

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Called to Welcome”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
July 2, 2017
Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42**

Sometime this spring, a billboard went up on I-40 in Catawba County expressing support for the banning of refugees from certain predominantly Muslim countries using 9-11 as the basis for such a ban. At the bottom of the billboard noted the name of the group footing the bill for the sign: NC Pastors’ Network.

As I drove by, I immediately thought, “I’m a pastor in NC and I don’t want anyone to think I agree with such an exclusive and xenophobic sentiment.” After all, as Will Willimon says so well in his book *Fear of the Other*, hospitality is the Christian default. Hospitality is what we do because we know so well how God has unconditionally and without our deserving welcomed us into the transforming power of grace and forgiveness by Christ’s act on the cross. We would be hypocritical if we did not welcome others the way God has welcomed us – without judgment, without questioning risk, without making assumptions, and without prejudice and bias.

And yet there on the side of a well-traveled section of the interstate was a sign that would make non-Christians passing by think that NC pastors believed that a

Muslim ban was the Christian thing to do. I felt my stomach clench with despair. I knew there was another Christian voice that needed to be heard, but it wasn't there on the side of that freeway – at least not yet.

At our meeting earlier this month, the North Carolina Council of Churches board approved the installation of a separate billboard along that same stretch of Catawba County road. This one had a significantly different message – the default one not just for Christians, but even earlier for the Hebrew people – a quote from Leviticus 19:34 stating clearly, “Welcome the stranger, for you were once a stranger.” At the bottom of this sign was the NC Council of Churches’ name with information that told of our diversity and numbers – 18 denominations, 6200 congregations.

We are not, you see, just a few people stating that welcome is what Christianity is all about. We are the many who have heard Jesus calling us to love one another. We are the thousands who have read of the way Jesus welcomed the stranger – the Samaritan woman, the leper, the outcast, the Syrophenician woman, the Roman centurion. We are the ones who listened as Jesus shared with us the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, when the Son of Man said,

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25: 35).

We are part of the Christian community that has heard the apostle Paul say to the early church in Rome:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8),

and

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”
(Romans 13:10),

and

“Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”
(Romans 12:13).

We are also the ones who remember what Peter learned as a leader in the early church, when God taught him that:

“God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34).

We are many and we must not let our voices be silenced by the voices of exclusion and fear. We must not. We will not.

On World Refugee Day, June 20, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson, issued a letter outlining our stance on welcoming refugees. He wrote:

Presbyterians have a long history of choosing welcome over isolation and fear. At the end of World War II and the wars in Southeast Asia, we called on the U.S. to welcome refugees to our country and our government responded. We chose welcome when our very congregations served as the host sites to refugees in the years before resettlement agencies. And, Presbyterians choose welcome now as we assist families resettling to the U.S. from Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Burma, Bhutan, and other countries. In 2016 alone, hundreds of congregations engaged directly with newly arriving refugees. We believe this ministry to and with our sisters and brothers in danger is essential to our calling as people of faith. This is how we extend light to those in dire circumstances. And, we stand with others who engage in this work, too. It is together that we can affect change and bring hope to those running from peril.

Refugees enrich our lives as well, and we acknowledge that they also give back to our country.

In this time when the world's sorrows are great, it is the desire of many Presbyterians to extend welcome to those seeking safety. This call to choose welcome is our faithful and compassionate remembrance that we too once "were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19, NRSV). This call comes from our history of actively assisting in refugee resettlement. We know, firsthand, that by choosing welcome, we have entertained angels (Heb. 13: 1–2, NRSV). We do not condone. . . anti-Muslim sentiment . . . as a gauge of whom we should accept. We choose to welcome all sisters and brothers in need of protection and security regardless of race, creed, or nationality.¹

It seems to me that, based on Hebrew Scripture, the writings of the New Testament, and our own denominational history, welcoming refugees into our midst would be a foregone conclusion. Sadly, however, it is not. Too many of us cannot escape the human tendency to let our fears dictate our actions, even though over and over again angels of God and Jesus himself have exhorted us not to fear: "Be not afraid! I am with you! I love you. Love one another." But fear is a powerful force and no one is completely immune from the power of our fears. Fear is also contagious, and when one is afraid, soon everyone around becomes afraid. When fear enters the picture, many shrink back from the calling of our faith and count the risk as being too great. However, the opposite is true as well, my friends. When one stands with confidence before that which might create fear, others find their courage as well and stand together.

¹ Letter from Stated Clerk of PC (USA), J. Herbert Nelson

Think of the way the Greensboro Four started their sit-in. Just four young black men who entered an all-white Woolworths, sat down at the counter, and asked for a cup of coffee. Do you think they were afraid? Oh, yeah. You bet they were. They were terrified. But soon their confident stand against injustice gave others courage to stand with them – at first in the same coffee shop in Greensboro, but soon in coffee shops all around the southeast and beyond. The courage of the few became the courage of the many.

