

**** This is a partial transcript of this Sunday's sermon. Please listen to the audio version for the complete sermon.**

**The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
May 2, 2010**

Delesay Campos is now 19 years old – she first came to my attention as one of our very first students at a program called “Kids Café”. The program, run by St. Paul’s, Winston-Salem helps children with their homework and provides dinner four nights a week.

At the time Delesay came to us she was a middle school student – a very bright and lovely girl. When she was fourteen, she was involved in a very serious automobile accident – she was a passenger. Delesay was in a coma – in fact at one point the doctors recommended that she be removed from life support, but the parents would not agree.

Delesay did eventually come out of the coma, and for a good while it seemed as if she was impaired in terms of her ability to learn and do her school work. Gradually however, and with a tremendous effort on her part, she began to once again make good grades and excel in school. She has now graduated from high school and wants to enter the Nursing program at Forsyth Technical Community College. She wants to help others because she so appreciates the help she was given when she was so ill and helpless.

There is a problem. Delesay came to the United States with her parents when she was a very young child. She had no choice in the matter. She did what any four or five year old would do – what her parents told her. Delesay is an undocumented

immigrant. She has brothers and sisters who are American citizens because they were born in this country. When Delesay enrolls at Forsyth Technical Community College she will pay out of state tuition – her younger brothers and sisters can attend the same school at a fraction of the cost.

I suppose it could be worse for Delesay, she could be living in Arizona and have to live in much greater fear, but of course those same views that created the Arizona law are held by many in North Carolina.

It seems that God is always doing a new thing. And it often causes Christians to have to reevaluate their position and even change some time-honored traditions. Sometime it puts them in conflict with their government and the law. It can even put us into the position of deciding between following Christ or the law.

Our current opportunity or conflict – depending on how you view it – has to do with immigration. The recent passage of a rather (in my view) Draconian law in Arizona has raised the stakes in a huge and complicated national problem.

It is easy enough to get into an argument when you talk about immigration from a theoretical perspective – when you just deal with economics and questions about benefits and employment issues. Immigration has created a platform for political posturing by all sorts and conditions of would be office holders.

We have an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in this country. Much of our discussion and often our actions have been driven by fear. For many of us, it is just one of those things we would like for someone to handle and we'd like to not be bothered by it.

Of course when a problem is about people you don't know or care about, it is pretty easy to be tough minded and uncaring. It becomes a bit more difficult when you put a human face on the so-called problem and especially it becomes difficult to 'objectify' when you get to know someone and begin to understand their story.

According to the lesson from Acts, the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, those who were among the original believers (we would call them charter members) were upset with Peter and criticized him saying, "Why did you go to these unclean men and eat with them?"

Peter was eating with people who were different. The original believers were upset. They did not believe that Gentiles were worthy enough to believe in Jesus and accept him. So they were upset that one of their strongest leaders – Peter was getting involved with these 'unclean, crude, people.'

They wanted an explanation of why Peter would do such a thing. Why would he be in the company of such people, much less be sharing his religion with them and then sharing a meal? Peter, have you no couth?

So Peter tells them of a vision that he had while in a trance – a trance that came upon him while at prayer. In this vision every kind of animal was before him and he heard the words, "kill and eat..." Peter resisted this command by saying, "By no means, nothing profane (forbidden) has ever entered my mouth."

Then Peter hears, “What God has made clean must not be called profane.” He says that this happened to him three times.

Peter really did not understand what was happening or why until he was visited by three men from Caesarea. This visit has profound implications. You see both Caesarea Maritima and Caesarea Philippi were declared by the rabbis to be not a part of the land of Israel – they were unclean, not because of behavior but because of the pagan temples. (Fred Horton commentary on the Lectionary) Even if the people had been upright the people were still considered unclean because of the presence of these temples.

So Peter has this vision and it is immediately followed by a visit from three Gentiles from a forbidden city: Caesarea Maritima (by the sea.) It became clear to Peter that the vision was a message from God that the Gentiles (considered unclean) were not to be excluded from the message of salvation. Even more importantly, they - did not have to become Jews in order to receive this grace.

When the three men from Caesarea visit Peter, they are able to share their belief in Jesus. Peter then realizes that God had given these Gentiles the same gift of the Holy Spirit that the Jewish disciples had been given. Eventually Peter gets the point – not only is all that God provides acceptable --- all people are as well.

Peter shared this story with his Jewish friends in Jerusalem. It was a cause of great consternation in the early church. Should these outsiders be brought into the faith? Shouldn't we make them Jews first, before we let them in?

When Peter says to them, “If then the God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,

who was I that I could hinder God?” Another translation says, “...who was I to argue?”

We see from today’s lesson that from the very beginning the church is confronted with the choice to follow the all encompassing love and compassion of Jesus and this often put those Christians in conflict with the laws, rules and regulations they had thought were appropriate.

Well so what?

As a Christian you enter this situation with a different set of eyes and a different set of assumptions. O, you didn’t know that? Well, it is true.

Your church – the Episcopal Church at its July, 2009 convention passed resolution B006 calling for comprehensive immigration reform that would allow millions of undocumented immigrants who have established roots in the United States, including parents and spouses of legal immigrants to have a ‘pathway to legalization and to full social and economic integration into the United States.’

In a recent issue of Episcopal News Monthly the Rev. Richard Witt wrote an article titled ‘To God, No Person is ‘Illegal’ I quote, “In God’s eyes there is no documented or undocumented, there are only his children. For evidence, look at the Torah, which mentions the importance of welcoming the foreigner in our midst more than 15 times.”

As Christians we must be prepared to stand with our brothers and sisters who are threatened and live in fear. We must be ready to stand and defend – provide sanctuary if needed for those who are being persecuted for attempting to make a better

life for themselves and their families by responding to American's call of opportunity.

If you are looking for a precedent – try reading the book of Acts --- you will find that Christians are boundary breaking people.

Empowered and enabled by the Holy Spirit of God to overcome social convention and even risk being at odds with their own nation's policies and laws because they have discovered a greater allegiance. Christians have found that God has no illegal children and like Peter they have stated, 'who was I that I could hinder God?' or as another translation puts it: "Who am I to argue with God?"