

“WELCOMING THE STRANGER”

Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 17-21; Matthew 25:34-40

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I received a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt for Christmas, and I really enjoyed reading about this fascinating woman. I learned a lot that I didn't know, and I'm in awe of her tremendous energy and dedication – she wrote a daily newspaper column for 27 years, worked for women's rights and workplace safety and public health and literacy, spent time listening with compassion to soldiers and children and unemployed people, spoke out against racism, had interests that ranged from human rights to music, and never gave up on the vision of a more peaceful and just world. But in the course of reading about Eleanor Roosevelt, I also learned more about the history of the late 1930's and early 1940's – some of which is little talked about today.

The rise of Hitler and the Nazis through the 1930's, with the increasingly brutal repression of Jews and dissenters in Germany, and in other parts of Europe as the German armies invaded, and then a war more extensive than the world had ever known created a massive refugee crisis. Millions of people from all over Europe fled as their homes and towns were overrun or destroyed. Jews fled the persecution, ghettos, and death camps of the Nazi regime. But there were not many places to go.

The United States accepted very few of these millions of displaced people. Partly this was due to immigration quotas that had been established years before, meant mainly to put strict limits on the number of people admitted to the country from “undesirable” ethnic groups, which is to say most everyone except northern European Christians. But more than that: an isolationist, anti-immigrant mood dominated the politics of the day. The State Department refused to issue visas, but instead created new rules to make immigration more difficult; so even the established quotas weren't met. It was suggested that these people fleeing the Nazis might actually be Nazis themselves, or spies, or German agents, or communists, or fascists or “dangerous elements” who would “contaminate” America with their un-American-ness. When you read about it, it's perfectly clear that over anti-Jewish sentiment was a big part of this.

Ships filled with refugees, including large numbers of children, were refused permission to land at U.S. ports and many of them eventually returned their passengers to Europe. Literally hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children died in fear and great suffering because the U.S. (and other countries as well) turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to them. These policies continued well past the point when anyone could have reasonably claimed ignorance of Nazi intentions or atrocities.

That history is usually overshadowed by the United States role in World War 2, which we generally think of as a necessary war in a righteous cause. We look back on the Holocaust as a tragedy for the human race and the ideology behind it as unspeakably evil. We know it was right to oppose it. But that understanding casts a harsh light over the earlier rejection of the desperate people who tried to escape it.

Fast forward to the present day: as 2016 ended, the website dictionary.com named “xenophobia” its word of the year. Xenophobia is defined as “fear or hatred of foreigners, people from different cultures, or strangers.’ It can also refer to fear or dislike of customs, dress, and cultures of people with backgrounds different from our own.” From the Greek, “phobos” meaning “fear or panic,” and “xenos” meaning “stranger,” the choice reflects (according to dictionary.com) “a major theme resonating deeply in the cultural consciousness.”

There *is* a lot of anxiety and fear in our world right now, and a great deal of it is focused on those who are different, outsiders, foreigners. And at the same time, we are facing the worst refugee crisis since the end of the Second World War, and we know that people are suffering and dying. Once again we are caught between the fear of the stranger and the human tragedy we know is happening.

I was really struck, as I read that earlier history, at the similarity between the rhetoric of that time and much of what we hear today. In fact, you could simply replace the word “Jews” with “Muslims” and you’d hardly know the difference. It occurs to me that the world’s response - our response – to today’s crisis won’t look any better from a historical perspective.

Today, worldwide there are 65 million forcibly displaced people of whom 21 million are refugees who’ve fled their home country because of violence or persecution. 20-30 per cent of them live in refugee camps. Now, I always thought of those as temporary stopping places on the way to a more permanent residence, but I learned that the average length of a person’s stay in a refugee camp is 17 years. But most refugees live in urban areas, often undocumented, in the shadows, without access to legal work, education, health care and other needs. About half of the world’s refugees come from Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, but refugees also come from Iraq, Central African Republic, El Salvador, Myanmar, Yemen and other places. And half of all refugees are children.

Only a small portion of these millions of men, women and children will get a chance to start a new life.

It’s an absolutely huge issue - complicated, fueled by all kinds of other issues such as war, poverty, ethnic strife, economics, tyranny and repression. It’s not surprising that people in some regions fear being overwhelmed by the need. It’s not surprising that there is disagreement about what to do. It’s not surprising that there are those who tell us that “it’s not our problem,” that “we need to “take care of our own people first.” And it’s sadly not surprising that the victims of the world’s conflicts are themselves regarded with hostility and suspicion; that makes it easier to turn away from their suffering.

