

How the Lord's Supper Changes the Immigration Conversation

CRAIG WONG

Grace Fellowship Community Church (San Francisco, CA)

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

HOW THE LORD'S SUPPER CHANGES THE IMMIGRATION
CONVERSATION

By Craig Wong

Pamphlet 18 in the *Renewing Radical Discipleship* series of
Ekklesia Pamphlets, edited by Joel Shuman.

Copyright©2012 by The Ekklesia Project

Printed by Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401

All Rights Reserved.

To become involved in The Ekklesia Project,
or for more information, please contact:

The Ekklesia Project

Brent Laytham, Coordinator

St. Mary's Seminary and University

5400 Roland Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21210-1994

mail@ekklesiaproject.org

(773) 428-5745

The Ekklesia Project maintains a web page that includes resources, announcements and news regarding our activities and work. You may find it at <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org>

This site includes printable versions of earlier pamphlets, and two online pamphlets in the *Studies in Radical Discipleship* series.

WHAT DIFFERENCE does a sacrament make in a society where the lines drawn between “legal” and “illegal” persons are hardened not only by prejudice, politics, and law, but also by cement blocks, barbed wire, transport planes, and electronic ankle bracelets? Where an average of 30,000 immigrants occupy federal detention facilities each day, and up to 400,000 are being forcibly removed from the country each year?

This essay will suggest that a liturgical practice—more specifically, the Eucharist—can indeed make a difference, but not as a creative tool for church-based social activism. Rather, I attempt to explore the relational, economic, and eschatological dimensions of the Lord’s Supper and their implications for the Church’s engagement with today’s immigration conversation. To elucidate this practically, I draw from the journey of San Francisco-based Grace Fellowship Community Church (GFCC), with whom I worship and serve.

The impetus for this essay arose, in large part, by dismay not only about the divisive and dehumanizing nature of the national immigration conversation but, more alarmingly, the American Church’s overall impotence to engage the issue much differently from the rest of American society. How the Church talks *about*, *with*, or even *on behalf of* our neighbors reveals a lot about the most basic of Christian commitments—where does our ultimate hope lie?. My hope is that this essay will deepen appreciation for the transformative role of Sunday morning sacraments, that is, the joyous possibilities of redemptive change when the Church *begins* in communion with the Host of the table.

BEGINNINGS

To appreciate the evolving role of the Lord's Supper in the life of GFCC, it is helpful to go back some forty years—well before we were separately incorporated as a new congregation—to our practice of communion in Chinatown's largest Chinese congregation at the time. We observed the Eucharist on a quarterly basis, a joint activity among the Cantonese-, Mandarin-, and English-speaking fellowships. The tone of our communion experience, by most accounts, was one of solemnity. It was an occasion for the “truly spiritual,” as demonstrated in at least two ways. On one hand, to rise and process to the table was to make public a clean conscience: Jesus and sinner were on good terms. On the other hand, to remain seated was to demonstrate another form of piety: there remained some sins to work out, making one unworthy to partake in the supper. To sit out the supper meant that one's outstanding sins were being taken very seriously.

With the communion event reduced down to a public performance of one's spirituality, it was only natural to engage in either religious voyeurism or self-preoccupation. *Why is Mel going up to the table? We all know what he's been up to! And look at Teri, sitting there all smug and self-righteous. Clearly, she's just putting on a performance for the rest of us. What should I do? What will Trent think if I walk up to the table? Or Bernice, if I remain seated?* In the end, such banal motive-interrogation demonstrated that the Lord's Supper that was more about *us*—what *we* brought to the table—rather than about *Jesus* and what *He* has done on our behalf.

Charting the shift from communion being about *us* to being about *Jesus* is difficult, especially since it is an ongoing journey. But there are some moments to point to. For one, being commissioned and sent out as a new church plant in 1983 gave us a fresh opportunity to push ecclesial questions, including the nature of worship. We began to understand liturgy as reorientation rather than refilling, a time not merely for inspiration but for “detox” from the lies

of a fallen world. Worship, and therefore the table, became that place where the congregation rehearsed her true identity.

