

Refugees in a Strange Land

Dear Friends,

Abraham and Sarah's story is the story of the homeless and the refugees. They were strangers in a strange land without protection, connections, or rights to carry on their business without harassment. Today things aren't so different for the homeless or the refugees seeking refuge in this country.

The story of Abraham and Sarah's struggles in the midst of their refugee status is repeated daily. So many who are now hurting and homeless try to survive in a country that has made homelessness a crime if they sleep in the parks after 10:00 p.m. or use the bathroom outdoors because they have nowhere else to go.

For many the golden rule is, the one who has the gold makes the rules. Those believing such ignore passages like Exodus 23:9 when it comes to the homeless and the migrants. *"You shall not oppress a stranger, you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."*

Abraham and Sarah came to Egypt without permission just like so many of the homeless who sleep in the allies, the parks and the vacant lots. Like Abraham and Sarah who brought blessings to the region, immigrants, bring America the blessings and bounty of abundant labor as poverty drives them across our borders.

Yet whether it is the migrant or the homeless, they are forced to live in a society that often treats them like strangers in a strange land. Time magazine ran the following quote from one of the envoys of the U.N. High Commissioner for refugees:

"At the first sign of armed conflict or persecution, the natural human response is to try take your children out of harm's way. Threatened by bombs, mass rape or murder squads, people gather the little they can carry and seek safety. Refugees are people who've chosen to leave a conflict. They pull themselves and their families through war, and often help rebuild their countries. These are qualities to be admired."

"Why then has the word refugee acquired such negative connotations in our times? Why are politicians being elected on promises to shut borders and turn back refugees?"

"Today the distinction between refugees and migrants has been blurred and politicized. Refugees have been forced to flee their country because of persecution,

war or violence. Migrants have chosen to move, mainly to improve their lives. Some leaders deliberately use the terms refugee and migrant interchangeably, using hostile rhetoric that whips up fear against all outsiders.”

“Everyone deserves dignity and fair treatment, but we need to be clear about the distinction. Under international law it is not an option to assist refugees, it is an obligation. It is perfectly possible to ensure strong border control and fair, humane immigration policies while meeting our responsibility to help refugees. More than half of all refugees worldwide are children, and 4 of 5 of them live in a country that borders the conflict or crisis they have fled.”

The previous quote by Angelina Jolie reminds all of us of the strong Biblical mandates that are given to believers to help the refugees and homeless.

I know from working with countless numbers of hurting and homeless people that when they are desperate and in precarious circumstances sometimes, like Abraham and Sarah, they lie and break the law to get by. It’s degrading. It’s humiliating. It’s not what people want to do. Instead of judging them, we should try to empathize and ask ourselves why we aren’t directly confronting those who use the law to create a permanent underclass that allows the rich and powerful to milk the federal government for all the funds they can get.

The world system works this way. The federal funds are channeled through the municipalities. The municipalities in turn use them as rewards. They give these monies to those non-profit organizations that use them without questioning the structure of government that contributes to problems of the homeless.

Providing hospitality to those in need has been a central part of the scriptures. In Genesis 18 we see Abraham providing hospitality to the Lord and two heavenly visitors who were with him. In Matt. 25:31-36 Jesus cites the provision of hospitality as evidence of His saving grace. Hebrews 13:2 tells us, “*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.*”

Living out the gospel of hospitality is becoming increasingly difficult. This is a result of local municipalities imposing codes that are hostile to the practice of the basic principles of hospitality. Such hostile actions are causing people who are homeless to become strangers in their own communities.

When Jesus says, “*When I was hungry did you feed me, naked did you clothe me or a stranger did you welcome me*” He didn’t expect us to give Him the excuse that we can’t do it because some city law forbids it. When you want to provide extended housing to

women and children, cities like St Louis and Springfield say you can't do it, unless you are zoned for a boarding house and then they make it very difficult to get such zoning. When you want to shelter your own children in your apartment you are told by city inspectors you can't do that either because you live in a conservation district and your apartment is zoned for single occupancy.

If people are serious about following Jesus Christ today, in obedience to his commands to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless, they had better be ready to declare along with Peter and the other apostles, "*We must obey God rather than men!*" (Acts 5:21)

When the scriptures say, "*do the stranger (homeless) no wrong*", migrants are kept out of the country as the police tell the homeless in our community you can't sleep in the parks after 10:00 p.m. nor anywhere else outside, as the homeless are subjected to the torture of sleep deprivation.

As Jesus asks, "When I was hungry did you feed me?" and you take sandwiches to the streets for the homeless don't be surprised if the police and the health inspectors say you can't do that. They say it is in the name of public safety and health. The question is how safe is it to let people go hungry, or eat out of dumpsters?

Many churches will leave the homeless outside rather than disobeying zoning laws that deny them the opportunity to shelter the homeless. After all, didn't Jesus say that feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless were functions of worship when He declared, "as often as you did it to the least of these even so you did it unto me"?

