

Sermon for Refugee and Migrant Sunday, 2019

According to the International Migrant Report of the United Nations in 2017, over 258 million people are on the move around the world. While some are moving toward a dream, most are fleeing hunger and violence. When we stand in the position of those who are safe and full, this can feel like an overwhelming wall of need, a threat that frightens us. When we (or someone we love) is the person needing hospitality and help, the picture changes. Where is God in this story? How does He want us to respond to this situation?

In the first lesson for today, Abraham is a migrant. God has called him to leave his birthplace and move towards the promised land. He has told him that his impact will go far beyond the place he came from; he and his descendants will become a blessing to the world. In this scripture, God is reaffirming that he will give him a new home in which his descendants will live and prosper. The inhabitants of that land did not welcome Abraham; they saw him as a threat – but in the end, Abraham and his descendants have blessed the whole world.

Rev. Rene Molina came from El Salvador years ago, running from a violent conflict which threatened his life. When he entered the US, he had no official papers. Yet, as he told a room full of pastors, maybe God sent him like he sent Abraham to be a blessing - because he became a Christian in the US, and the little church he started in South Los Angeles now has thousands of members, many of whom came to faith because of the ministry of this church. This Pentecost all over the United States, Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services will be calling Lutheran Churches to celebrate refugee and migrant Sunday, remembering the contributions of migrants and refugees and our traditional ministry to and with them. (Our Synod is doing it a little early!)

In Hebrews 13:3, we are reminded to welcome strangers because by doing so, we might welcome angels without knowing it. Angels in Koine Greek are not just celestial beings with wings. An angel is a messenger of God, sent to bring a blessing. Abraham fulfilled an angelic role. So do many refugees and migrants.

What does it mean for us to celebrate refugee and migrant Sunday when immigration is such a contentious issue in our society for so many? First, we should not be afraid to discuss these questions. Christians are called to be a holy people. Holy means both whole and other. We are called to courageously be different than the people around us. In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus weeps for Jerusalem because they reject God's way. He wants so much for them and

from them. He weeps the same way for all societies; as nations we never live up to all that God wants for us and from us. There are ninety-two verses calling for us to be hospitable people, for us to welcome strangers and to treat them as we would treat citizens. In Corinthians, we are reminded that we are first and foremost citizens of heaven and only secondly citizens of any country.

To be a citizen of heaven does not mean that we cannot also be a citizen of the United States. Martin Luther said that in the between time between the first and second coming of Christ, we all live in two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. We are citizens of an earthly realm which deserves our loyalty and respect. However, we are also always bound to all of our brothers and sisters in the family of our one heavenly parent – and when there is a conflict between the demands of our faith and the demands of our nation, we must place God first. The blessing of living in a democracy is that we can actually have a voice in the laws that our nation establishes. We can advocate for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We can advocate for laws that are compassionate and just. We can steward the talent of our voices, votes and influence for the shalom of our communities and society.

The shalom of our communities is not won by focusing on the narrow self-interest of us and our immediate neighbors. We are reminded in the famous Body of Christ scripture in 1 Corinthians 12 that if one member of the Body suffers, we all suffer. Our Synod is a companion Synod with the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. We hear horror stories from our churches about the unjust violence perpetrated in their communities by organized crime syndicates that are controlling increasingly large territories of the Northern Triangle of Central America (*see attached stories – use any one that you prefer.*) These are members of our Body who are hurting. Our well-being, the shalom of our communities, depends on responding with compassion and justice to their plight. Our country’s refugee policies and asylum laws come from an international agreement signed in 1948 at the close of WWII as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is U.S. law that we open our arms and hearts to people fleeing systemic violence in their countries of origin as the result of their religion, race, political beliefs, gender, sexual orientation or membership in a particular group. If they apply for and are granted this status from a second safe country, we call them refugees and provide them with refugee resettlement services, If they apply at our border, we call them asylees and do not provide economic support or services. However, we use the same criteria and complicated system for determining whether anyone qualifies for refugee or

asylum status. The system certainly could use reform and we hope and pray that we as a people will create the most effective, fair and humane system possible.

In the meantime, on refugee and migrant Sunday, we remember the contributions of immigrants and refugees, the blessings brought by strangers biblical and modern. We remember that Jesus himself said in Matthew 25 that when we welcome strangers, we welcome Him and when we reject strangers, we reject Him. And we commit to live our faith in action, striving for a community and society where migrants and refugees are treated with respect and care.