

Lessons From Migrant Spirituality

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Preacher: Dr. David Ley

[0 : 00] This is a privilege to speak to you this evening, and I do not want to take this responsibility lightly. So let's begin with a word of prayer.

Father, we do thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit, and we now ask for the blessing of his presence through what I say and what we all hear.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. In this presentation, I want to address some of the challenges of those two Bible readings that we've just heard, and their warnings about worldliness, about loving the world.

And I want to bring that particular challenge against the practices of some of the immigrant churches that I and my students have had contact with in the greater Vancouver area.

We conducted a very interesting research project looking at the role of immigrant churches in the settlement of immigrants.

[1 : 26] And what we found, as is so often the case with fieldwork, was so much more than we anticipated. And indeed, some what I think are important lessons for all of us in terms of our own growth and our own dealing with the world.

Because what we discovered, for reasons that I'll share with you, is that these churches are often places of unworldly practices.

For reasons that we will examine, they have come to terms with the world in the way in which that challenge was presented in John's gospel and in his letter.

And this surely is an important spiritual lesson that we need to learn and to learn often. I want to start just by reflecting a little on those two passages and in particular on the emphasis in John's gospel on the world and dealing with the world.

The term world is one of John's key words. Any of you who know and love his gospel as I do, know that there are certain words, certain terms that John uses as a kind of an architecture around which he builds his story of the life of Christ.

[3 : 08] Words such as life and light and world. So these provide a framework that he returns to frequently.

All three of them occurred in the brilliant first chapter that we've just heard. And having introduced them, John returns to them repeatedly.

So we read in John 1 verses 9 and 10 the immediate introduction of the world right at the end of the passage that Mel read for us.

Now this term world occurs 78 times in John's gospel. So as I say, it's a big word for him. It does a lot of work for him.

And it occurs another 24 times in his three short letters. The three verses in the second reading this evening from 1 John 2, 15 to 17, represent then a much bigger concern that he has as an author.

[4 : 26] Reflection and teaching on the world is a preoccupation in his writing. So what is the world?

How do we understand it? Well, there are in fact three overlapping meanings in John when he talks about the world.

And he moves from one to another. In chapter 17 of his gospel, for example, his high priestly prayer, the world occurs 18 times.

And he passes without explanation from one meaning to another. The first meaning is the cosmos, the created order.

This is the meaning of John 1, 10, which we just heard. The world made by the word, who is Jesus Christ.

[5 : 27] But in that same verse, John 1, 10, this meaning merges and overlaps with two other meanings. Because second, Jesus was also in the world.

And that world is the domain of humankind. It's the place of men, women, and children, farmers, laborers, and soldiers.

So there is the created order, the world. There is the world of human societies. But there is also a third meaning to the world.

And it is this third meaning that is the most important one for us this evening. The human societies of the world, we read in John 1, 10, did not recognize him.

Now, this third usage has a more sinister meaning, a darker meaning. In 1 John 5, 19, we read, We know that we are children of God and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.

[6 : 51] This world does not recognize God, is not of God. Here, in everyday life, neither Jesus nor God are acknowledged, and certainly they are not honored.

Here, men and women live largely for ourselves. God's values, his priorities, are rejected.

And in their place is a complacent ideology. Let us eat and drink. For tomorrow, we die. The world, this world, sadly, is a place without hope in any ultimate sense.

If there is no creator, creation is just a game of chance, just a roll of the dice. These are the stark and solemn contours that are presented in our second reading this evening.

For everything in the world, everything in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, comes not from the Father, but from the world.

[8 : 21] The world and its desires pass away. But whoever does the will of God lives forever. And so the message for Christians is stated earnestly in 1 John 2.15.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.

So Christians are not of this world, but of course we live in this world. Jesus said in John 17.15, My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one.

We are not of this world. We live in this world. So how are we to live as believers and not be drawn into the world's God-denying patterns of thought and life?

How do our everyday habits, our normal way of thinking, provide an alternative to a secular culture?

[9 : 47] That is our question this evening. Not a small one. Not an inconsequential one. And of course, there will not be a silver bullet, a complete answer.

But I do think there is something that we can learn from immigrant spirituality as we look at that question. Of course, we know the theological answers.

We know that through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, again to quote John, the prince of this world now stands condemned. We know that.

But I don't want to push those theological insights because that would be pushing way beyond the envelope of my own ability. Of course, these are very important insights.

