

Refugee and Migrant Sunday Sermon

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...This famous verse reminds us of the depth and power of the amazing love of God. God loves the world so much that he gave the best he had, all that he had. Who did he love so much? The worthy and righteous ones? No, we all know that he came to save sinners, to reach out in compassion to save the least, the lost and the lonely. We have all received his generous compassion and when we realize that, we are moved to be compassionate as he was, to share the compassionate love of Jesus with our world. Except of course, when we are not. When we see someone else as a lawbreaker, as undeserving of our compassion, we can turn cold and judgmental in an instant. If you don't believe me, notice the current reaction of many American Christians to immigrants and refugees. I am not saying that our current immigration system works well. Most of us know that it is ineffective. If you get a step closer, you learn that it is illogical – it makes the DMV and the IRS look positively sane in comparison. And if you come a step closer, you will learn that it is profoundly inhumane. However, to even take a closer look at what is wrong and needs fixing, we need first to be moved by the love of Jesus.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells the world that wherever one of the little ones is rejected – whether the hungry is left unfed or the prisoner unvisited or the stranger unwelcomed, he takes it personally. Whenever we ignore or turn away those in need, we hurt Jesus – and in the end, that hurts us all. We often pass by the hungry, forget the prisoner and reject the stranger, hurting ourselves and others in the process.

Today is Refugee and Migrant Sunday, a time set aside to remember and respond to the strangers in our midst. What is a Refugee? Our government defines refugees as people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm. To be granted asylum, you have to demonstrate a “well-founded fear of persecution” in your home country. There are roughly 50 million refugees in the world. The largest single source of refugees at this moment is Syria with 4 million of its residents desperately seeking a safe place to stay. Over 220,000 Syrians have been killed, including 110,000 civilians.

The next most dangerous area in the world is the Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) where there is a murder an

hour as a result of increasingly powerful international mafia who are controlling large territories. These criminal organizations make their money from the extortion of small businesses (over \$650 million dollars a year), drug trafficking, guns trafficking and human trafficking. They forcibly conscript teenage boys and force girls to become sex slaves on the threat of murdering family members. Approximately 80,000 children, youth and their mothers arrived in the United States over the past two years seeking asylum. The Wilbur Wilburforce Anti-trafficking legislation of 2008 mandates that unaccompanied migrant children and youth from these countries receive a full asylum assessment. However, this requires legal assistance. When these children and youth are able to obtain lawyers, over 77% are granted refugee status. However, our government does not automatically grant lawyers to asylum seekers. When they don't have access to a lawyer, only 7% of them are recognized as refugees. Under the current federal administration, our government is actively prioritizing the detention and deportation of these children and youth, and their mothers.

It can be overwhelming to even think about all these suffering people; after all, we have enough suffering in our country alone, right? The natural impulse in a broken and fallen world is to "circle the wagons", to protect ourselves and those we love and to only share with them. We are understandably concerned about our security when we consider opening our arms to those who come from violent places. Even though statistically immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born residents, it is a natural impulse to be cautious. However, there are noble moments when we go beyond those impulses. After World War II, in the midst of the worldwide horror caused by the Holocaust and a truly enormous number of refugees, almost all of the countries in the world signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations which included the "right to seek asylum from persecution". This other impulse, the impulse to hospitality, is supported by over 92 passages in the Old and New Testament. The great Christian author Henri Nouen spoke of the Christian life as a journey from hostility to hospitality. The scriptures which call us to hospitality often remind us that it is also in our benefit to do so; Hebrews 13:2 reminds us that when we welcome strangers that we may be welcoming angels in disguise. The word for angel in Koine Greek refers to more than just celestial beings. Angels are any messenger of God sent to bring a blessing. Any stranger could be an angel. Our impulse is to see the other as a threat – and that can always be true! -- but there are also intimate enemies – and the other can be an angel, bringing a blessing.

The Lutheran church has a long proud history of welcoming migrants and refugees. Our theology of grace calls us to share the grace that we have

received from God with others in need of mercy and rescue. We have many opportunities through our national organization Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to help – from donations to advocacy. We also have local opportunities in our Synod. The Guardian Angels is a project of the Synod Justice and Global Missions teams. The Angels accompany children and youth from Central America in court, observing the process to ensure that their rights are respected, referring them to services and caring for them. Let me share a story. Sandra came to the United States from a very poor area in El Salvador to work and send the money home to her sister to care for her son Christian so that he could go to school. When Christian was 12 years old, the neighborhood where his school is located was taken over by the Marasalvatrucha. When his aunt tried to take him to school, she was told that he couldn't enter that area because he lived outside the territory. When she defied the order, she was stabbed in front of Christian. Traumatized, Christian fled to the United States to run to his mother and was picked up at the border by the Border Patrol; he was released into the custody of this mother while his immigration case was in process. However, he did not have a lawyer. The judge ordered his mother to find him a lawyer, but as a fast food worker she did not have the capacity to pay for a lawyer. At the next court date, the judge said that Christian would be deported if she did not find a lawyer for him. When Sandra and Christian were crying in the corridor outside the courtroom, a Guardian Angel volunteer tapped her on the shoulder and helped them to find a lawyer. Christian now has been granted political asylum and can stay in this country legally. He is studying hard in school so that he too can be a lawyer when he grows up, and his faith is strong. Sandra says that they now believe in Guardian Angels. If you would like to be trained to volunteer as a Guardian Angel, please contact Pastor Alexia Salvatierra at alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com. Of course, the Guardian Angels also always need donations! You can donate through our Synod. If you want to see for yourself, the Global Partners Team sponsors an annual trip to our companion Synod, the Lutheran Church of El Salvador, from July 31-August 7th. The information about costs and how to sign up is on the synod website.

Whether you are moved to direct support or not, please do keep refugees and migrants in your prayers. This is a dark moment around the world for those feeling violence; the love of Christ coming through you can make all the difference for someone else.