Perhaps more significantly, we began to sense our need for the feast of forgiveness. We were feeling a certain amount of weakness and vulnerability as a new church plant. We anticipated making many mistakes, and indeed made them. Also, with our smaller numbers, we rubbed up against each other a lot more than we used to. Seeking to live more intimately as a Christian community, our sins became more apparent. Lastly, we had left the culturally-cloistered world of Chinatown and felt intimidated by our renewed mission to “be the Church in San Francisco” in places that were much less familiar to us. We needed sustenance to ask this question rightly, and to labor faithfully.

Therefore, the Eucharist became less of a ritual, and more of a meal...one that, over time, came to mean at least three things. First of all, the Eucharist was where we embraced our shared brokenness. Watching each other walk up the aisle was a visual reminder that we were broken and needy people and we, therefore, needed *each other*. Secondly, like loaves and fishes, Christ received our feeble offerings at the table, broke them, and returned them, sending us out with more to share than what we started with. The table spoke of Christ’s abundance—we need not fear scarcity.

Lastly, the Lord’s Supper was a picture of what is to come, the hope of God’s good future, where even the most unlikely of table-mates would at last feast together at a Great Banquet. We practiced “passing the peace” with each other after communion, affirming the *shalom* of God made possible through Christ’s death and resurrection. At the table, we proclaimed the hope of the cross until He comes.

As our need for the feast continued to grow, we increased our Eucharistic diet from once a quarter, to monthly, to twice-monthly and, finally, to every Sunday. And then in 1992, perhaps knowing we needed to be tested, God led our predominantly Asian

and Anglo congregation into the *Latino* Mission District of San Francisco.

INTO THE MISSION DISTRICT

It was one thing to affirm our brokenness at the table and exchange hugs in the pews each Sunday. It was quite another thing to resist our deeply ingrained impulses to function out of our strengths. Our congregation is largely comprised of college-educated professionals who possess, at least ancestrally, the Chinese immigrant success story. We can tell of our hard-working predecessors who not only learned how to be *accepted* by the system, but also how to tap it and reap its rewards. A 1910 California journalist put it this way: “It goes to show how fast the Oriental with his thrifty ways and clever mind is gaining a place in our hearts and brotherhood and that we are at last beginning to recognize his sincere endeavor to live up to our American ideals...Let the little brown man adapt to *our* standards and manners of life, and we are *quite ready* to give him a chance with our own!”

This comment comes out of *The Overland Monthly*, a turn-of-the-century literary magazine based in San Francisco that, among other things, was used by a wealthy iron baron to rouse public support for America’s imperial ambitions, in particular, her “manifest destiny” to colonize the Philippines after the defeat of Spain. Because his local company supplied ships and armaments for the U.S. fleet, he had much to gain from the war effort. Thus, his magazine heralded an America on the move. Its message to Asian immigrants was simple: Get with the program or go back home!

As the Monthly explained, some “Orientals” were finally starting to get it. But other Asians apparently *didn’t* because the same year that the article was written, the U.S. built the West Coast’s first major immigration detention facility on Angel Island, and with a specifically-restrictionist mission. A logical extension of the

Chinese Exclusion Act passed by Congress in 1882, the detention center was an answer to the anti-immigrant sentiment captured in this *Overland Monthly* offering: “The most objectionable feature of the presence of the Chinese in California is their affect on our people. Their affect has been to degrade labor, to weaken the political body, and to injure morally, in the broad sense of that word, both the rich and the poor.”

Angel Island will return at the conclusion of this essay, but the primary point I seek to suggest here is simply that the cultural heritage of many at GFCC is that of the successful Chinese immigrant, a success that was made possible by complicity with the American imperial agenda, the dominant narrative of state power and hegemony that remains to this day.

