MY WIFE AND I live and minister among many Hispanic immigrants, both documented and undocumented. Because of that, a number of people have asked my opinion on immigration issues and what has been happening in Arizona.

To be honest, it’s a question that I’d rather avoid. It’s more economically and socially appealing to plead the Fifth Amendment than to offer a polemic on immigration to friends and family who financially support our ministry.

I’d also prefer to avoid the question because quite often the storyline of immigration gets flattened. Questions of legality allow us to forget that human beings are involved. Soon immigrants are reduced to cost/benefit ratios with arguments about how they either contribute to our economy or drain government resources. The popular rejoinder “What part of ‘illegal’ don’t you understand?” shuts the door on further conversation. Whatever corporate colonialism or personal histories give rise to people leaving their homeland for a chance at a better life are summarily dismissed before immigrants have a chance to defend themselves.

Once we classify undocumented immigrants as illegal—just as white people in the U.S. once classified people of color as less than human—our feelings are safe. We don’t need to bother with stories of mothers who choose between being with their children and having nothing to feed them but a glass of sugar water. We don’t have to hear how they left their children to find work in the U.S. in order to provide them a measure of material decency. We don’t need to ask why they left their countries; we need only ask how we can keep them out of ours.

As writer John Steinbeck once noted, if we dared ask ourselves the tougher questions, empathy would drive us mad.
Not So Simple
Our world is more understandable when it’s “black and white.” Sterile categorization makes things easier. You’re either right or you’re wrong. You’re either liberal or conservative. You’re for us or against us. You’re legal or illegal.

Religion, too, loves such categorization. We see it throughout the gospels:
“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ask the disciples.
“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”
“In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone adulterous women. What do you say?”

WHEN FOREIGNERS RESIDE AMONG YOU IN YOUR LAND, DO NOT MISTREAT THEM. THE FOREIGNERS RESIDING AMONG YOU MUST BE TREATED AS YOUR NATIVE-BORN. LOVE THEM AS YOURSELF, FOR YOU WERE FOREIGNERS IN EGYPT. I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.

—Leviticus 19:33-34

We love categorization because we think it allows us to know exactly where we stand before God and one another. Yet at every step Jesus refuses to play that game.

Jesus, like anyone who has muddied himself or herself in the pain of the world, knows that the answers to those questions are rarely simple. Motives, lies, and complex personal and political histories blur the lines. Real life and the pain of the human experience often play out in gray areas.

Having Hispanic immigrants as neighbors and friends, I’ve come to see that their stories are filled with shades of gray. More than 60 percent of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. were once rural farmers, like many of my family and friends in Iowa are. Many of them came here because trade policies such as NAFTA allowed U.S.-subsidized grain into Mexico. These farmers lost their way of life because they couldn’t compete with subsidized commodities. That’s difficult for me to own up to.

The very policies that have benefited me, my family, my friends, and my community are the same policies that have devastated the livelihoods of farmers and rural communities not so different from ours.

Do undocumented immigrants break a law when they cross into the United States illegally? Yes. But it seems as if crossing the border illegally isn’t the only line of justice that’s been transgressed.

If empathy can track with the plight of undocumented immigrants this far, we might often concede, “I don’t have a problem if they come here, but can’t they just do it legally?” That seems like a fair question and a reasonable solution—that is, until you learn of the bureaucratic impossibility of obtaining a legal work visa.

Mexico is allowed up to 25,460 work visas from the United States per year. If the 1,000 Hispanic immigrants in my hometown in Iowa each received one, they alone would constitute 4 percent of the total visas allowed. Our current system simply doesn’t meet the great demand.

What do I do with a truth like that? Maybe I can ignore it if I classify the plight of these immigrants as the reality of business in a global free-market economy. But I wonder how “free” it truly is when cheap goods can flow freely across borders yet labor cannot. My Reformed faith that claims we are Christ’s agents of restoration and reconciliation in all areas of our lives doesn’t allow me to subject the majority of daily life and business to the rules of Darwin and only a few sacred hours a week to the rule of Christ.

Jesus’ Politics
“Who sinned, this child or his parents, that he is here illegally?”
“Is it right to cross Caesar’s border or not?”
“In the Law we are commanded to deport such women. What do you say?”

I imagine that Jesus would refuse to play these games. His compassion for victims of the politicos and the powerful would trump allegiance to any nation’s economic interests. Jesus turned out to be a poor Roman citizen as well as a poor Jewish nationalist. I imagine his immigration policy wouldn’t impress today’s politicians.

Conservatives and liberals alike can claim Jesus to be on their side, but Jesus refuses to take sides. He proclaims a different kingdom altogether, one that doesn’t define citizenship by political boundaries, privileges, or rights.

In God’s kingdom, citizens lay down their rights, becoming servants who view others as better than themselves, who love one another as they love themselves. These are the subversive politics of Jesus. If we truly claim that our primary citizenship is in the kingdom of God, then we must let that vision of shalom, of the lion lying down with the lamb, guide and critique the politics of our worldly kingdoms.

—Kurt Rietema, his wife, Emily, and their son, Luke, live in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of Argentine in Kansas City, Kan. As they seek God’s shalom for Argentine, through Christian community development efforts for the CRC, the Rietemas hope to see a new faith community emerge.