

“God’s Love for the Stranger”
Leviticus 19:33,34; Luke 10:25-37
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During the 1960’s, our family spent one week during the course of several summers vacationing near Plymouth, Massachusetts, the famed locale where the Pilgrims had supposedly landed. On one visit, we toured a replica of the Mayflower and visited a re-creation of the early colony called "Plymouth Plantation" where persons dressed in Puritan costumes taught you what daily life among the Pilgrims was like. Even the famed "PLYMOUTH ROCK" wasn't real as, contrary to the legend, the Pilgrims never actually landed on it. They kept their ship moored out in the harbor and taxied a small boat in to land. Apparently more than a century ago, the town fathers ARBITRARILY chose a rock and then circulated this myth about it. Because it drew so many tourists and souvenir hunters who wanted a piece of it, they had to encase it in a large concrete monument so as to protect it while also adding to its importance. After all, if there’s no rock, there’s no myth, and if there’s no myth, then there’d be no tourists coming to see it.

What WAS real, however, were the many risks and unbearable hardships suffered by those early pilgrims in order to enjoy the political and religious freedom they so ardently sought. They left the Old World for the New in a ship no larger than the life boats on the "Queen Mary." They were tossed about by angry seas for thirteen weeks with no clear idea as to where they would eventually land. There were a hundred and two when they arrived, but within the first six months, more than half of them died and of those who DID survive, they were forced to endure pestilence and hunger, cold and loneliness. Living off a strange diet of dried fish, ground nuts and corn, they spent seven long years working to pay off the bank loans they had taken out to make their voyage possible. Yet, in spite of all the death and hardship, they NEVER regretted it, NEVER once looked back from where they had come and said, "This UNBEARABLE- we want to return home!" They succeeded in planting the seeds of a new nation here that is now the strongest and most productive the world has ever seen and we are ALL the BENEFICIARIES of their sacrifice. That’s why we celebrate Thanksgiving, so we can never forget this.

Like most of YOU, I TOO am the descendent of pilgrims- not the same ones that landed in Plymouth Harbor, but of a number of pilgrim immigrants who landed on these shores in the late 19th and early part of the 20th centuries. My grandparents on my father's side came over from England in the 1890’s to stake a new life for themselves while thirty years later, my mother and her parents arrived from Germany on the ship, the *Bremenhaven*. They were seeking the freedom and economic opportunity that was unavailable to them back in their war-torn, financially-ruined homeland where in the aftermath of World War I, a wheelbarrow full of Deutsche Marks could not even purchase a single loaf of bread. Their options were to either remain in Germany and starve, or come to America and survive. Not unlike those original settlers, it was a tremendous struggle for them. They had to leave all their furniture and most of their belongings behind in order to come and it involved learning an ENTIRELY NEW LANGUAGE, one they did not understand. My grandfather, who had survived World War I serving on German U-boats, was a baker who worked long hours and saved what he could to make ends meet. My grandmother, still a young woman with five children, developed Hodgkin’s Disease- a form of cancer for which there was no available treatment at the time. In

the spring of 1936, blind and bedridden, she eventually died late one night in my mother's arms. It was while America was in the grip of her OWN Great Depression.

Suddenly, my mother--a young girl at the age of thirteen--had the responsibility of NOW being a mother to her four younger sisters and brothers. She had to do most of the cooking and cleaning herself, making sure everyone was dressed and off to school in the mornings. On Sundays, after they had been fed, she would march them all off to church and then home again when church was over. She told me how she would often organize picnics for them- on their mother's grave. I know that throughout her life, she was determined to make sure my brother and I could enjoy the childhood that she NEVER had. It was unbelievably hard for the family during those years, but like those pilgrims, the New World represented a freedom and a hope they could not find back in their homeland. Possessing little more than the clothes on their backs and with their hearts and heads filled with dreams and determination, they struggled and sacrificed to make a life for themselves and their families until they succeeded. I have to admit that I feel fortunate that I live in a land of freedom and plenty and never had to endure what my mother and so many others in the world TODAY are experiencing. I realize now MORE THAN EVER that I am a BENEFICIARY of their struggles and I must NEVER FORGET that.