Instead, I want to give you an applied empirical answer or partial answer to that question. An answer that I hope will inspire and motivate us.

[10 : 50] The example of immigrant spirituality and the discipleship of the immigrant church. Well, if you've been with me so far, the rest should be easy.

That is kind of the theoretical part. That is positioning us within scripture. Now, let's move and think more about the immigrant church.

You know, I'm sure you've noticed this. Whenever we have a social or economic problem in Canada, there is a common answer to it, at least in government and business circles.

The answer is, immigration will fix it. Is our population growing too slowly because birth rates are too low?

Okay, it's okay. Immigration will fix it. Do we have labor shortages? Both in the dirty and dangerous jobs, but also in certain skilled sectors like nursing, accounting, or the trade.

[12 : 04] Oh, no problem. No problem. Immigration will fix it. Is there concern amongst some of us with gray hair that there are not enough taxpayers to cover our pension plans?

That as we retire, who is going to pay for our overly generous pensions? You know the answer.

No worries. Immigrants will fix it. Well, perhaps there is now a new problem for immigrants to fix that is being raised by the churches of Canada.

Is there a rising tide of secularism? Too much evidence of a world that does not recognize its creator?

Don't worry, folks. We've got an answer. Immigrants will fix it. What is the basis of such a statement?

[13:09] Well, throughout the immigrant-receiving countries of the global north, immigration is leading the renewal of organized religion.

And I should add, non-Christian religions as well as Christianity. In London, 60% of churchgoers are not white, but visible minorities, most of them immigrants.

Catholic parishes in parts of Western Europe have been renewed by immigrants from Poland. Just as Catholic parishes in Canada and the U.S.

Are being renewed by immigrants from the Philippines and Central America. Some of you may have noticed about a month ago an interview in the Anglican Planet, that newspaper that is distributed here every so often.

It was with Philip Jenkins, who studies contemporary religious growth. He's a modern historian. And he has documented the remarkable role of immigration in restoring church life in parts of Europe.

[14:31] In this interview in the Anglican Planet, Jenkins is quoted as saying that the four largest megachurches in Britain are all headed by Nigerians.

Now, here's something to talk to the visitors about next week. The largest congregation in Europe is a Nigerian-led church in Kiev.

We heard about Kiev earlier. So Kiev in the Ukraine, a Nigerian-led church. The largest congregation in Europe with 150 daughter congregations in Eastern Europe and Russia.

In Hamburg, Germany, a Ghanaian-led church, a Ghanaian student, that now has a dozen offshoots in Germany and another 60 in Ghana itself.

Philips goes on to say this in the interview, and any of you who read this will have remembered it. I'm quoting him now. Canadian Christianity is going to be much more an immigrant phenomenon.

[15:48] There are thriving Chinese Baptist churches in Scarborough and Richmond Hill. He's in TO, of course, as he gives us this information. There are thriving Chinese Baptist churches in Scarborough and Richmond.

And don't get me started on Vancouver. Don't get me started on Vancouver. Immigration will fix it. This sense of religious vibrancy amongst immigrants is not just because particularly religious folk choose to immigrate to Canada or the U.S. or Western Europe.

That is part of the story. But there is more to it than that. In the words of a church historian, Timothy Smith, immigration is, I'm quoting him, a theologizing experience.

Immigration is a theologizing experience. It makes people aware of the religious dimensions of life.

[16:57] Immigrants are more attuned to the religious world. Conversions occur. Consider the Korean population.

In Korea, about 25% of the population is Christian. Among those who migrate to North America, about 50% are Christian.

But surveys of Koreans in both Canada and the U.S. lead to 75% of Koreans saying that they are Christian.

This, I think, is the highest share of any ethnocultural group. 75% identification. A similar story is true of recent Chinese immigration.

A study of Chinese Canadians in Toronto repeated, and I'm quoting from this study, the number of new converts is phenomenal. Here's an interesting statement to get underneath these figures into an individual family.

[18:10] This is a conversation I had with a family from Hong Kong who became Christians in Vancouver. This is what the wife told me, and the husband agreed.

I interviewed the two together. When we were leaving Hong Kong, she said, we were at the peak of our business life. That's why we were too busy and finding too little time to give to the family.

So when we came to Canada and we get away from that fast living, we maintain family life. This is the first priority we need to have.

Otherwise, it ruins the meaning of coming to Canada if we put all our time into working and still neglect the kids. This is what I think because God changed my values.

