GROUNDED: When Neighborliness Fails

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Virginia McDaniel
August 28, 2016

Luke 10:25-37

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"

He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied with a story. "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"

Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Earlier this summer Doug and I were privileged to take part in a performance of a relatively new choral work by Stephen Paulus as part of the Berkshire Choral Festival. The work, "To Be Certain of the Dawn," was commissioned 11 years ago by the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis as a gift to their neighbors of Temple Israel synagogue. The first performance in 2005 coincided with the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps in 1945.

The work arose from the conviction that Christians must own and teach about the Holocaust. To say that taking part in this performance was powerful is an

understatement. Probably every other person in the chorus was Jewish; some of them the children of Holocaust survivors.

The first section of the work is an expression of contrition for all the centuries of "the Christian teaching of contempt," as well as the desire of Christians to return to our spiritual roots and seek a new beginning as partners in faith with Jews. Contrasting with these dissonant expressions of remorse are several simple Jewish blessings sung by a children's chorus. The middle section of the work is based on the black and white photographs of Roman Vishniac, haunting images of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. (The photographs were actually projected during the performance.) As soloists sang of the simple scenes depicted, the chorus interrupted with sections the Nuremburg laws—those Nazi laws which put restrictions on every aspect of Jewish life. What a contrast! In the final section of the work, a sense of peace was at last felt with words of survivors of the Holocaust intertwined with children's voices in an interfaith expression of hope.

The unifying theme of the work is what many of us know as "the golden rule," a verse of scripture found in both Hebrew and Christian bibles and found in every faith tradition: "You should love your neighbor as yourself." And as we sang that verse in Hebrew, German, and English, we *lived* the dream of peace contained in the work.

And so this morning I planned to talk about the failure of neighborliness that led to the Holocaust, that horrific consequence of 2000 years of anti-Semitism enshrined in Christian theology. But this week I heard some more current examples of neighborliness—and the lack thereof.

First, from a column Thursday by Nicholas Kristof.[1]

AMSTERDAM — On April 30, 1941, a Jewish man in Amsterdam wrote a desperate letter to an American friend, pleading for help emigrating to the United States.

"U.S.A. is the only country we could go to," he wrote. "It is for the sake of the children mainly."

A volunteer found that plea for help in 2005 when she was sorting old World War II refugee files in New York City. It looked like countless other files, until she saw the children's names.

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[1] "Anne Frank Today Is a Syrian Girl" by Nicholas Kristof, NY Times Aug. 25, 2016

"Oh my God," she said, "this is the Anne Frank file." Along with the letter were many others by Otto Frank, frantically seeking help to flee Nazi persecution and obtain a visa to America, Britain or Cuba — but getting nowhere because of global indifference to Jewish refugees.

We all know that the Frank children were murdered by the Nazis, but what is less known is the way Anne's fate was sealed by a callous fear of refugees, among the world's most desperate people.

Sound familiar?

Fears of terrorism have left Muslim refugees toxic in the West, and almost no one wants them any more than anyone wanted a German-Dutch teenager named Anne.

"No one takes their family into hiding in the heart of an occupied city unless they are out of options," "No one takes their child on a flimsy boat to cross the Mediterranean unless they are desperate."

[Kristof continues] As the son of a World War II refugee, I've been researching the anti-refugee hysteria of the 1930s and '40s. The parallels to today are striking.

For the Frank family, a new life in America seemed feasible. Anne had studied English shorthand, and her father spoke English, had lived on West 71st Street in Manhattan, and had been a longtime friend of Nathan Straus Jr., an official in the Franklin Roosevelt administration.

The obstacle was an American wariness toward refugees that outweighed sympathy. After the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom against Jews, a poll [at the time] found that 94 percent of Americans disapproved of Nazi treatment of Jews, but 72 percent still objected to admitting large numbers of Jews.

The reasons for the opposition then were the same as they are for rejecting Syrians or Hondurans today: We can't afford it, we should look after Americans first, we can't accept everybody, they'll take American jobs, they're dangerous and different.

"The United States, if it continues to be the world's asylum and poorhouse, would soon wreck its present economic life," the New York Chamber of Commerce warned in 1934.

