**Matthew 25: I Was A Stranger**

**Leviticus 19:33-34; Hebrews 13:2**

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For as long as I can remember, my Mom and Dad have been fascinated by family history.  After years of traipsing through cemeteries and studying court and church records in search for information on our roots, recently they got scientific about this and had one of those DNA tests done to reveal our heritage.  So, here is what we learned. On my mom’s side, we are 69% from England, Wales, and Northwestern Europe, 18% Germanic, and 13% Irish and Scottish. On my dad’s side, we are 60% from England, Wales and Northwestern Europe and 40% Irish and Scottish. I am about as northern European as you can get.

Over the years, my parents have traced the family back far enough to know that many of our ancestors were among the earliest European settlers to come to this country, but we don’t know why they came.  We don’t know their stories. Did they come to escape religious persecution or famine? Were they seeking adventure or hoping for a new start?

Unless you are among the indigenous people of North America, than your family, like mine, has a story of how you came to be in the United States.  Some of those stories are filled with the horrors of slave ships and auction blocks. Others may be about escaping religious persecution, genocide, or war.  Still others may involve seeking broader opportunities for education or work. Whatever the reason your family came here, unless you are Native American, as immigrants and arrived as strangers in a strange land.

To be a stranger is one of the most uncomfortable feelings we can have.  And yet, we don’t do a great job of remembering that when we encounter strangers on our own turf.  When we see someone new at church, when we encounter a stranger sleeping on a bench, when we listen to the debates about immigration and refugees that are happening all around us.

This is the fourth in our sermon series on Matthew 25 in which Jesus teaches us what it means to be his follower and to live our faith in the world.  We heard his words in our call to worship today, read by Ted Brokaw. I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked, and you clothed me.  Today, we come to “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

While we encounter strangers in many ways in our lives, in the Bible, the word stranger almost always refers to an immigrant or refugee.  Someone displaced from another country or culture. The Bible is full of stories of people on the move from one country to another - in search of food, safety, freedom from persecution, or, in some cases, forced into bondage as the spoils of war.  Joseph was taken from his native land to Egypt when his brothers sold him into slavery. Later, his family arrives in Egypt in search of food because of a famine. Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem for Moab, again because of a famine. Moses was actually a criminal immigrant who fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian  And, of course, the stories of the Passover and the Exodus are stories of a whole people, the Israelites, who were oppressed as strangers in Egypt, escaping to find their own homeland again.

These are just a few examples of the many migrants in the Bible, but perhaps the most significant migrant in scripture for us, as followers of Christ, is Jesus himself.  Jesus was a refugee whose family fled to Egypt soon after his birth because King Herod ordered the killing of all Jewish baby boys who might threaten his throne.

Our heritage, our history, as Christians is deeply interwoven with the plight of immigrants and yet, the issue of immigration in our country has become so divisive and controversial on the political platform that we lose sight of that fact.  We overlook or forget that in the Jewish tradition, welcoming and caring for the stranger is a law, and in the teachings of Jesus, it is an expectation of what it means to love our neighbor.

According to the United Nations Refugee agency, in 2018, more than 70 million people in the world were forcibly displaced from their homes.  About 40 million of them stayed within their own countries, but about 30 million were refugees or asylum seekers - people escaping persecution or violence in their home countries and looking for some place they could live safely.  Of those, less than 1% were resettled in countries where they could begin to rebuild their lives. In 2016, the United States, once the world leader in welcoming refugees, admitted 85,000, in 2017, 54,000. For 2019, there is a cap of 30,000 refugees who can be admitted to the United States but it is expected that far fewer will actually be allowed across our borders.

The world has a refugee crisis, which ultimately leads to huge numbers of people on the move, trying to escape violence, war, persecution, and, oftentimes, death.  Our basic human instinct is to do what we must to survive, and so we see a steady flow of migrants - men, women, and children -slowly making their way from Honduras, Guatemala, and Venezuela to the US border.  We see the images of children and families camped on the border hoping to cross legally or illegally to someplace they can be safe. And we hear of the deaths of children in detention centers while in immigration custody.

Closer to home, we hear the stories of people who have lived and worked right here in Michigan, paying their fair share in taxes and social security, arrested and deported, often sent back to places where they may not speak the language, may not have access to medical treatment or supplies, may even be jailed or executed.

We, as Christ followers, with a mandate to welcome the stranger, are called to respond.  The United Methodist Church has in its Book of Resolutions these words: “Christians do not approach the issue of migration from the perspective of tribe or nation, but from within a faith community of love and welcome, a community that teaches and expects hospitality to the poor, the homeless, and the oppressed. The Christian community at its best not only welcomes and embraces migrants but can be led by them toward clearer understandings of justice and hospitality. Christians rejoice in welcoming migrants who are also Christian, brothers and sisters of the same baptism, gathered around the same sacramental table. And people beyond the Christian community deserve no less hospitality than Christians extend to themselves.”

So, how do we embody that community of love and welcome?  One thing we have done here in this congregation is to become a Solidarity Sanctuary Congregation.  This means that, while we don’t have the facilities to house an immigrant or immigrant family who is seeking sanctuary, we will help to support those faith communities that do.  We passed this resolution at a church conference in June of 2017. At the same time, our Immigrant Hospitality Team was born. In a few minutes, you’ll hear from James MacDonald, a member of our church and the Immigrant Hospitality Team, who will share with us a bit about the man who is currently in sanctuary here in Ann Arbor and how we have helped to support him.

Central United Methodist Church in Detroit has been hosting a family in sanctuary at their church for some time now.  If you are interested in supporting them, they will be holding a benefit dinner for that family at their church on October 21.  Also, our Immigration Hospitality Team plans to visit Central on November 24 to have a meal and play games with the family that is in sanctuary there.  They also plan to have holiday cards that we can sign and send to women and children who are in detention.

That said, there are other ways you can help to support immigrants and refugees, as well.  Tori Booker, one of our church members, works with Justice for our Neighbors of Michigan, a United Methodist organization which provides legal help to immigrants making their way through the complex paperwork and processes required to move forward within the US system.  You can support their work with donations or with expertise.

Another option to help locally is to donate to our Immigration Hospitality Team or to Washtenaw Congregational Sanctuary.  You can also donate to the refugee work of UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. UMCOR has a special account to gather donations specifically for refugee needs.  You might also make hygiene kits that can be distributed by UMCOR at transitional housing facilities around the country. UMCOR also has an Amazon registry where you can buy supplies like diapers and clothing to be handed out by UMCOR to refugees.

At a very practical level, you could consider teaching English as a Second Language to local immigrants or help with employment searches and job training. Finally, you can advocate by writing to congress and by educating yourselves and others about the challenges of immigrants and refugees who are seeking safety and hope.

My family came to this country generations ago, and I don’t know my ancestors’ stories.  I don’t know if they came looking for a better life or because of some sort of persecution.  Maybe you don’t know your family’s story either. But what we do know is that the immigrants at our borders and those in refugee camps around the world have as much right to be free of oppression, danger, and hunger as our ancestors did.  Jesus made it clear what we are to do for them. “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

May it be so. Amen.