Now we have religion and have a change of mind. A change of mind, what is the priority in life?

Let's look deeper into that theologizing experience and its results.

[19:24] Immigration is a period of uprootedness. Some of you will know that from personal experience. A stripping away of the familiar contours of everyday life.

In the most radical sense, the immigrant becomes a stranger in the new land. Disoriented and vulnerable. The English language is frequently a problem.

So the simplest everyday task becomes a challenge of understanding. Employment success beyond the most basic survival jobs is a steep mountain to climb.

As one immigrant here told me, I have been very depressed since we came here. We failed in everything we tried. Another said, we had to adjust to the situation of being unemployed.

We'd had to start our business from scratch. We could hardly face it. It's more stressful here. We really don't know what to do. We are kind of at a loss.

[20 : 39] We are confused. Downward economic and social mobility is a common phenomenon for the immigrants.

Always, almost always in the short term and for some even in the long term. Culture-specific counselling is a critical service to address both chronic and acute stress.

The loss of status seems to hit men harder. A retired businessman spoke about his cohort of Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants to me.

This is what he said. This is just a short part of a much longer statement. He said 95% of male immigrants feel upset, feel embarrassed, feel very bad.

Men around 35 to 50 years old feel upset because they have lost their self-confidence, their job, lost their respect.

[21 : 49] A Korean pastor told us, quote, some immigrants are in real need because they contemplate suicide and come from broken families.

There are many cases in which the fathers are being stressed or depressed because they can no longer properly be the head of the family.

Here's another Hong Kong immigrant speaking. From being a powerful person in Hong Kong, I became powerless.

If I stayed in Hong Kong, I would be powerful, powerful, powerful going up in my job. But God wanted to make me powerless.

I needed to be humble. I belong to God. He leads me. Good thing I have religion. If not, I would have gone mad.

[22 : 52] For the refugee, there are still deeper hurts of family loss and homeland traumas. The familiar world with its comforts, opportunities, and diversions is gone.

That is why one Chinese-Canadian author has written, Immigration for most people approximates a real-life crisis.

Where is the church in all of this? In this vexed situation, the immigrant church becomes an oasis of relief.

In interviews, the immigrant church was described to us in these words. A home away from home. A safe place to grow and be accepted.

A non-threatening place. A refuge where many are lonely and stressed. Let me spell this out.

[24 : 04] Immigrants and refugees become resident aliens in the society they move to. They become resident aliens.

And that is exactly the status prescribed for Christian believers in the world. We are to be residents who are alien to this world.

We are to be strangers in this world. In Peter's words, we are to be aliens and strangers in the world.

Such resident alien status does not mean indifference to society, as is clear from the example of Jesus.

But it does mean a distinct ranking of claims and priorities. A separate domain of hopes and disciplines. This status, of course, is highlighted in Pilgrim's Progress.

[25 : 07] Where the pilgrim is a spiritual traveler passing through the world. A resident alien who avoids the world's enticing distractions.

While this perfect life of pilgrim detachment is rarely acted out, of course. The enforced separation of the immigrant from worldly convention, from worldly comforts.

Where the everyday is an alien place. This comes much closer to such separation that Peter speaks about than is the experience of most of us.

Here we need just one technical term. Just one piece of jargon this evening. The anthropologist Victor Turner has used the word liminality.

I'll repeat that. Liminality. There's our one piece of jargon. He uses it to describe the actual experience of being on a pilgrimage.

[26 : 23] He actually studied many, many pilgrims who are on pilgrimages. And devised this theoretical account about the experience of being a pilgrim.

One of the points he emphasizes is that life as a pilgrim is separate from normal, everyday society. As he studies pilgrimages as liminal experiences, Turner identifies a set of characteristics. Listen to them carefully. In the pilgrimage, there is selflessness, simplicity, *communitas*, that is intense solidarity in a group.

Money and status don't matter. And there is a strong sense of the sacred and the spiritual. Doesn't that sound a bit like the New Testament church in the early chapters of Acts?

As it sought to follow the radical prescriptions of Jesus' teaching. Likewise, the immigrants' detachment from the comforts and distractions of society leads to an intensification of religious experience.

[27 : 52] Reflected in their worship, in the way they spend their time, and the way they give of their talents. Signs of such intensification of religious practice were evident in the immigrant churches where we conducted interviews in Greater Vancouver.

