

Safe Space

Leviticus 19:33-34
Deuteronomy 24: 17-22
Matthew 10: 40-42; 25: 34-40

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Safe Space. This is the name of the domestic violence agency in Louisburg where I served as Executive Director for a couple of years in the late 1990's. I remember many of the women who stayed at the large, Victorian-style home that we bought and renovated as a shelter: some alone, some with children; black, white, Asian and Latino; old and young, rich and poor.

Some came directly from hospital emergency rooms. Others arrived with no external injuries, but their psychological wounds were deep and obvious. The common denominator was the look of fear in their eyes, the anxious glances over their shoulders, the sudden starts at loud noises from the street.

These women relished the simplest acts of daily life in the comfortable, sprawling house that had become their new home: cooking a meal, reading a book on the sofa, playing with children, taking a deep breath. Escaping a former home that was no longer a refuge but a place of terror, they had arrived at a safe space, a sanctuary whose walls provided protection from those who pursued and persecuted them. This place of physical and legal refuge gave them the breathing room they needed in order to face a new and unknown future.

So it is with countries, host nations that give refuge to those who must flee their homeland because they are no longer safe. We here in the United States have the privilege and the duty to provide these exiled and uprooted ones a sanctuary, a safe space where they can be free to live and speak and worship as they choose, where they are granted the same rights as our native citizens, and where they can consider whether to stay on a permanent basis or return to their homeland when conditions get better.

The idea of a place of protection and sanctuary goes back to ancient times. The Old Testament mentions safe haven at the altar for criminals who have killed by accident, and the scriptures even command the establishment of cities of refuge. By the fourth century, the right to sanctuary had become formalized among early Christians.

At first the sanctuary rule applied and the refugee was safe if the person had just one part of his body in a church building or grasped the rings attached to the church doors. Within a few centuries, the sanctuary zone included the churchyard, graveyard, cloisters, and a 35-pace radius around the bishop's residence. (*Daniel Engbar, "Can Criminals Hide in Church? On the Question of Religious Sanctuary" <http://www.slate.com/id/2172469>*).

We might ask ourselves today if our spiritual and political zones of sanctuary are big enough. Are they growing larger, or are they shrinking due to anti-immigrant sentiment, suspicion and fear? And what about those immigrants who come here for economic reasons, instead of political persecution? Do they have a right to safe space where they can earn a decent living for their families?

Bishop Roger Mahoney says "Yes!" He writes: "The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right." (*Acts of Faith, Year A, Part 2, p. 9, published by the NC Council of Churches, 2008.*)

In the first passage from Matthew we read today, Jesus is addressing his disciples and commissioning them to embody the good news to the towns and villages in the countryside: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," he says. The success of their mission hinges on the hospitality of others.

In ancient times, hospitality was a deeply fundamental practice that kept society from becoming unglued. It was the way that people expressed their concern for what was good. Hospitality was one of the pillars that held up a moral and just civilization.

In both passages from Matthew, Jesus is demonstrating what a welcoming hospitality looks like. In Chapter 10, he mentions prophets, righteous persons, and little ones. And in Matthew 25, he says "whoever welcomes a stranger, welcomes me." Jesus is making the point that when his followers welcome others through practices of hospitality- especially those who may not be well-regarded, like strangers, prophets and children, then people are opening themselves to receive God. We are called to share a cup of cold water with those who knock at the doors of our homes **and** our country.

As people of faith, we must remember that our scriptures have long taught us to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, and the uprooted ones. The biblical story of the people of Israel is a story of migration. Abraham left home and traveled to a new land. Ruth and Naomi were immigrants from Moab in the land of Judah. The Hebrew people migrated to Egypt to escape famine in their home country. There, they were oppressed and persecuted by citizens of their host country. The Exodus from Egypt involved wandering 40 years without a home until they reached the Promised Land.

Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel are called to remember that they themselves were immigrants when they were in Egypt. This is repeated several times throughout the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus: *Don't mistreat foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat native born citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.* (Lev. 19:33-34).