OUR POWER REFLEX

Reflecting this national narrative, and equipped with the tools and education to work the system to our advantage, we possessed (and still contend with) a “power reflex” which kicked in whenever obstacles threatened to thwart our agendas, even charitable ones. We were *problem solvers*, and we brought this impulse to *everything*, including our relationships. We were more inclined to *fix* people than to join them, much less to imagine being *changed* by them.

And so, we brought this power reflex into the Mission District, home to a majority of San Francisco’s immigrant poor who came from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico under difficult circumstances we had little clue about. In this way, it is important to note, we did not pick the immigration issue as much as it picked us. When God led us into the Mission District, we honestly did not know what we were doing.

Thus, in 1992, we found ourselves situated in a new neighborhood, clueless about our neighbors but with a well-intentioned desire to serve. With due diligence, we conducted a community needs assessment. Identifying a felt need for computer skills train-

ing and English literacy, we created a program to address it. Not wanting to operate in an overtly paternalistic fashion, we emphasized the word “partner” in *Grace Learning Partners* to connote a two-way relationship. Not only would we offer skills to our neighbors, our neighbors would be encouraged to offer something back, for example, “I’ll teach you MS-Word and you can teach me how to make pupusas.”

So why did most of the visiting participants, after just a few short weeks, stop coming? We found later that they sensed our frustration whenever they arrived late or failed to come consistently. Also, the dinner was provided within a very narrow window of time. At Grace Learning Partners, visitors learned to make a choice: be punctual or be hungry. In the end, our neighbors grew tired of failing to fit into our tightly-engineered expectations and schedules.

STRANGERS THAT BECOME FRIENDS

Far more insidious than our cultural blind spots, however, was our *relational* blindness. When Maria entered the doors of our church, who did I see? Did I see a poor person looking for help? An undocumented immigrant taking advantage of free resources? A single mom whose irresponsible life was messed up beyond repair? These are typical questions of privileged people who are used to having resources at their disposal, and who expect others to be able to live likewise.

At the Lord’s Table, however, we’re mercifully stripped of the delusion of self-sufficiency. Here, the cross disabuses us of any claim to moral superiority or self-made-ness. So deep is our sin, yet Christ died for us. Moreover, Jesus invites us to the table to have communion with Him and with fellow sinners. No more dehumanizing prejudice *or* pedestals. All are valuable simply because each one is deeply loved by God. Dr. Daniel Carroll Rodas, Old Testament scholar at Denver Seminary, makes a Genesis

argument: Immigrants are human beings, and as such are made in God's image, having essential value with the potential to contribute to society through their presence, work and ideas. So the wealthy receives from the lowly, the banker from the hotel worker, and the Stanford graduate from the marginally literate, and vice versa. *Everyone* is a gift. *Everyone* has something to offer. *Everyone* has something to receive.

This being said, perhaps the most important gift we receive from our neighbors is a perspective that questions our sensibilities, that challenges our high-powered, middle-class assumptions. Lydia, a young mom from Central America, gave us this gift. "I really have a hard time relating to your problems," she told us. Lydia struggled to survive in America after being persecuted, physically abused and forced to flee her war-torn country. By contrast, our "struggles" befuddled her as we shared in small group about our angst over which home to buy, the safety of our daughter's pre-school, or finding a job that is more personally fulfilling. Increasingly, she found the chasm between her experience and ours too difficult to bridge and she eventually parted ways with us. We realized, after Lydia left the congregation, that we were losing a gift far more valuable than we were able to appreciate when she was present with us. Such wake-up calls served to make us more mindful that the welcome of strangers is not only a biblical imperative. It truly changes our lives for the better.

Justo Gonzales' *Santa Biblia*, a book that we read corporately as a congregation, proves helpful on this point. Gonzales explains that the Spanish word *frontera* has two meanings: *frontier* and *border*. Frontier is associated with conquest, for example, the U.S. annexation of Mexican territories by force, or the colonization of the Philippines by scorched earth and bayonet. A *frontier* is unidirectional and therefore inherently violent. Conversely, the Latin American notion of *border* connotes a peaceful encounter where two different cultures mutually enrich each other, usually producing a third culture. In our ministry, the shift in posture from one

of frontier to one of border has meant the difference between *repelling* and *compelling* our neighbors. In breaking bread with our neighbors, Christ transforms strangers into friends...not projects.

