



THOU WAYFARING JESUS

February 5, 2017, The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 58:4-9a; Matthew 5: 13-16

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Theme: God calls us to be a welcoming people.

God of eternity, may your Spirit bear these ancient and holy words of Scripture across the gulf of time. Plant them in our hearts, and there may they empower us to be salt in a bland world and light in a dark world. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Not so long ago, a well-known Presbyterian minister found himself caught up in a tragic and complicated refugee crisis. He did all he could to help the thousands fleeing oppression in their homelands; in many cases they were running for their very lives. In a letter to a friend, this minister reflected on the refugees and the response to their plight that he was leading: “I am killed with work here. This is the open door... we are looking for the lost and wounded of every nation. I have organized an international banking bureau, a correspondence office, a registration office, and a department of consolation for nervous folks... But after all, this is kind of work that America stands for. Blot out the race-feud. Serve humanity. Resist tyrants... Show the world a better way...”

That letter was written 104 years ago. It was written in the fall of 1913 by the Rev. Henry Van Dyke, the former pastor of this congregation. He wrote it in the Netherlands where, at the appointment of President Woodrow Wilson, he was serving as American ambassador. The refugees he refers to were from all over – Belgium, Russia, and a collapsing Ottoman Empire. This 100 years-ago refugee crisis had been occasioned by the outbreak of the World War I, especially Germany’s invasion of Belgium. 400,000 Belgian refugees poured across the



borders, mostly into Holland where Van Dyke was posted. Holland welcomed them. Some 200,000 were ultimately settled in England, not without significant controversy by the way. An interesting aside – Agatha Christie, the doyenne of the English murder mystery, modeled her famous detective Hercule Poirot after one of these Belgian refugees.

It's hardly surprising that Van Dyke responded as he did when he found himself in the middle of a refugee disaster, a disaster he had not expected when he was first posted to Holland. Van Dyke, who'd just turned 60, had been looking forward to ribbon cutting, baby kissing, and fly-fishing. As he said in that letter, he rose to the occasion partly in response to what he said "America stands for. Blot out the race-feud. Serve humanity. Resist tyrants... Show the world a better way..." But his response was also shaped by his Christian faith. A few years earlier, Van Dyke, prolific poet that he was, had written a short poem that gave this sermon its title. It's not very long, quintessentially late-Victorian, but evocative. It begins:

“Thou wayfaring Jesus, a pilgrim and a stranger,
Exiled from heaven by love at Thy birth:
Exiled again from Thy rest in the manger,
A fugitive child ‘mid the perils of earth –
Cheer with Thy fellowship all who are weary,
Wandering far from the land that they love;
Guide every heart that is homeless and dreary,
Safe to its home in Thy presence above.”

A century later, I step into this pulpit in the midst of another refugee crisis. I do so with some anxiety. As I noted a few weeks ago, Brick – like most large mainline congregations – is a “purple” church. We're neither totally blue nor red, but a mixture of the two – purple. Nevertheless, by the grace of God we pray and study and work alongside each other, fellow Christians who don't always vote like us. It might be easier to be an all red church or an all blue church, but I'd think we'd be poorer for it. I for one have come to value a diversity of opinions.



My call as your pastor is not to write immigration policy from the pulpit. Of course, every country needs borders and immigration policy. Only the most extreme voices would say either “Let everyone in, no matter what!” or “Keep everybody out, no matter what!” There must be policy, policy that balances generous welcome on the one hand and appropriate security on the other. Right now, a lot of people in our country sense that the recent executive order on immigration has destroyed that balance.

We are so obviously a country of immigrants. Many of you in the room are immigrants or the children of immigrants. A quarter of our Brick church staff are immigrants or the children of immigrants. I’m the great-grandchild of immigrants. Immigrants animate this City at every level from the banking industry, to the arts, to education, to high tech, to the cabbies we sit behind and the busboys at the restaurants where we eat. Without immigrants, New York City would grind to a screeching halt. They are us.

Again, my call is not to write immigration policy from the pulpit; nor is it to offer my personal political opinion. But my task as your pastor is to point toward Scripture when the Bible speaks to our time and the choices before us. And Scripture does have something to say about this question.

The news has done a good job of covering the demonstrations around the country opposing the executive order on immigration and refugees. The demonstrators I see on television or in the newspaper are often carrying signs. One hand-made sign I’ve seen at several demonstrations reads, “Jesus was a refugee.”

That statement is correct. It’s exactly the point that Henry Van Dyke made a century ago in his poem when he wrote “Exiled again from Thy rest in the Manger, A fugitive child ‘mid the perils of earth.” Both the sign at the protests and Van Dyke’s poem refer to a story in Matthew’s Gospel traditionally called “The Flight into Egypt.” Mary and Joseph, warned of the Herod’s plan to murder the children of Bethlehem, escape across the Sinai, crossing the border to find refuge in Egypt.



But that little story is only the half of it; it's only the tenth of it. Most everybody in the Bible is a migrant. Abraham migrates from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan. His grandchildren become economic refugees when they leave famine in Canaan and migrate to Egypt. Moses is a refugee when he flees Egypt, then returns to lead the nation of Israel on another migration back to the Promised Land. Half a millennium later, the Babylonians invade Jerusalem and relocate half the Jewish population. A few decades later, they migrate back to Judea and try to rebuild their lives.

And it's just then that the first passage from the Bible Sam read was written. Trying to put their lives together, they do what they think is religiously correct. In those days this meant observing all the proper fasts with punctilious correctness.

Along comes the prophet Isaiah, not a man to mince his words. He tells Israel that these little outward religious observances are not what God really desires of them. On behalf of God, Isaiah says:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke.

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house...”

“...to bring the homeless poor into your house.” This ethical thread is woven through all of the Bible, Old and New Testament alike. It's a long and strong thread that calls us – first Israel and then the church – calls us again and again toward lives that exhibit

gracious welcome,
radical hospitality,
and kindness to the stranger.

In the Gospel of Matthew, in the very last parable that Jesus offers right before his arrest, he imagines a figure he names the “Son of Man.” The Son of Man has



come to earth for final judgment. Later in the parable, Jesus calls this figure a “King,” and then portrays him as a Great Shepherd. All this seems to somehow refer back to himself, to Jesus. This mysterious eschatological figure famously separates what the parable names the “sheep and the goats.”

But here’s the surprise – he does not separate them on the basis of their ethnic or religious identity – Jew versus Gentile, or Christian versus non-Christians. Many of his listeners would have expected exactly that. He doesn’t even exactly separate them on the basis of what they believe – believers on one side, non-believers on the other. Many of his listeners would have expected that.

Rather, he separates them solely on the basis of whether or not they have lived love – whether or not they have shown mercy, kindness and welcome. The Son of Man says to the sheep, now named “the righteous,” “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...”

When was that?” they ask. The Son of Man answers, “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.”

Believe me, I do understand that the immigration questions facing our nation and the world are fraught. Welcome and security must be rightly weighed. But in this balancing, the weight of Scripture rests its hand heavily on the welcoming side of the scale.

“Then,” old Isaiah said, “Then shall your light break forth like the dawn.”

Or as Jesus would put it in the Sermon on the Mount five centuries later, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven.”



Or as Henry Van Dyke would put it in that letter written nineteen hundred years after that, a letter telling his friend what we stand for – “Blot out the race-feud. Serve humanity. Resist tyrants... Show the world a better way...”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.