There are over 32 million immigrants living in the United States today. Perhaps, like the Hebrew people, we need to be reminded of our own history. Except for Native Americans, we were **all** once new to this country. Some of us came to the U.S. escaping poverty or oppression. Others of us were forced here on slave ships. Others came seeking opportunity and a safe place to raise a family and start a new life. In modern times, new immigrants come here for the same reasons.

Perhaps we should rephrase those Leviticus verses for ourselves: "Don't mistreat the immigrants who live in your communities, whether they are documented or not. Treat them as well as you treat U.S. citizens, and love them as much as you love your own family. Remember, your ancestors too were once immigrants in America."

The Hebrew scriptures are filled with God's commandments to Israel regarding the treatment of aliens and foreigners. Communities are told they must have the same laws for citizens and for immigrants alike. (Numbers 15:15). Judges are to hear disputes and judge fairly, whether the case involves citizens or immigrants. (Deut. 1:16). Employers are not to take advantage of hired workers, whether that worker is an immigrant or a citizen, but to treat each one fairly and pay wages that are due. (Deut. 24:14).

Our nation's current immigration policies wouldn't stand up to scrutiny under these same biblical commandments. We have become a nation which is suspicious of strangers, and our laws, for the most part, are punitive rather than compassionate, especially towards those who are undocumented.

In the New Testament, we remember that the infant Jesus and his parents fled to sanctuary in Egypt after their homeland became a place of terror. The ruthless military of King Herod was preparing to murder all Hebrew babies under 2 years old, a brutal attempt at ethnic cleansing which was designed to get rid of Jesus who was deemed a threat to the crown.

Jesus' parents did what many terrorized refugee families have done throughout the centuries: they packed up a few belongings and fled across the border to a place beyond the reach of violence in their former country. They lived in Egypt, exiles in a strange land, until Herod's death changed the religious and political landscape of Israel, and they were able to return home.

The UN Refugee agency defines a refugee as a person living outside of his or her home country because of a "well-founded fear of persecution." (<http://www.unhcr.org/basics/BASICS/3c0f495f4.pdf>) Jesus and his family were certainly refugees by this definition. It would be interesting to imagine how they might be treated today. What if they were Iraqis fleeing to Syria and Jordan, an Afghan family escaping the Taliban by crossing the mountains into Pakistan, or Sudanese refugees fleeing to South Africa? What if they were a Burmese family arriving in the United States and settling in North Carolina?

All of us grow up with an emotional tie to the concept of 'home'. In the natural order of things we are born into a family of a particular culture, religion and worldview. We are born in a particular place with its own unique geography and history. A home gives us roots. Without it we don't know where we come from; without it there is no restorative place of return and rest.

It is impossible for most of us to imagine what it must be like to leave the home you love, the culture you know, the people who are dear to you, and move to a strange land with unfamiliar customs, with people who do not look like you or speak your language. We cannot imagine the confusion, the

loneliness, the sense of isolation, the grief for all that has been lost. All that we can do is offer welcome and hope, justice and compassion.

When Jesus grew up, he became a displaced person in his own land, chased from his hometown by people who wanted to kill him. This same Jesus said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” The homelessness of Jesus shows us that that God cares for those who share this condition, and we should too.

The love of God is embodied in the dislocated and displaced, the homeless one and the refugee, the fugitive and victim. The love of God lives among us in the lives of the uprooted and the vulnerable. This is why Jesus said “Come, you that are blessed by God!... for I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes.” (Matthew 25:34-35).

Most of us cannot imagine what it must be like to sing God’s song in a strange land, but we *can* make sure that we sing tunes of welcome and justice. We should reach out our hands to those who have fled cruel governments to seek asylum and safety in our towns. We should also offer welcome to those immigrants who, like our own ancestors, left their countries of origin in order to find a better life for their families here in America. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said: “Remember, remember always, that all of us... are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.”

This is spiritual work, but it also has political dimensions. As U.S. citizens, we must work to fix our broken immigration system. We should remind ourselves of Jefferson’s words in the Declaration of Independence: that **every** person has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As Christians, we believe every person is also entitled to safe space, to a home which is not marred by violence and fear, to a life where work will provide enough for one’s family.

May our faith remind us that we are called to offer strangers an extravagant welcome. As the writer of Hebrews said: “Keep on loving one another... Remember to welcome strangers into your homes, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:1-2).