

## Would the Trump Administration Separate Jesus from Mary and Joseph?

by David B. Gowler

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They fled under cover of darkness and traveled hundreds of miles to a distant country where they would be safe.

As the story goes, the family was fortunate. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escaped from Herod the Great and found refuge in Egypt, although many others in Bethlehem and the surrounding villages were killed on Herod's orders.

[Last year a woman and her seven year-old daughter](#), fearing violence, fled the Congo, presented themselves at the U.S. border and officially sought asylum. Even though officials determined that asylum might be granted, the mother and her child were forcibly separated by immigration agents. The woman was detained in San Diego, and her daughter, screaming and traumatized, was taken to a facility in Chicago.

This story and numerous [other stories of children being separated from their parents](#) foreshadow what is now official government policy: [All people who cross the border illegally](#) will be prosecuted. This change means that parents who arrive with children are detained in jail, including ones seeking asylum, and their children—even those who are 18 months old or younger—are turned over to the Department of Health and Human Services.

[The stench of this policy](#) begins at the top, as is evident from [Donald Trump's statements](#), such as the ones [in the announcement of his candidacy](#) for president. Trump found an eager partner in Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who [recently announced this new "zero tolerance policy"](#): "If you cross the southwest border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you . . . If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law. If you don't like that, then don't smuggle children over our border."

[There is no law that requires separating children from their parents at the border](#). This policy is new, it is heartless, and [it is Trump's policy](#).

This hostile approach to immigration is justified throughout the administration, such as [chief of staff John Kelly](#) who bemoaned the ability of these "overwhelmingly rural people" to "assimilate": "They don't speak English. They don't integrate well, they don't have skills." Kelly

supported the policy to separate family members as a “tough deterrent” and infamously declared: “The children will be taken care of — put into foster care or whatever.”

So far the Trump administration’s approach to immigration has significant support among Republicans. A recent [Pew Research Center poll](#) indicated that only 26% of Republicans (and Republican-leaning independents)—and only 25% of white evangelical Protestants—believe that the United States has a responsibility to accept refugees. In contrast, almost three times as many Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (74%) believe that the U.S. has such a responsibility.

Anti-immigrant sentiments have a long history in the U.S., but they stand in stark contrast with one of the greatest landmarks in the U.S., the Statue of Liberty. Since its dedication in 1886, the Statue of Liberty has stood in New York Harbor. It faces southeast so that ships, entering the harbor, can [see her as a welcoming symbol](#) for immigrants and others coming to the U.S.

Emma Lazarus wrote the [Petrarchan sonnet](#), “The New Colossus,” in 1883 to help raise funds for the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty stands, and, in 1903, a plaque with the poem inscribed on it was placed inside the pedestal. Even though people such as White House adviser [Stephen Miller attempt to undermine](#) the importance of the sonnet, its connections to the Statue of Liberty’s symbolism are clear.

The sonnet makes a [radical statement about hospitality](#) to immigrants that contrasts the welcoming “Mother of Exiles” symbolism of the Statue of Liberty with the “conquering limbs” symbolism of the statue of Colossus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world that stood in the harbor of ancient Rhodes.

Lazarus’s sonnet also reminds us that although many Christians believe the Gospel of Matthew’s story about Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fleeing to Egypt is unique, that story is similar to thousands of other stories of immigrants fleeing for their lives and livelihoods. In all of these cases the fundamental issue is that of hospitality to fellow human beings.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, as “strangers” (immigrants) in Egypt received hospitality and later return to Israel after Herod the Great died (although they settled in Galilee). Matthew is also the only Gospel to include Jesus’s famous parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46), a story that declares that giving hospitality to those in need, such as strangers/immigrants like Jesus was in Egypt, is the same as giving hospitality to Jesus himself. This parable also teaches that God will judge human beings on their hospitality, how they treat the “least of these,” the hungry, thirsty, stranger/immigrant, sick, ill-clothed, and imprisoned. Since some scholars—incorrectly, in my view—interpret the “least of these” as being Christians, it is important to note that the critical importance of these acts of hospitality is found throughout the teachings of Jesus—such as extending hospitality to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

Hospitality, of course, is not exclusively a Christian virtue. But the dichotomy between the teachings of Jesus and the beliefs of some white evangelical Christians today about immigration is striking.

The good news is that a [number of Christians](#), including some evangelical Christian leaders, are challenging other Christians to consider what Jesus actually said and did [before reaching any political conclusions](#): “Because ‘how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ,’ Christians must oppose ‘attacks on immigrants and refugees’ and ‘cutting services and programs for the poor’ accompanied by tax cuts ‘for the rich.’”

To date there is little evidence that white evangelical supporters of Donald Trump can be persuaded to change their minds [by any appeal to the teachings of Jesus](#). But one key element in this policy of separating children from their parents may make a difference. As [Jonathan Chait argues](#), the “emotional power of the stories of families torn apart by Trump’s policy has an unknown, but vast, potential.”

The first step would be to understand that these asylum seekers and other immigrants—who are demonized as “criminals” or even “animals” by those seeking to rationalize this policy—are fellow human beings. As Ali Noorani notes, [there are more humane options](#), such as using discretion in prosecuting immigration cases (families are separated when adults are prosecuted), providing legal counsel for children, creating alternatives to detention in facilities, and, when detention is deemed necessary, providing more humane conditions. The next step would be honest discussions of our immigration policies and to what extent the U.S. should practice the virtue of hospitality.

Will the horrific policy of separating children from their parents cause many white evangelicals and others to change their minds about immigration policies in general? As the president they support says when he does not know or want to give the answer, “We’ll see what happens.”

In the meantime, those who have a shred of humanity should fight this inhumane policy.