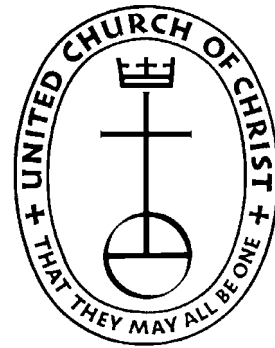


A Different Kind of Hospitality/Justice Ministry

A Sermon By —
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August 30, 2009



In this sermon a US asylum officer describes his work of determining which of the many refugees who enter this country will receive asylum status, and links that work to the welcome and hospitality Jesus described, a part of the radically inclusive love of God.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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It is an honor to be here this morning. Jerry Stinson asked me to share with the church a few months ago. He specifically asked me to share about my work, which he sees as a special kind of Justice Ministry. I am humbled to be back here sharing these thoughts with you. It is always a bit of an un-nerving challenge to prepare a sermon to deliver from any pulpit, but this church is especially blessed to have gifted preachers speak from this pulpit week after week. I pray that my thoughts and words will be meaningful.

30 years ago, in early June 1979, I was ordained and started working on a part-time basis resettling refugees with the American Baptist Churches in Northern California. There was a small and growing Romanian Baptist church in San Leandro and they were sponsoring as many Baptists and other Christians as they could bring into that part of California. They were coming to the US because they had experienced persecution and/or they had a well-founded fear of persecution if they returned to Romania. The “strong man,” Ceausescu ruled Communist Romania with an iron fist and political opponents and religious minorities experienced many problems in that country. Within a couple of months of starting that refugee work, I remember resettling Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees and then at the end of that year the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and I was contacted by Afghans who were already living and working in the Bay Area to see if I could help get family members to the US to join them in safety. Then the Mariel Boatlift happened out of Cuba in the spring of 1980 and the list goes on and on. With the support and funding from the American Baptist congregations and the national denomination, we continued to resettle refugees from around the world into various Northern California communities from 1979 to 1991. A six month part-time job had been stretched out to 12 years. Hundreds of refugees were resettled, many of whom came to join other family members who had arrived earlier.

That refugee ministry struggled to survive toward the end of that project. Things became challenging, to say the least. With bad economic times in the late 1980s /early 1990s compassion fatigue set in. Churches just did not feel like they could do one more thing to help welcome refugees to their communities to build new lives.

Denominational funding was drying up as well. Immigration lawyer friends in San Francisco then encouraged me to apply to the INS at that time to become an Asylum Officer. I applied and against many odds, I got a job and for the past 17 ½ years, I have been working on “the other side,” within the government bureaucracy to decide who is a refugee and with that recognition who can build a new life here in the US. I say that I got the job against some odds because it was a lawsuit that was brought against the US

Department of Justice over the disparate treatment given to refugees from Central America when compared to refugees from the former Soviet Block that brought about a significant change in Immigration practice here in the US. That lawsuit was called, “the American Baptist Churches *et al v. Meese* (and then later Thornburg).” My background was solidly American Baptist and some friends did not think that I had “a snowball’s” chance of working in the INS given that lawsuit, but mystery of mysteries in January 1992, on Martin Luther King Sunday (another irony since Dr. King was an American Baptist minister who had his own run-ins with US Government officials) I was called and offered the Asylum Officer job.

Now, I need to tell you something about what an Asylum Officer does. We are the people who interview applicants for asylum and determine whether they will be granted the protection of the US Government and therefore not sent back to their home country. We have to follow US law and government regulations and procedures. Along with the information that we gather from the applicant’s application and supporting documents and our interview of the applicant and what we can determine in our study of country conditions and by applying the law we grant asylum if we can and if we cannot grant asylum, we refer the applicant on to the Immigration Court, where they can have their case heard by an Immigration Judge. We follow the definition from the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees, namely a refugee is a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his (or her) nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.”

Please allow me to step aside for a minute and talk about some of the history revolving around that 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. The beautiful cranes floating in this sacred space remind us all of one of the horrors of World War II—the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the atomic bomb attacks in August 1945. But following the defeat of Germany in Europe, the allies were confronted with horrors that were inconceivable for 20th Century Europe. The Nazis had unleashed a war machine and a genocide that had killed millions of people in the invasion of other countries and in the systematic death machine that was the final solution to rid the world of Jews, gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, disabled persons, gay men, communists and religious resistance. Eleanor Roosevelt and various world leaders worked hard after the war to shape the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a founding document for the United Nations. The survivors of the war in Europe came together to see what they could do to prevent another genocide. An international commitment was made through the UN and subsequent international conventions and treaties to work to see what could be done to prevent refugees and protect them. It took 40 years though – from 1951 to

1991—for the US to finally establish a refugee and asylum program that was free of the political influences that shaped the cold war period following World War II.

The world still had some dangerous and unstable places. We watched this summer as the elections in Iran were stolen by the ruling clerics, who dictated the outcome. Protestors were shot in the streets, others have been arrested and imprisoned and now a show trial is moving forward that may end with the execution of some of the so-called “protest leaders.” Persons working for a change in government in Iran may be at risk of being mistreated, imprisoned, or possibly executed because of their political opinion.

In Africa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, thousands of people have been assaulted by armed militias and the government forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Ethnic militias terrorize women and men because of their ethnicity, possible ties to the government, and or possible ties to other ethnic groups. Further north in Africa, hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Sudanese region of Darfur have sought refuge in neighboring countries, having been run out of their home villages by the violent militias armed by the Sudanese government.

