraid that her brothers would take revenge on him and do something horrible to her ex-husband. On two different occasions, he put Maria and their kids out on the street. It only got worse as the kids continued to grow older. Her ex-husband lost his job, which meant that as the only wage earner, Maria was forced to take a second job; in order to survive she worked all day everyday.

Meanwhile, his alcohol problem continued and got worse. Maria tried to hide her crying, particularly in front of the children. She tried to move her family out, but found she was not able to sustain them, and so went back in order to provide shelter and food to her children. But mental and physical abuse

increased, and Maria continued to ask God “Why?”

Though she felt like God wasn't listening to her, she kept praying. Her prayers turned from simply prayers of need and desperation to her eventually breaking down and asking God for forgiveness for times she made poor choices and promising to do everything she needs to do to keep her kids and herself safe.

Coincidentally, the very next day a friend called her and invited her to come and join her in the US. Three days later, she was here in Minnesota. It was heart-breaking to leave her kids behind, but she also trusted God to guide her. Her path has not been easy—she especially misses her kids everyday—but moving to the States paradoxically gave her a better opportunity for her to help her kids to finish school than she would have had had she stayed in Mexico. Two of them have gone on to graduate from University, and the third one still attending the University. And strangely enough, her leaving the country and divorcing her husband was actually the kind of shock he needed. He has since been getting treatment for his alcoholism and as a result, he also has become a good and attentive father to them since getting cleaned up.

Finally safe physically, increasingly secure economically, and strangely able to provide for her family although from a distance, God had more in store for Maria as a new immigrant. She was invited to be part of Pueblo de Fe, the ELCA Latino Ministry in West St. Paul. There, she met Joël whom she has since married. Together, they have embarked on the American Dream. They got a house. Joel has become a citizen, and now she is in process to become one, too.

Maria and Joel belong to Christ the King/Cristo Rey because they have found a home here, too. Week after week, they are met here by smiling, happy faces that welcome them. IN fact, they have become some of the smiling happy faces that greet others here at CTK. Maria's English is still a bit limited, but that does not stop her from helping out with communion, with the block party, as a greeter, as a scripture reader.

"I belong to CTK because this is my community" Maria says proudly.

We are Christ the King. Somos el Cristo Rey. We are that community, that flock that has been gathered by God, our loving shepherd, gathered out of the remnant of many flocks, out of the many lands where they have been driven, brought back into this one fold, this one flock. We follow Christ, our King, who reigns not from a throne, not from the halls of temporal power, but from a cross. And from that cross, he promises to remember us, to bring us into the Kingdom he is calling into being with all these misfit remnants of many lands, many flocks, many peoples. And they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.