This mutual exchange has been particularly poignant as we've encountered a number of struggling marriages among the immigrant families that have come our way. These couples have allowed some of us to speak into their lives, but not because they were marital projects needing solutions from experts, but because they discovered that the sinful dynamics in *our* marriages were no different than theirs. In our common vulnerability, we've been able to give and receive from one another.

MORE THAN ECONOMIC COMMODITIES

I move now to the economic question lying at the intersection of the Eucharist and the immigration conversation. As experienced by my Chinese ancestors, the enmeshment of immigrant sentiment and the economy is inextricable inasmuch as the value of an immigrant, whether spoken or unspoken, is based almost solely upon whether they are deemed an economic asset or liability. While much of the venomous language used of immigrants over the years may sound more judicial than economic, for example, "illegal," "law-breaking," "criminal," "invader," the reality is that such invective invariably spikes in times of economic insecurity.

History bears testimony to this relationship. It is why the Chinese were welcomed when the Central Pacific Railroad needed laborers, but despised when gold prospects began to dry up. Why Mexicans were welcomed across the border in the 1920s when agribusiness grew, but forcibly repatriated after the Great Depression. Why Mexicans were once again sought during the WWII farm-labor shortage through the Bracero Program, but expelled in mass numbers through *Operation Wetback* soon after.

The cold relationship between economic malaise and immigrant crackdowns is not something that political leaders like to

acknowledge openly. We see this clearly in the glaring omission of U.S. trade policy (and its direct influence on the flow of human migration) in the immigration reform conversation. Congress is willing to argue about immigration, but not in ways that will raise the ire of their corporate constituencies.

Similarly, as a congregation, we're squeamish about talking about wealth and materialism, particularly in the context of social need and love of neighbor. At one of our congregation's family retreats, Michael Budde, professor of political science at DePaul University, suggested that we take an evening to disclose our salaries to one another. This was indeed an uncomfortable proposition, let alone to entertain an open conversation about our discretionary spending, our vacationing habits, or the financial trajectories we're quietly securing for our children. And we're unsure about what to do with our wealth in the company of poor immigrant families, many of whom struggle month to month and live in spaces the size-equivalent of a typical kid's bedroom.

Recent reflections on the Eucharist from the first Corinthian letter have helped us see that the Church's blind spots, or ambivalences, about wealth and possessions have always been around. Paul's incredulity about the Corinthian congregation's practice of the Lord's Supper drives home the point that what we may consider *reasonable* and what is *Christian* are often two different things. Richard Hays, New Testament professor at Duke Divinity School, astutely observes that what the Corinthian believers did was quite normal for their day. In Roman imperial society, it was typical for the wealthy benefactor and his friends to congregate in the dining room while lower-status guests gathered in the foyer. For the church, however, to mirror the class divisions of the Rome was to "show contempt for the Church of God" and to "drink judgment against themselves." Paul grieved that their meal gatherings were not for the better, but indeed for the *worse*. They were called by Christ to live as *one family*, but they failed to demonstrate this in their segregated dining practices.

It has been humbling, therefore, to see ways that our poorer neighbors can live *as one family* more naturally than those of us who possess much more. We once had an opportunity to help a neighboring immigrant church with a Spring-cleaning day. At this event, one of our parishioners made this helpful observation: “I’m impressed by how freely they give away their stuff to anyone who passes on the street. They’re not worried about making sure everything is going to a ‘good cause.’ They just let God do with their stuff as He chooses.”