My friend Marcia Mount Shoop also reminds us that:

When individual congregations chose to serve as a stop on the underground railroad during slavery in the United States of America, churches engaged in the risky business of welcome as sanctuary.

In a similar way,

[i]n the late twentieth century churches responded to a humanitarian [crisis] of thousands of Central American refugees fleeing violent conflicts, in many cases fueled by [our own] government policies. These churches created the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, born along the southern borders of the United States. [E]ruptions of anti-immigrant sentiment and violence have resurfaced a clarion call toward Christian dispositions of welcome. Jesus' followers are again invited to take risks in our welcome, to embody sanctuary in the way we make space for “the stranger,” the vulnerable, and those in need.²

The Gospel writer is reminding those receiving and redacting this message that being a Jesus follower is not easy, nor is it a clear road to social acceptance, favor, or safety. The words of our passage today follow verses [in

² Marcia Mount Shoop, *ON Scripture*, accessed on June 28, 2017, <https://www.onscripture.com/risky-business-jesus%E2%80%99-perilous-welcome>

Matthew] that speak of persecution, humiliation, estrangement from family, and a transient lifestyle that leans on the kindness of other people of faith. Following Jesus is a process that brings with it both peril and promise.³

We know this, don't we? If we have read the gospel, we know this. And yet, too often Christian communities seek the safe way, the comfortable way, the less-risky way. We cling to the promise, but we run from the peril, even when it means forsaking the gospel. But surely, we can't be blamed for being afraid, can we? Isn't fear a natural part of the human condition?

Yes, of course it is, but Jesus came to cast out all fear with his perfect love, as the writer John reminds us. Jesus calls us to follow him, even when it is risky, even when it is difficult. Jesus calls us into community with one another, no matter who we are: "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, Male or Female." Christ has made us one. We have been called to love our neighbor as ourselves and to risk the challenges of love even as we experience its great joys.

These days, we all know too well the meaning of the word xenophobia – "fear of the stranger." What we may have forgotten, however, is the word that comes from Jesus' call to welcome the other, xenophilia – "love of the stranger." In xenophilia, the stranger becomes the guest, the one for whom a table of welcome is set, the one for whom the best wine is poured, the one for whom all else is forgotten but that this one is here and that this one is a gift from God to be received as a friend along the road of life.

³ Marcia Mount Shoop, *ON Scripture*, accessed on June 28, 2017, <https://www.onscripture.com/risky-business-jesus%E2%80%99-perilous-welcome>

Earlier this year, one of our own members set aside any fears she might have had in order to care for a stranger who was obviously confused and in need. It happened like this:

On Sunday, February 12, following worship, this woman stopped at the Durham Co-op Market on the way home from church. As she exited her car, she greeted a father and young daughter who were walking on the sidewalk. The father, Mohammed, asked her if the Duke Center for Child and Family Health was open. He had taken the bus there to try to find medical care for his daughter. Our church member knew that the center wasn't open on Sunday and was not a health care facility. She saw, though, that the daughter was very ill, possibly with the flu, and so, putting her fear of the stranger and any fear she might have had of catching the flu to the side, she offered to give them a ride to Urgent Care. She waited with them while the little girl saw the doctor and then gave them a ride to the drug store and then to their home.

Along the way, she discovered that their family had been evacuated from their home in Afghanistan to Turkey where they lived for four years before coming as refugees to the United States. Since then, they had been cared for by a program through Church World Services, but their needs were still many and it was a difficult task to fit into a new country and a new culture. When our church member arrived at their home, she met Mohammed's wife and two other daughters. They invited her to return another day to have tea with them when everyone was well, which she did. Xenophilia, love for the stranger, blossomed and grew in her heart and in the hearts of Mohammed and his family. Those who once were strangers are now friends.

And Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me... Truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Today following worship, I hope you will join us in the East Parlor, which, if you could fly there, would be through this door and straight until you get to the last door on your right. For those who are walking or in a wheelchair, the trip is a little more convoluted, but I will be happy to direct you there after worship! I hope you will join us there because we will be talking about how First Presbyterian Church might participate in working with a refugee family. Tom Bacon will lead the conversation and other members of our Service and Mission Committee will be there to answer questions as well. Please join us as we seek to live out God’s call to welcome the stranger!

Friends, we have been made welcome by Christ who has reconciled us to God by grace. We are the recipients of this welcome and in humility and gratitude, we are called to extend welcome to others, just as if we are welcoming Christ.

May your week be one full of xenophilia – full of welcome – full of love.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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