But each of us ALSO shares ANOTHER legacy- one with Jesus Christ who remains THE most ESSENTIAL part of OUR life's story. Each of us, as members of his "Body" and participants in his Church, has inherited the SAME responsibility- and that is to serve as his conscience to our culture. Thus, it is up to US, speaking as our Lord's representative in a secular world, to remind our leaders how important it is to look after the poorest and most vulnerable among us. When I was the pastor of Old First in Syracuse, NY, our church housed rooms filled with furniture for incoming refugees to the area, and after I left Northern New York for the American Mid-west, to Waterloo, Iowa, we supported and gave free office space to Clementine Msengi—HERSELF a refugee from the brutal civil war that savaged Rwanda throughout the mid-1990's. She created what was called the *Bright Moves Network*- an organization to help assist other refugees adjust to their new country even as SHE had to. Meanwhile, I worked with local Catholics to help establish "Hospitality House" in downtown Waterloo- a center to which homeless people can come to relax and receive free meals, take a shower, get their clothes washed, and receive counseling before returning back to the streets. To this day, First Presbyterian Church in that city continues to deliver hot meals each week so that people who own nothing but the clothes on their backs might experience some relief and know there are people in this world who care.

Throughout history, people have always been on the move, migrating from one location to another. We're told that Abraham journeyed from Ur to the land of Canaan, and Moses and the Israelites wandered throughout the wilderness for forty years. Sometimes it's for economic reasons such as seeking the prospect of a better life for oneself and one's family. Sometimes it's due to a scarcity of food created by extreme environmental conditions such as when Abraham and later Isaac traveled to Egypt to escape a famine that had struck their homeland. With the devastation of one's crops and livestock, persons are often forced to relocate to other regions simply for subsistence sake. And then there are those who are forced to abandon their homeland because of war or conflict or persecution. Such is the reason for the huge influx of refugees into Europe from Syria and Northern Africa today, why leaky dinghies filled with Cubans and Haitians brave the dangerous waters of the Caribbean to make it to Florida, and why groups from Latin America make long sojourns northward in the hopes of one day having the SAME

opportunities WE have. Historically, the United States--a nation built on the backs of immigrants and refugees--has led the rest of the world in recognizing the moral obligation to protect them.

This morning, our Old Testament lesson expresses God's attitude towards the stranger in our midst. In Leviticus 19, God instructs Moses to command his people to be holy even as the Lord their God is holy- that they are not to steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another; they are not to oppress their neighbor or rob him but instead deal justly and compassionately with him. All these commands are summarized in vv. 17 and 18 where God says: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, **BUT YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF: I AM THE LORD.**"

However, God then asks us to take it one step further. We are commanded to not just **LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR** but to even **LOVE THE STRANGER RESIDING IN OUR MIDST**: "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, **AND YOU SHALL LOVE HIM AS YOURSELF**; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." By punctuating his statements with "for I am the Lord your God," God is intentionally emphasizing the importance of hearing what it is he has just told them and the seriousness of **DISOBEYING** it. They were to accept and love the foreigner in their midst because there was a time when **THEY THEMSELVES** were foreigners, strangers in a strange land, yet God never ceased loving and caring for **THEM**. Now they are to show similar care and concern towards the stranger in **THEIR** land. This commandment was **FURTHER** radicalized by Jesus in the New Testament when he instructs us in his Sermon on the Mount to love **FAR MORE** than our families and **MORE** than our neighbors, but we are even to love **OUR ENEMIES** for, as St. Paul later elaborates in his Epistles, we were once **ENEMIES OURSELVES**- enemies of **GOD**, and as God loved **US** then, so are we now to love **OTHERS** in the very same manner!

The Old Testament word for "stranger" did not mean a transient or person passing through; nor did it necessarily refer to a foreigner in the sense of a non-Israelite. The Hebrew word "ger" meant a stranger who dwelt under the protection of a family or a tribe which he or she did not belong to, a term that was later broadened to mean anyone who lived in complete freedom in the midst of a community in whose customs he or she did not participate. Quite often, a Gentile--that is, a non-Israelite--would move into Israel, but because that person was not a Jew and therefore forbidden to participate in any of the Jewish festivals or ceremonies, he or she was still to be considered a "brother," a "sister" within that community. One was accepted, not on the basis of his or her religion, but solely because he or she had been created by the very same God. Thus, strangers were put on an equal footing with the Israelites in all matters of charity and justice. When the Israelite reaped his harvest or gathered his fruit, it was commanded that a substantial portion of that field and the fruit that had fallen of itself from his orchards was to be strictly reserved for the poor and the stranger in their midst. As Deuteronomy states, "At the end of every third year, bring the tithe of all your crops and store it in your towns. The food is for the Levites since they own no property, and for foreigners, orphans and widows."(14:28)