In a similar vein, we have been struck by the difference between the way that our immigrant neighbors approach home hospitality versus the way we do. Our approach tends to be of the Martha Stewart variety, with its emphasis on how things appear. We’re reluctant to invite others in unless our domiciles are “presentable,” treating our homes as though they were showrooms and, in so doing, placing a higher value on image than on relationship. The unfortunate result of this posture is that many opportunities to break bread with our neighbors are sacrificed.

Meanwhile, our immigrant friends welcome us into *their* homes, despite having less room or fancy silverware. On a particular Saturday, the newly-married Castillos invited over thirty of us into their small flat, one shared by three families. Wanting us to celebrate with them, the Castillo family re-arranged what room they had to accommodate as many of us as possible. They cooked a meal and we brought desert. It was cramped and crazy, but one thing was clear: To honor and enjoy the relationship we shared with them was what mattered most. They genuinely considered us as their family.

Although our neighbors are teaching us valuable lessons about what it means to be family, we have a long way to go. Like the wealthy Corinthians, we may not flaunt our taste in fine food, but we remain largely blind to what life is like for most of our city’s undocumented who work in our restaurants, harvest our produce, construct our buildings, and keep our tourists happy. It is diffi-

cult for us to relate to having to make hard choices between food, housing and health care...vital provisions that we daily take for granted. Even farther from our grasp, however, is our complicity with the economic systems and policies that adversely affect the very neighbors we seek to serve.

A Salvadoran man, Manuel, helped us to see these uncomfortable realities one Friday night over dinner: "My friend's farm no longer generates enough money to support his family. The government recently accepted the U.S. dollar as the national currency. This has raised the cost of living a lot, especially for the poorest families. Only the wealthiest in El Salvador, like those who work for corporations, can afford to pay for things at American prices."

His story was consistent with what we learned at a church-based citizenship fair at which a couple of our lawyers volunteered. At the entrance to the fair was a photo of El Salvador's president, and ours, shaking hands. Not knowing what this was about, I later learned that the Central American Free Trade Agreement had just been signed, a boon for North American multi-nationals at the expense of countless Salvadoran farmers. Sadly, economically-destabilizing policies like these are nothing new to our Salvadoran brothers and sisters who draw inspiration from the life of Archbishop Romero. An advocate for the poor, Romero was assassinated in 1980 by one of the infamous "death squads," trained in part by a U.S. government intent on keeping Central America open for business. Among our Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Honduran, and Filipino friends we have heard similar stories, ones about regime change, covert operations, torture, and other political strong-arming on the part of our government that has forced the very illegal border crossings we decry.

However difficult, these are the kinds of stories we must be willing to hear if we are to take our Eucharistic theology seriously. How might the national immigration conversation change if we truly believed that we all human beings fundamentally need each other? That immigrants are more than mere economic assets or

liabilities? That if we truly believed in a God of abundance, we can live as though there really is enough for everyone? That sharing isn't scary? That securing America's economic dominance in the world is not only delusional and immoral—especially when it comes at other nations' expense—but that it ultimately isn't even necessary?

STRANGE TABLEMATES THAT ONE DAY FEAST TOGETHER

The final dimension of the Lord's Supper I will discuss is eschatological, that is, that the Eucharist points to God's good future when strange tablemates will one day feast together. For Phil, a long-time church member and one who once confessed to being a "closet redneck," there are many folks he could never imagine sharing heaven with, the least of which being the "lazy, good-for-nothing freeloaders" his parents always told him about. His upbringing conditioned him to disdain those that society considers irresponsible, who "don't play by the rules" or "earn their right to be here."

And yet, partaking in the Lord's Supper made him think twice, especially as he witnessed the increasingly diverse cast of characters filing up the aisle each Sunday. Phil was slowly being confronted by the wideness of God's mercy: *everyone* is invited to His table, no matter where they're from or how messed up their lives were. Was this a picture of the eschaton, of what is to come?