Maurice Harris, a rabbi at Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, OR writes, "...laws are important, and our country is based on the rule of law. Jewish tradition also sees law as sacred and essential to a just society. But alongside law, Judaism also places sacred emphasis on story. The law must listen to the specifics of the stories being brought before it. A good law is not robotic. It responds to people, and it recognizes human vulnerability. It resists humiliating people who are swept along by massive forces that put them in the position of needing to take unappealing and dangerous risks to try to help themselves and their families survive."

Leviticus 19:33-34 reads, "*And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall do him or her no wrong. The stranger that dwells with you shall be to you as the home-born among you, and you shall love him or her as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Eternal, your God.*"

For those who strive to do better the scriptures are filled with promise. *“He (or she) who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will reward Him for what He has done”* (Proverbs 19:17).

We are told in Proverbs 14:21 that to despise our homeless neighbors is sinful, but kindness to them results in blessings. *“He who despises his neighbor sins but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.”* In Psalms 41:1 we read, *“blessed is he that consider the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.”*

To consider the refugee means to stand alongside them with mountain moving faith against what often seems to be overwhelming odds. Jesus explained it this way in Mark 11:22-25 when He said, *“Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”*

Unless forgiveness flows in and through our lives it is so easy to get bitter rather than better as we confront the walls of injustice and human need. May God help us to forgive and even love the oppressor lest our own prayers be hindered.

For those working with refugees’ prayer is one of the most powerful weapons available. Jesus tells us this when he declares, *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened”* (Matt.7:7, 8).

When is the last time you prayed for the refugee, the migrant, the hurting, the homeless, and those who all too often find themselves strangers in a strange land?

The fact is God cares and answers prayer. Whether it is prayer for the needs of others or major needs we may be facing in our own lives, God answers prayer. *“I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to Him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called, and the Lord heard him, He saved him out of all his troubles”* (Ps. 34:4-6).

The central message of the Christian faith revolves around compassion for the refugees and the poor. Bishop George Dallas McKinney reminds us that, “Christ modeled a life and ministry of compassion to those in need. He was forever mingling with them (Luke 5:1-11), eating with them (Luke 5:27-32), comforting them (Luke 12:22-34), feeding them (Luke 9:10-17) and restoring them to health (Luke 7:18-23). He even went

so far as to use the dramatic words of Isaiah to summarize and epitomize his life's purpose. *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"* (Luke 4:18-19).

Since I John 3:18 says, "let us not love with words or tongue but with action and in truth," we will as believers in the power of Christ courageously confront injustices.

If we are going to obey the mandates of scripture when it says, *"defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy,"* (Psalms 82:3) we must be ready to engage in acts of civil disobedience.

Laws are often made for the benefit of the rich who have hired their lawmakers through unlimited political contributions. Isaiah 10:1-4 says, *"Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and then write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and they may rob the fatherless."*

God's heart has always been with the oppressed, refugees, and homeless. He is with those who cry out for deliverance, justice, equity, and peace. This may be the cry for fair and just migrant laws, increasing the assistance for refugees; providing a place for the homeless to put a tent, giving them a meal or even a sandwich that fills a hungry stomach. God's record of compassion is clear throughout Biblical history. It is also a mandate for those who call themselves children of God.

When one studies scriptures he or she will see three areas of Biblical teaching that reveal God's compassionate hospitality for the refugee, the migrant and the homeless in our communities.

1. **Deliverance**

At critical moments in human history, the creator of Heaven and Earth is revealed as the Great Deliverer. At decisive moments of need God takes sides and *"does not ignore the cry of the afflicted"* (Psalms 9:12). When the oppressed refugee, migrant or the homeless cry out to God, He hears, sees and delivers. He often provides this deliverance through the compassionate hospitality of those who truly love Him.

2. **Justice**

A second Biblical mandate is God's concern for social justice. During a time of political security and economic prosperity, God sent Amos to the northern Kingdom of Israel to condemn those who "oppress the poor and crush the needy" (Amos 4:1). He said, "*Let justice run down as waters, and righteous as a mighty stream*" (Amos 5:24). In Isaiah 1:17 believers are told to "*seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow.*"

3. **Equity**

A third strand of Biblical teaching is that God desires equitable distribution of material resources. In this time of extreme capitalism as the rich are getting richer and the poor, poorer we must realize that God delights in exalting the humble and casting down the rich and proud. Mary spoke of this in her Magnificat in Luke 1:52, 53 when she declared, "*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*"

A holistic work among those in need involves sharing the fact that true freedom comes from experiencing the grace of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ. The poor, like all of us, need to understand that the greatest obstacle to a full and abundant life is poverty of the soul. That is why in John 10:10 Jesus declares, "*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*"

I want to invite you to join us here at New Life Evangelistic Center in sharing compassionate hospitality through the love of our Lord Jesus Christ to those who find themselves homeless refugees in a strange land. Let's keep the welcome sign hung out as Jean Vanier states, "Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and peace to share."

Jesus was the incarnation of God's heartfelt love for the migrant, homeless and refugee. As followers of Jesus Christ, we can do no less. We must daily pray for those who are strangers in a strange land as we let God's love and power flow through us. Each day He gives us so many opportunities to help those in need. As we walk in the spirit and love of God may we recognize these opportunities and allow His love to flow through us.

Yours in Christ,
Larry Rice 