

God cares for immigrants, author tells Baylor students

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Throughout the Bible, God demonstrates special concern for immigrants, a Guatemala-born author reminded Baylor University students.

Until recently, several Baylor departments sponsored Neighbor Nights, where students shared a meal and learned about the culture of other students as part of the university's Good Neighbor Project.

The Diana R. Garland School of Social Work and its Center for Church and Community Impact hosted an event where Karen Gonzalez, author of *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong*, spoke.

Gonzalez, who works as human resources director for World Relief, said she was encouraged to see students gathered to learn more about immigration in the United States.

"I have a lot of hope the church will rally around this issue," she said.

Lessons from Ruth

Scripture expresses God's care for immigrants, Gonzalez noted. From Hagar—the one whom everyone else ignored but God saw—to Jesus and his parents finding refuge in a foreign land, God shows mercy and compassion for the foreigners, she explained.



Speaker and author Karen Gonzalez touched on the command God gives for the care of immigrants even if the laws of other countries interfere or prohibit having compassion for them. She explained one of the best examples for that is found in the Book of Ruth. (Photo/Isa Torres)

Gonzalez focused on the story of Ruth, the Moabite woman who moved to Judah with her mother-in-law, Naomi.

“In the first five verses [of the Old Testament book of Ruth] you already hear about the survival of women in ancient times,” Gonzalez said. “To those challenges, you have to add the people of Bethlehem did not love the Moabites.”

When Ruth told Naomi she would go wherever Naomi went, Ruth became an immigrant, Gonzalez said.

Some Old Testament passages warned Israel against certain people, she noted. She pointed to Deuteronomy 23, which prohibits Ammonites and Moabites from entering the assembly of the Lord. But Gonzalez also pointed out other verses like Deuteronomy 24:19-24, in which God commands Israel to care for people on the margins of society, particularly immigrants, orphans and widows.

While many stories in the Old Testament speak of Israel not obeying God, the book of Ruth shows God's people obeying God by treating Ruth with justice, she said.

"This is a quaint story where everyone does what they're supposed to do," Gonzalez said. "It is what I call a blessed alliance, in which everyone brings something to the table."

Ruth added her savviness, hard-working ethic and compassion, while Naomi brought her kindness and her advantage as a cultural insider, she noted.

How would Ruth be treated at the southern U.S. border?

The way immigrants are recognized in Ruth differs from how immigrants seem to be perceived in the United States right now, Gonzalez observed.

"Unlike today, when immigrants do the jobs nobody wants to do, Ruth was able to do the job everyone else did," she said.

Boaz understood his power should be used to help others, Gonzalez said.

"Nobody was superior to others and no one abused someone else," she maintained. "But what would have happened if Ruth arrived at our southern border now?"

Immigration takes place for several reasons, including the desire to seek a better life, seek employment and be reunited with family members, she explained.

Others seek refuge or asylum, she added. People flee their homes if they face persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political

opinion or belong to a particular social group.

Of all the people seeking refuge, only about 4 percent ever are resettled, Gonzalez reported.

Gonzalez explained the difference between refugees and asylum seekers comes not because of the reasons people flee their home countries, but because of where they solicit aid. Asylum seekers present themselves at a port of entry, while those seeking refuge solicit the aid of one country while in a different one.

Both are completely legal, she said. But only less than 10 percent of asylum seekers to the United States are successful.

Immigrants face challenges, dangers

Once immigrants come into this country, they are more likely to become victims of crime than U.S. citizens. Since they see their status as vulnerable and may not fully understand their rights or the civil process, immigrants face more cases of abuse than those born in the country, Gonzalez said.

Besides falling victims of crime or abuse in their home country and at the countries where they immigrated, many asylum seekers suffer from violence while journeying to the U.S., she said.

She noted 70 to 80 percent of immigrant women crossing the border between Mexico and the United States are victims of sexual assault.

The history between the United States and immigrants carries with it some antagonism, Gonzalez observed.

In 1882, President Chester Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Immigration Act of 1917 restricted immigration by imposing literacy tests and creating new categories of inadmissible people. Then in 1924, the

Johnson-Reed Act signed by President Calvin Coolidge prevented immigration from Mexico and placed other limits.

The Johnson-Reed Act was created to preserve ethnic homogeneity and found support from groups like the Ku Klux Klan. While in jail, Adolf Hitler learned of the 1924 Immigration Act and found it inspiring.

A year later in *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler wrote: "There is currently one state in which one can observe at least weak beginnings of a better conception. This is of course not [Germany], but the American Union. The American Union categorically refuses the immigration of physically unhealthy elements, and simply excludes the immigration of certain races."

When other nations accused Germany of abuse against Jews, the Nazis simply cited American laws against African-Americans and other minorities in defense of their government.

The Virginia General Assembly passed the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which defined as "white" a person "who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian."

"What was known as the 'one drop' rule seemed a little too extreme for the Nazis, who formed their ideas from our laws," she said.

U.S. laws change; God's love never changes

Christians must shape the laws they follow according to God's desires, Gonzalez said.

"Immigration is a political, social and economic issue, but it also certainly is a biblical issue," Gonzalez stated. "It is a biblical issue because immigration deals with people, and people are made in the image of God."

Laws that allowed certain horrible things in the United States at one time no longer are legal today, so the laws of a country cannot be taken absolutely, she observed.

“U.S. laws are not God’s,” Gonzalez insisted. “U.S. laws change or are repealed frequently.”

What does not change and is never repealed is the love God has for the field worker whose labor cost prevents produce’s prices from going higher, or the family who ran through the night hoping to find refuge in the United States, she said.

“Immigration is good for countries and for their economy,” Gonzalez observed. “But even if it were not, God commands us to welcome and do justice for immigrants.”