But it is too bad that we haven’t learned more from history.

And it’s too bad that we have not realized how deeply the issue of refugees is entwined with our faith.

Bible is full of stories of people who are displaced, wanderers, refugees: from Adam and Eve who are expelled from the garden of Eden to early Christians who live, the Apostle Paul says, as aliens and exiles in the world, because they belong to the kingdom of God. In between, we read about Abraham leaving his home for a new country, Jacob and his family moving to Egypt to escape a famine, and the Israelites escaping slavery in Egypt and wandering through the desert for 40 years before they found a home. The book of Ruth tells about an Israelite family

that spent years living abroad in Moab, and the Moabite daughter-in-law who came back to Israel with Naomi. After the Babylonians conquered most of the ancient world, many Israelites were forcibly exiled to Babylon. And in a story we just recently read, Matthew's gospel tells us how Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus became refugees to escape from Herod's violence.

A couple of important truths are threaded through these stories:

One is the message to the displaced that God is present in that experience of exile. God knows the suffering. God is a refuge when there is no other refuge.

Another repeated theme is the message we read from Deuteronomy: ... you must welcome the strangers, do right by them, give protection and be concerned about their needs, and take extra care not to exploit them in their vulnerability. Why? There are two reasons: First, because you have had the experience of being an outsider, and a wanderer and therefore you are able to understand and sympathize. Second because this is what God says you are to do.

The couple of scriptures we read this morning are not, by any means, isolated texts. Do a little search sometime and you might be surprised just how often this topic comes up. It is a major theme of scripture.

I kind of suspect that it was never easy, and that there were always some who felt compelled to guard against strangers... hence the need for repeated reiterations of the instruction. But in any case, it's utterly clear.

Hospitality is supposed to be a way of life for God's people. It reflects the generosity and grace of God. It involves trust in God and openness to others. It fosters a safe and peaceful community. It's how we form new relationships and connections; it builds bridges between people who have differences. And whether it's easy or hard makes no difference. This is how God asks us to be.

Turning to the New Testament, thinking about a specifically Christian theology: I realize that hospitality is at the heart of it, because the key question of the gospel is whether we will welcome Christ, whether the God who comes into the world in Jesus has a place in our world and in our lives. Jesus is the "holy stranger" whose presence challenges our complacency, our expectations, our separateness. And in that role, he allies himself with the others who are strangers, who are vulnerable, who are regarded as having the least claim on any thing we can give.

To who say they want to welcome Jesus, but are not so sure about welcoming other folks ... those who are different, who seem unimportant or without much to offer us, who are other, who are strangers ... Jesus says, "whatever you did to them, you did to me. Whatever you withheld from them, you withheld from me." Our love for Jesus is inseparable from our love of neighbor ... of all our neighbors. Our love of Jesus leads us to open our hearts in love and compassion.

What do we do?

As Christians we need to understand more clearly the call of our faith, our scripture, and our Lord to compassion, justice, and radical hospitality for strangers, particularly the displaced or suffering. It's neither optional nor a footnote but a major theme of scripture.

We also need to make ourselves more aware and informed about the reality and the extent of the refugee crisis in our world today. I would urge you to look up the website of the United Nations Refugee Agency, which is very informative about many aspects of the refugee experience and also about the work that's being done.

We need to support efforts to help displaced people make a new life. I'm pleased that First Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo is sponsoring a Syrian refugee family, and even more pleased that our mission team and a number of folks from our congregation have pledged to help. I hope that we can be part of extending hospitality, healing, and hope to these folks.

We can also donate to programs that protect and assist and resettle refugees. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is one good example (and also another good resource to learn more.)

In terms of the larger picture it is so important for us to speak out in support of governmental action and international cooperation to address the humanitarian crisis facing our world. We have to add our voices to the chorus of people around our country and around the world who continue to advocate for human rights, for everyone, everywhere.

Most of all, we need to commit ourselves, wherever we stand on the various political issues involved, to say "no" to hate and indifference, and "yes" to compassion. We can't participate in stereotyping, prejudice, and victim-blaming, because we know that every displaced person, no matter where they come from or what they believe, is a child of God. We can't pretend it's not happening, because we serve a God of truth and justice. We can't say it's none of our concern, because we know that it breaks God's heart to see people suffer, and what breaks God's heart must break ours too.

Resources:

Eleanor Roosevelt: The War Years and After by Blanche Wiesen Cook
U.N. Refugee Agency (www.unhcr.org)