

I just don't get it!

I've got strong Alabama roots and have much to love and appreciate about the state—including giving me an excellent college education. But sometimes I just don't get Alabama.

For a region that claims to be the buckle of the Bible Belt (the Bible being a book that contains more than 2,500 references to God's concern for the stranger, the poor and powerless) and to have more Baptists than McDonalds has hamburgers, while at the same time so egregiously ignoring the needy—well, I just don't get it.

Consider this. In 2002, Bob Riley, a fiscally conservative Republican, was elected governor and found himself administering a tax code dating to 1901 in which the *richest Alabamians pay only 3 percent of their income in taxes*, while the *poorest pay up to 12 percent*—with taxes kicking in once a family of four makes just \$4,600! And, in a state where 71% of the land is in timber, wealthy out-of-state timber companies pay just \$1.25 an acre in property taxes. General property taxes are rock bottom.

So Riley did what he'd never done before—he proposed a modest property tax hike, partly to put more money into the state's school system, routinely ranked near the worst in the nation. Why did he do that? It turns out Riley's a Christian, and he realized his faith has something to say about the tax situation.

But Riley's proposal didn't pass. In the 2003 vote, sixty-eight percent of the state voted against it—meaning, of course, something like 68% of the Christians who voted. The opposition was led not just by the state's wealthiest interests but also by the Christian Coalition of Alabama. “You'll find most Alabamians have a charitable heart,” said the Coalition's president. “They just don't want it coming out of their pockets.” I just don't get it.

And, now, Alabama is poised to put into law the nation's most draconian immigration legislation (the September 1 enactment date has been postponed one month for a constitutional challenge). As described by Micky Hammon, the majority leader of the Alabama House of Representatives and the measure's chief sponsor, the legislation is patterned on Arizona's immigration policy—but with “an Alabama flavor.” Part of that “flavor,” as Hammon explains it, requires residents to produce IDs to establish their immigration status in “every aspect of a person's life.”

The law prohibits transporting or “harboring” any undocumented immigrant—effectively making citizens lawbreakers for associating with someone here illegally, whether that be inviting them to one's home or church or giving them a ride in a car to visit a doctor. The law bars undocumented immigrants from enrolling in any public college after high school, makes it a crime to rent housing to undocumented immigrants, and requires schools to verify the immigration status of all students and then to report it to the state.

Now I certainly don't have all the answers regarding immigration policy or quickly dismiss the arguments for law and security. But I just don't get how such harsh and intimidating measures square with the Gospel's demand that we welcome the wandering, serve the poor and offer hospitality to the stranger. Faithful churches have no option but to welcome and serve all people regardless of immigration or citizenship status. I just don't get it.

Regarding our nation's immigration situation and our anxiety over the way to go, I simply would offer the same word that I gave this past Sunday, as we addressed living after 9/11. In the sermon, I said:

As you may know, anxiety, vulnerability and suffering are most efficient means of transformation, and God makes full use of them whenever God can. They have unparalleled power to open our eyes and open our hearts.

As a nation, however, we've yet to learn this lesson. Our response to terrorism and the conditions that create it lacks any real imagination—only more of what we've always done. I'd humbly suggest that if we were to be less hasty in acting and to listen more, to ask new questions and to dream more, we might be better off.

What if, instead of working so hard to prop up what's always been, we were to live with our vulnerability until we're able to get out of the driver's seat so we can hear God, honestly look at ourselves and see things in new ways?

I think we can do that in the immigration debate, as well. I have no doubt we can be compassionate enough and creative enough and courageous enough to find a better way through all this. But, what Alabama's done, what all those good Christian folk have done—well, I just don't get it.

Grace,
Pastor Joe