Some readers may object: "But Jews weren't a threat the way Syrian refugees are!"

In the 1930s and '40s, though, a world war was underway and Jews were widely seen as potential Communists or even Nazis. There were widespread fears that Germany would infiltrate the U.S. with spies and saboteurs under the cover that they were Jewish refugees.

"When the safety of the country is imperiled, it seems fully justifiable to resolve any possible doubts in favor of the country, rather than in favor of the aliens," the State Department instructed in 1941. The New York Times in 1938 quoted the granddaughter of President Ulysses S. Grant warning about "so-called Jewish refugees" and hinting that they were Communists "coming to this country to join the ranks of those who hate our institutions and want to overthrow them."

In this political environment, officials and politicians lost all humanity.

"Let Europe take care of its own," argued Senator Robert Reynolds, a North Carolina Democrat who also denounced Jews. [One] Georgia Democrat, went a step further introducing legislation calling for the deportation of "every alien in the United States."

In this climate, Otto Frank was unable to get visas for his family members, who were victims in part of American paranoia, demagogy and indifference.

Today, to our shame [Kristof concludes], Anne Frank is a Syrian girl.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Here's another story I heard this week—maybe you heard it too on NEPR.[2]

On an unseasonably chilly evening this past June, volunteers rendezvoused in a deserted parking lot in New Haven, just off I-91. They were there to meet two Syrian refugee families. The groups had been preparing for months. Over potluck dinners in fellowship halls, and over coffee on Sunday mornings, in synagogues and nearby mosques, Muslims, Christians and Jews from greater Hartford have been collaborating since last fall. Their project: to bring refugee families to the region.

In addition to this group there were several Arabic translators and cultural liaisons. Egyptian immigrant Fatima Antar of Bristol, who has been involved in interfaith coalitions before, said, "For religious and secular [people], it makes us feel good, especially where this hate has been going on, in politics and so on. It reminds us that not everybody is like that."

The families were flying from Cairo to JFK and were scheduled to be dropped off in New Haven around 6:30 that evening. At 7:30, there was still no sign of them.

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[2] "Sponsoring Refugees, Faith Communities Say 'We In Connecticut Care About The World'" NEPR, reported by Tema Silk August 23, 2016 West Hartford, CT.

As the sun set, the Muslims broke their Ramadan fast, and there was plenty of food for everybody. Someone showed a homemade welcome banner. Others showed off stuffed animals. Hours passed, and people were cold and nervously giddy. Finally, around 11 pm, airport limos pulled in. Others stepped back as the translators stepped in.

The build-up to this day began 10 months earlier. Rev. Geordie Campbell of West Hartford was anguished over the refugee crisis. "It felt like somebody had to do something," Campbell recalled. "Somebody had to do something constructive, such as bring refugees to West Hartford." Campbell thought the project would be too much for his own congregation, by themselves, so he convened a meeting with ten other clergy… ministers and rabbis. They agreed to meet again, this time knowing whether their congregations would be willing to sign on. By meeting two, everyone was in. By meeting three, members of the congregations were invited. Instead of a small showing, there were 36 eager volunteers.

They teamed up across congregations, in teams of three, each team willing to sponsor one family. West Hartford resident Terry Schmidt has worked with religious and nonprofit organizations for decades. He's never seen much energy for a project. He has some theories as to why: 1) the shocking image seen around the world last fall of a drowned Syrian boy found on the Turkish shore. "People said 'Wait a second. Can I do something? I can't sit around and do nothing.'"

Indiana Governor Mike Pence (now the Republican Vice Presidential nominee) announced that he didn't want any refugees in his state, specifically, the Syrian family on its way there. Enter Governor Dannel Malloy who invited that family to Connecticut instead.

Schmidt believes hosting refugees in West Hartford is a way to say "We're different. We in Connecticut care about other people in the world, and we will be welcoming."

What does God require? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. To love our neighbors as ourselves. It's as simple as being human, really.

Hospitality requires not grand gestures, but open hearts. When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything.[3]

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[3] Lonni Collins, *Radical Hospitality*