In our New Testament lesson, Jesus relates a parable concerning a Good Samaritan. The moral of the story is that the ones expected to show great compassion-- in this instance a priest

and a Levite—were the ones who demonstrated NO love, while the Samaritan, who would have been expected to IGNORE the injured stranger, becomes the HERO of the story. Jesus redefines the term so that a “neighbor” isn’t one who happens to be White and a good American or attends a Presbyterian church or who may live on the same street as you or I may do. Rather, a “neighbor” is defined by his or her VULNERABILITY, that is, by whatever NEED happens to present itself at that particular time. Jesus reminds us that we all have an obligation to help others REGARDLESS of nationality; of race, religion, and sex, and we are obligated to do so precisely because they TOO are God’s children

And we ARE to care for them because we know that EVEN CHRIST HIMSELF was a stranger- a man rejected by his hometown, a rabbi expelled by his own congregation, a savior killed by the very people he had come to save. As Jesus took strangers SUCH AS OURSELVES--with our varied backgrounds, sexes, and ages; with our diverse nationalities, races, and personalities--and forged US into a living community, so does he ask US to receive those different from ourselves and provide THEM a home, even if it’s just a temporary one. We must never forget how God has ALWAYS had a special concern for the stranger- for those who were aliens, or disinherited, or dispossessed in our midst for as the writer of Hebrews warns, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”(13:2) As Children of God who at one time were a dispossessed people OURSELVES, our attitudes towards this problem must ABOVE ALL be guided by our deepest concern and love. Nicholas Kristof, the former columnist for *The New York Times* and a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, has written, “If you don’t see yourself or your family members in those images of today’s refugees, you need an empathy transplant.”

Let me close by saying that I know among both Republicans and Democrats, liberals as well as conservatives, that we are AT LEAST UNITED on THIS point- that there is currently an immigration crisis in our nation; that we all affirm the importance of keeping strict borders and maintaining sensible controls over our immigration policy. Every President going back more than forty years to the Carter and Reagan administrations has realized that there are no easy answers to what constitutes a seemingly intractable problem. Still, AS CHRISTIANS, we must not close our eyes or bury our heads in the sand about it, nor must we give in to all the hysteria or the xenophobia--xenophobia being any unreasonable fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers--that has dominated so much of our political discourse over the past several decades. The inhumane way migrants have often been used as political pawns- either treated as an impending “invasion” of criminals and gang-members, or as a “diseased mob” ready to introduce smallpox and leprosy into our population- NONE OF IT is true, NONE OF IT is rooted in reality. Every human rights organization has testified that they are essentially the same honest and hard-working people our forefathers proved themselves to be, that many are seeking temporary sanctuary from one of the most violent regions on the planet where every day they are confronted with the threat of being raped, extorted, kidnapped, and even MURDERED.

And they CONTINUE to come because America has always been so much more than just one more nation among many others. What has made America so SPECIAL in the eyes of the world is that she is also an “IDEAL,” a “PRINCIPLE”- one that has stirred people to dream even under the most oppressive circumstances. Her creed was inscribed a hundred and forty years ago on the base of a statue in New York harbor, a promise that has served as a beacon of freedom and hope to millions of immigrants the world over, inspiring them to come to these shores in search of the very same opportunity that the Pilgrims THEMSELVES did:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

However, the day that “ideal” loses its force and becomes just another empty motto or senseless political slogan, then America WILL have become JUST THAT- just one more cruel and uncaring nation among SO MANY OTHERS. Similarly, if we as God’s children and chosen representatives in the world ever stop acting as Christ’s conscience to our country; if the salt ever loses its savor, then we will have become nothing more than Christians IN NAME ONLY. Our Lord makes “love for the stranger” a STANDARD by which we measure our commitment to GOD HIMSELF and how we RESPOND to that challenge reveals whether we are IN FACT the “Body of Christ,” or just another social club that would rather PLAY church than actually BE the church. Let us pray...

Our Heavenly Father, on this Thanksgiving week, open our hearts that we might care for others--ESPECIALLY the stranger who resides in our midst--the same way you do US, and by doing so, more clearly reveal your Son to a blind and broken world. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.