Phil's growing friendship with Carlos was clear evidence to many of us that the Spirit of Christ was at work in our redneck brother's life. A Nicaraguan immigrant, Carlos had a host of health issues, mental and physical, that made it difficult for him to hold a job. However, he wasn't lazy. He came to our church regularly, always looking for ways to help, whether setting up chairs, cooking, or cleaning the dining hall. He didn't ask for anything in return. He

simply loved being around. One person he particularly connected with was Phil.

Thus, it was Phil who first took notice when Carlos disappeared. He alerted the pastoral staff and started making phone calls. No one, including the sister he lived with, knew where he was. Finally, after about three weeks, Carlos' family found out that he had been picked up by immigration authorities and put in a detention facility some hundred twenty-five miles away from San Francisco.

By way of background, what happened to Carlos can be traced back to the Department of Homeland Security's "Operation Endgame," a plan set in motion in 2003 to expel every "deportable alien" from the country by the year 2012, the most ambitious immigration crackdown operation in U.S. history. Since then, over 2.5 million immigrants have been deported, the majority of them forcibly returned back to Mexico, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe.

While the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) claims to target violent criminals, the fact remains that well over half of the 2.5 million do not have criminal records. Billions have been spent employing border patrol and Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, and over 350 detention facilities have sprouted across the country, representing a boon for the private prison industry. Some may recall a recent National Public Radio investigative report that revealed that Corrections Corporation of America executives had a key role in the drafting of SB1070, the Arizona bill that charges local police with responsibility to identify and arrest undocumented immigrants.

But Operation Endgame also gave a boost to county governments who become ICE subcontractors by dedicating jail beds for immigration detention. These arrangements become significant revenue generators because ICE funds such operations in excess of actual expenditures. With recession-hit budgets, counties have incentive to hold as many immigrants as possible.

Which is exactly where Phil's friend, Carlos, ended up. When we finally found out where he was, a group of us met with Carlos' sister and brother-in-law to see if there was anything we could do to help Carlos. We then took a trip to the Yuba County detention facility.

Of immediate concern were his epileptic seizures. During the first attack, we later found out, the guards thought he was faking, roughed him up, and put him into solitary confinement. Although there was a medical unit available for the detainees within the jail as is required by federal law, layers of bureaucratic insulation kept us from gaining any information about what medications, if any, he was receiving. This heavy-handed posture was also evident in the strictness of the meal schedule, for example, a requirement that inmates show up in the cafeteria at 5:00am each morning or miss breakfast.

Similarly, when we asked the jail officer about Carlos' immigration status, we were directed upstairs to a room to speak with someone. The room turned out to be windowless and empty, with the exception of one wall-mounted phone. We picked it up, explained what information we were looking seeking. The voice on the other end simply referred us to another line where we, in turn, were transferred—twice—only to receive vague information about Carlos' status.

We tried to comfort Carlos through the thick, bullet-proof glass, praying with him and assuring him we'd do what we could to help. The congregation sent letters and pictures. We advocated for his medical treatment, and looked into his legal options. But a month later he was deported.

Although we had read lots about ICE detention, there was something about being there up close that roused our anger. The harsh treatment—the administrative runaround, the limited access, the faceless interactions with authorities—all painted a dark picture of what happens when a particular class of people are criminalized. Carlos' brother-in-law's experience further fu-

eled our anger towards ICE. A politically conservative Pentecostal church-goer, Diego was grateful to be in America. He enjoyed his life in America, and generally felt he had been treated well. For this reason, he found it shocking and inexplicable how inhumanely his brother-in-law was being treated. This was not the America he had been familiar with.

EMBRACING ICE AS MY NEIGHBOR

Given such behavior, it has been a natural response to vilify the men and women of ICE, to view them as so many imperial storm troopers, void of humanity, who execute their responsibilities with ruthless efficiency. Some of us have engaged in opportunities to publicly rail against them, marching in front of their headquarters with “Who would Jesus deport” signs and t-shirts, condemning their practices and letting them know that Jesus is on *our* side.