We looked at Chinese and Korean churches today. And through an oral history project, we aimed to recreate the glory days of the German immigrant church in the 1950s and 1960s.

When many Germans were leaving Europe and some of them were coming to Canada.

Communitas, that is intense expressions of self-solidarity within the group, were very easy to find.

We were told this in the Korean church. Birds of a feather don't just bond together. They stick together like crazy glue.

In another Korean church, we learned the longer established immigrants tend to help the newer immigrants a lot. They show love and concern for the new immigrants.

[29 : 13] Another pastor told us, When immigrants first arrive in Canada, they feel very much alone and scared. The church offers a community that will embrace them where they are, whether they're Christian or not Christian.

The church offers cooked meals, places to rest when looking for a new place to rent or buy a home, advice on the educational system. The church becomes their home.

The church becomes their home. The German churches had also practiced this warm welcome in the 1950s and 1960s.

So we spoke to older members of the congregations and asked them to think back to that period.

We were told, as a whole, the German community looked after each other.

I think during the first ten years, this was the great strength of the churches, meeting emotional needs, spiritual needs, and physical needs.

[30 : 19] One elder described the process in his church in the 1960s. His house sounds like it was a chaotic place.

A phone call would come from the church to his house saying, I'm quoting now, saying there were fellows who had just arrived on the train from Germany. We'd have five or six fellows boarding with us.

Then through the network or through my dad, they'd either direct them to barrage shipyards, if you can remember them, to barrage shipyards as shipwrights or trained carpenters, or to the various mills in the Fraser River for employment.

And so the church, he added, became, in addition to a spiritual center, it became a social center as well.

Note, this is not either or. This is not spiritual center or social center. This is not the conservative church or the liberal church.

[31 : 24] This is both and. The outcome was a harvest of conversions and church growth. A German pastor remembered how immigrants, quote, were received with a lot of enthusiasm, were given many, many gifts and benefits.

This kind of assistance in the immigrant church remains today as we looked at Chinese and Korean congregations.

And it includes a wide range of services. Besides spiritual and counseling services, advice is offered on housing, schooling, social services, even employment.

As one Chinese-Canadian elder told us, we are a walking yellow pages to them. We help them to find accommodation and a job, teach them to fill in application forms, be their interpreter and a referee for them.

Talks are offered of the most practical kind. How to do winter driving. How to complete your tax form. And so on.

[32 : 40] Mentoring for the practicalities of everyday life often occurs in weekly home fellowship or care groups.

Quoting here from a Chinese respondent, our members from a care group will advise them how to apply for a social insurance card, how to open a bank account, recommend a family doctor, etc. Language services are another practical gift. For example, there was one small Chinese-Canadian church we spoke to that offers 16 hours of English language training each year.

Congregation of about 100 people. It also offers a Chinese language school for children. A painting class, a sewing class, a martial arts class, and a class for people preparing for their citizenship test. Retired and long-established immigrants are often prominent as volunteers. We learned of one heroic figure in Burnaby. In a Chinese-Canadian church, there is a retired man who has prepared 50 different immigrants to take their driving test.

[34 : 02] Not all in his own car, I hope. But from having taught four children to drive, multiplying that by 12, my goodness.

Costly contributions of time, finances, and practical gifts are donated for church activities, including building programs.

A German-Canadian deacon at a South Vancouver church remembered how in the 1960s, and I'm quoting from him, when the church was built, the people, they stayed in basement suites, many of them, instead of buying a home so the church could be up.

I spent eight months working on building the church. I gave my job up for the construction of the church. So here's my story then.

The vitality of the immigrant church. The church intensified through a period of liminality, through its separation, whether voluntary or involuntary, from the worldly pursuits of the society in which it is embedded.

[35 : 23] Of course, we should not romanticize immigrant churches, for they are not perfect institutions. Divisions and splits occur among members.

There's not a lot of attention paid to the world outside their own ethnocultural group. And moreover, this liminal stage does not last indefinitely.

Economic and social mobility, a gradual embeddedness in the new society, carries the congregation and its members from weakness and separation from the world to self-sufficiency and integration with the cares of the world.

Some congregations extend the period of liminality longer than others, keeping the world at arm's length. I think they provide an important example to us of religious practice, an intensification, a deepening of religious practice.

They offer us a valuable lesson in discipleship, in the challenge that faces each one of us, singly and as a congregation.

[36 : 53] the challenge of living as Christians in the world. Amen.