A growing crisis is emerging in Iraq as the US forces withdraw. On August 17, 2009 Human Rights Watch released a 67-page report detailing how armed Shiite militiamen are “torturing and killing gay men with impunity in a systematic campaign that has spread from Baghdad to several other cities.” Shiite militiamen have for the most part stopped their violence against rival Sunnis, but they have been conducting a less publicized campaign of social cleansing. The report details with stories too horrific to discuss here today, how deeply gay men in Iraq have a well-founded fear of persecution because they are gay.

A few weeks ago, the New York Times in a front page article detailed how we in our asylum cases and procedures can follow this administration’s guidelines and grant asylum to women from Mexico who have been the victims of years of domestic violence. Contrary to the fears of the anti-immigration forces, this really will not open up a flood gate for women asylees from Mexico. It is a rare, rare case of a woman who has suffered domestic violence to get away from her abuser and make it to the US and then in our processing the case, we need analyze whether she could move to another part of the country and be safe and whether the Mexican authorities are willing and able to protect her. We deal with these cases on a case-by-case basis and none of them can be considered a “slam dunk” under these procedures.

So surrounded by these issues and many, many more in our world today I go to work every day with 150 other government workers in our warehouse of an office building in

Anaheim. We interview applicants for asylum and we do our best to make the correct decision. We spend time learning about the world and the law and carrying out our duties. Some of my co-workers are overseas right now interviewing and processing refugees in Kenya, Syria, Jordan, Nepal, Istanbul and Baghdad. Others are in extended training sessions in Dallas and Northern Virginia. We do all that we can to apply the law and make sure that justice is done regarding asylum seekers and refugees.

So this is church and this is a sermon and I need to get some help from the Bible, right? I chosen a passage from Luke for today's service and how do I make it apply? Biblical scholars point out that the Gospel of Luke has a number of sub-themes moving through this account of the "Good News, the Gospel." These sub-themes include emphases upon the harmonious interaction of believers, the singular contributions of women disciples, the continuing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people, the centrality of repentance in the life of faith, the just use of material possessions, God's compassionate care for the poor and outcast, and (last but not least) hospitality (see John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, p.85-123).

So hear now this selection from Luke, chapter 14 verses 15-23:

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in so that my house may be filled.'"

The mission of the early Christian Church - those house churches scattered through out parts of the Roman Empire - is conceived by Luke in holistic terms. For Luke, all those on the outside of the redemptive community must be invited in so that both their bodies and their spirits can experience God's refreshment. Luke therefore takes care to point up the essential unity between ministries of word and ministries of the table (or hospitality). Jesus, the Apostles, and later in the book of Acts, Paul are depicted as both

preachers and teachers on the one hand and stewards of material goods, especially food on the other. This holistic ministry of word and table facilitates the welcoming of strangers inside the church as well as outside.

We sometimes struggle here at First Church with these ministries of hospitality. It is a challenge to do all that could be done to help the homeless or the neighborhood or just welcome visitors and newcomers. We support and trust friends and fellow members to minister in our name to some of the needs around us. We are challenged to do our part and extend a welcome whenever we can. Please know that you have a fellow member—me—and I value your support as I live out my calling to minister with refugees and asylum seekers. I am one of you doing what I can to live out a ministry of justice and hospitality.

Let me take you back to the hospitality of a banquet as I come to a close with these thoughts this morning. Frederick Buechner in his novel *Love Feast* gives his own version of Luke's banquet. The protagonist of the novel, Leo Bebb, a traveling evangelist and confidence man, hosts a Thanksgiving dinner at the Princeton, New Jersey home of his wealthy friend and patroness. The meal is a spur-of-the-moment affair whose guests are a strange combination of local residents, nuns, secretaries (at least one of whom is a part-time hooker), and students not otherwise occupied for the holiday. Some have been "compelled" to come in through aggressive invitations. When most of the guests have eaten their fill and consumed generous portions of their host's claret punch, Bebb addresses them. Antonio Parr, the novel's narrator, recalls the following fragments of Bebb's talk:

He said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a great feast. That's the way of it. The Kingdom of Heaven is a love feast where nobody's a stranger. Like right here. There's strangers everywhere you can think of. There's strangers was born out of the same womb. There's strangers was raised together in the same town and worked side by side all their life through. There's strangers got married and been climbing in and out of the same fourposter together for thirty-five or forty years, and they're strangers still. And Jesus, it's like most of the time he's a stranger too. Even when he's near as the end of your nose, people make like he's nowhere around. They won't talk to him. They won't listen to him. They keep their eye on the ground. But here in this place there's no strangers, and Jesus, he isn't a stranger either. The Kingdom of Heaven's like this."

He said, "We all got secrets. I got them same as everybody else—things we feel bad about and wish hadn't ever happened. Hurtful things. We're all scared and lonesome, but most of the time we keep it hid. It's like every one of us

has lost his way so bad we don't even know which way is home any more only we're ashamed to ask. You know what would happen if we would own up we're lost and ask? Why, what would happen is we'd find home is each other. We'd find out home is Jesus loves us lost or found or any whichway."

So here we are in this community, seeking to live out God's radically inclusive love and welcome to all. This place is a spiritual home for us and we are called to make this a home for others. I pray that we can find home with each other and that the refugees of the world will find a home as well. We cannot bring the 12 to 14 million refugees in the world to the US. In reality only about 50,000 refugees may come into the US from overseas this year and maybe 10,000 will be granted asylum here in the US. All of the world's refugees deeply long to return to their own homes and live in peace, free from the harm and/or the threats. All of humanity longs for peace and well-being and an end to the situations that force people to flee for safety. Please join me in praying and working for safe homes and a welcome for those who seek them. Amen.