Theologically speaking, there are legitimate grounds to “demonize” ICE *as an institution* for, inarguably, powers and principalities are indeed involved. However, the Lord’s Table does not allow us to view these men and women as anything other than human beings themselves, people deeply loved by God. In the midst of the madness, was it possible for us to imagine ICE agents breaking bread at the table alongside those of who advocate for their victims?

As the Lord would have it, we were given the unusual opportunity to co-host this very thing, a meeting in our church sanctuary with ICE. There they were, a Eucharist banner literally hanging over their heads. On one side sat twelve ICE and DHS officials, some from the local field office and the others from department headquarters in Washington, DC. On the other side were a dozen or so immigration advocates, including clergy and lay leaders who serve immigrant families. The event got under our skin, and we sensed the Spirit helping us to re-imagine what it meant to engage

the powers that be *as Christians*. Imagining Christ at the table, and the wideness of His mercy, began to change everything for us.

A transformative moment, the convening ultimately led to quarterly meetings between ICE and local San Francisco faith leaders. Like our secular activist colleagues, we are talking with them about the egregious effect upon families, and the larger society, when deportations tear them apart. How public safety is compromised when immigrants fear reporting crimes. How victims of crime cannot trust law enforcement officers that are ostensibly called to protect and to serve. We want to hold ICE accountable to humane detention practices. And we seek a departmental commitment to prosecutorial discretion that spares non-criminals from deportation.

But we don't want to hold these conversations as adversaries. We don't want to treat them as villains but as fellow human beings who are no more sinners than any of us. When they say "they're just doing their job" we want to extend them enough dignity to tell them that they are more than mere cogs in a machine, that they're subjects, not objects, with the agency to make moral judgments and to exercise them within the structures they find themselves, even if it might come at personal cost.

We go into these meetings not knowing what the end result might be. We don't expect our actions to change enforcement policy in the near term. But we do want to be persistent in one thing: that we demonstrate the love of Christ that welcomes sinners to the table regardless of who they are or what they've done. We want to proclaim, and *embody*, the hope of Christ's return, when a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages—Phil and Carlos, advocate and ICE agent, documented and undocumented—standing before the throne and before the lamb...cries out in a loud voice, saying 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

CONCLUSION

Like many of my fellow congregants, my family story follows the “immigrant success narrative,” but the truth is that I wouldn’t be here were it not for a small Presbyterian church that advocated for grandmother in 1917. Wong Shee was about 22 years old when she left her war torn country and arrived at a United States dock on Angel Island with great anticipation for a better life. What she *hadn’t* anticipated was being immediately incarcerated in an immigration detention facility for nearly six months where she seriously contemplated suicide under the duress of months of arduous interrogations, crowded and unsanitary conditions, poor food, inadequate medical treatment for her trachoma, and the constant fear of deportation back to China, where an abusive mother-in-law awaited her.

Immigration records obtained from the National Archives reveal an amazing paper trail of tireless advocacy...correspondence between the leaders of the Presbyterian Mission in San Francisco and the immigration authorities based on the island. There were appeals, backed with money, to medically treat for a condition that would have established the grounds for her deportation. Also included were letters of reference to verify her legitimacy and fitness for entrance under the exclusion laws. Lastly, there were assurances that she would be taken care of, once released from the Island. These letters written with grace, humility, and respect for the authorities who received them. After six long months, my grandmother was finally released and re-united with her husband. At last having settled in the U.S., she began to raise a family, eventually giving birth to my mother.

I am eager to learn more about this little Presbyterian church that advocated for my grandma. *I do not know* how they engaged the immigration issue theologically. I know little about their liturgical practices, the hymns they sang, or the way they did communion. But this I know, that they welcomed the neighbor in spite of the prevailing bigotry and draconian laws of the day. They were

inevitably transformed as they received *countless* immigrants, like my grandmother, into their fold. They gave generously, with time, energy *and* money, as those who knew they were ultimately provided for. They treated others, even those who held their loved ones in captivity, with respect and human dignity. And they served with perseverance and stubborn love, as ones who knew the One who writes the end of the story. May it so be said of the Church today.