

Face to face

by Andrew C. Thompson

Second, such a change of policy would test the claims of the many Americans who insist that they are not against immigration, but only *illegal* immigration. (“What is it about the word ‘illegal’ that you don’t understand?” says the bumper sticker.) These people have invested great emotional and political energy into trying to limit immigration. If law-breaking is really what they find so bothersome, why not work to eliminate the laws that make economic migration illegal in the first place?

Third, the change would serve to acknowledge a lesson we have seen reinforced again and again: there are no legislative solutions to what are, at root, macroeconomic and demographic challenges of historic proportions.

In patching together the immigration reform legislation that died in the Senate, President Bush and his fellow bargainers were pretending that we can have the best of both worlds. Sure, let Mexicans (and others) fill the gaps in the U.S. labor market, these people tried to argue, but let them do so through a guest worker program so we can send them home when we are through with them. This middle ground proved unsatisfactory to both anti-immigration hawks—who think that there are too many Mexicans coming to the United States in the first place—and to immigrant-rights advocates who think that hard-working immigrants deserve a fair shot at permanent residency and, eventually, citizenship.

In the wake of this legislative failure, the time has come to acknowledge that with NAFTA Americans got a whole lot more than they were bargaining for. The free-market arrangement has produced much good—radically increased trade, higher rates of economic growth and an ever-increasing interdependence of the three participant countries.

But NAFTA has also produced bitter fruit. With their rush to the north, Mexicans have made one thing abundantly clear: they will not stay put to work the fields of diminished economic opportunity while people living in the U.S. enjoy ever more goods and services at ever lower prices. ■

OUR CULTURE’S ever-increasing individualism is about to take a decisive turn. Any day now self-checkout lanes in our stores will outnumber the lanes that lead shoppers to a human cashier. At that point, “going to the market” will become a solitary enterprise.

When I walk into the grocery store closest to my home, I enter an environment designed to encourage me to do my shopping quickly and without bothering the help. Shopping carts stand waiting for me at the front door. Signs above the aisles announce the main products to be found there, and the employees are scarce. There are four check-out stations where I can scan my own groceries, place them into plastic sacks, process my coupons and feed my money into a slot. All by myself. If I do it the right way, I successfully purchase a week’s worth of groceries without ever interacting with another human being.

Initially I recoiled at the idea: the world of commerce has become cold and impersonal. Why exacerbate this trend? I caved, however, because the self-checkout option is easier. I usually don’t have to wait in line, and I can get out the door and on my way home more quickly.

Perhaps this isn’t as successful as I’d thought, however. Lately I’ve realized that I’m impatient when this “faster” lane isn’t as fast as usual. I become irritated when the self-checkout machine has a hiccup and I have to call over a real, flesh-and-blood human to help me.

As we move through the season after Pentecost, it is worth remembering that when Jesus Christ appeared to his disciples in the weeks following the resurrection, he did not speak to them in the disembodied voice of a Kroger self-checkout machine, and he did not beam himself into living rooms where

isolated individuals were watching cable TV. He didn’t send out a mass e-mail, and he didn’t offer a sermon downloadable on iTunes.

Instead, he appeared in two ways. The first type of encounter was with one or two people at a time, as in his appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary near the tomb, or to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. But when he appeared to one or two, it was not for their solitary benefit. He made a point of asking them to go to others. “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Matt. 28:10). Likewise, the encounter on the Emmaus road seems designed to motivate the pair of disciples to go and witness to the larger group (Luke 24:32-35).

The second way the resurrected Jesus appeared was to groups of his followers, as when he showed up in the midst of the disciples. In each instance, he shared a teaching or command that increased the disciples’ understanding and empowered their witness: in Matthew, it was the commission to baptize and make disciples; in Luke, a greater understanding of the scriptures; in John, the gift of the Holy Spirit itself.

In all his resurrection appearances, Jesus works to create the community that will become the church. This is the case whether he is motivating individuals to witness to the larger whole or encouraging and equipping the group of disciples itself. In all of these instances, he of-

Andrew C. Thompson is a United Methodist pastor currently working on a Th.D. degree at Duke Divinity School. He writes “Gen X Rising,” a column in the United Methodist Reporter, and maintains a blog at www.genxrising.com.

fers himself either *for* community or *in* community.

In October of 2005, just weeks after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, I went with a group of people to do relief work in Pascagoula, Mississippi. We stayed at an Assemblies of God church that was just far enough inland that the flooding damaged, rather than destroyed, the church building. The trip was a lesson to me in the power of the Holy Spirit working in community in almost every way—except in the case of the pastor of the church.

To be fair, this pastor was in the midst of the biggest challenge of his life. But in the process of equipping his community for the work of rebuilding homes and lives, he alienated almost everyone with whom he came into contact. Headstrong and abrasive, he pushed away not only the re-

lief workers who stayed in his church, but as he admitted to me, his own church members as well.

He was undaunted by the adverse effects of his attitude; in fact, he took his troubles as a sign that he was right. He claimed to be carrying on a personal discourse with the Holy Spirit, and his belief in a special calling gave him all the authority he needed for the ministry of rebuilding Pascagoula.

This pastor's background was Pentecostal, but the Pentecost that he subscribed to was a Pentecost of one. He had no need to test his divine discourse with God against scripture, the tradition, or the community of faith because God had been revealed to him personally, and that was enough. He had a divine mandate to do anything he wanted to do.

Of course, there is no such thing as a Pentecost of one. Just as the resurrec-

tion appearances of Jesus were progenitors of Christian community, so too the Spirit descended on the disciples and drew in a new community from all nations (Acts 2). There is no private, individualistic revelation of the Holy Spirit's power—the Pentecost is an event that can be experienced only by the whole church. It is a Pentecost of all.

Pentecost reminds us that God's redemptive work happens in the context of that corporate body called the church and not in isolated, individual units. That is a pertinent reminder for our day, when individual people and individual congregations separate from larger ecclesial bodies in order to pursue their own tailored versions of discipleship. In a larger sense, it is a lesson for those who remain faithful with the church, as they too must navigate in an isolating world full of self-checkout lanes and self-proclaimed prophets. ■

The ground of being

The artist's eye caught the bent iron grating intended to separate
the living from the dead, the bars pulled apart as though a wandering specter

had recovered his human form, escaped a deadened community. The camera
lens focused the rows of tampered vaults, doors nearly askew, lines

of dead diminishing to infinity. Framed by pillars past, the photo pressed into time
absence of brass bands blowing funereal dirges, colorful umbrellas swaying

to the beat, second-liners celebrating release. I thought of reading old Creole stories
of George Washington Cable and Grace King, the scourge of yellow fever,

the cycle of death and renewal acted out in another century. Or my own death
and renewal in the sixties, the damp breeze blowing across the iron bed frame

where I lay reading Paul Tillich one Saturday afternoon. His text called
into question all that Pleasant Bethel Baptist Church had taught me, questions

I had never allowed to take root, Noah's flood, the sacrificial testing of Abraham,
Esther's dubious path to the throne. Driving past Lafayette Cemetery

to seminary classes, I pondered the rationale for burying the dead
above the ground, the belief that levees would hold, the cockeyed certainty

that the mystical combination of voodoo and faith would somehow
render the Big Easy indomitable. Katrina changed all that,

but New Orleans has always shunted bones to the rear, reopened tombs
for the newly dead, believed in resurrection.

Rosanne Osborne