

SERMON

November 8, 2015

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For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25; 34-36, 40

I've always treasured a Sierra Club/Ballantine book that gives the story of the American Mount Everest Expedition of 1963. It was written by Thomas Hornbein and titled, Everest – The West Ridge. Hornbein gives a moving, personal account of the climb, and the book itself is beautiful – photos, poetry, quotations – a beautiful design. Here is one quotation from the book I've always liked: “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans; that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.”

The author of this quote was a Scottish mountaineer named William Hutchison Murray. In the British Army in WW2, he was captured in 1942 by German forces just south of Mersa Matruh in Egypt. During the critical first minutes of his capture, a German officer, pointing his Luger at the prisoner, saw that Murray was shivering from the cold. He said to Murray in broken English, “Pretty cold, ya?” Murray answered, “Cold as a mountain top.” “You are a mountaineer?” asked the German. Murray related that the German officer could “not do enough for him” once he knew they shared the experience of mountain climbing.

Murray spent three (3) years in a prisoner of war camp in Italy, and during that time, he wrote a book on mountaineering in Scotland on toilet tissue. The guards found it and destroyed it, but he

just wrote it again. Now, that's real commitment! But no matter the decision, once there is commitment – it's always as Murray put it - “All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred.”

The “stream of events” that resulted from the U.S. commitment/decision to go to war in April 1917 was astounding. The regular army went from fewer than 200k to over 3.7 million by August 1918. Most of the army was conscripted under the authority of the Selective Service Act. All manner of organizational improvements were made in the Army. Resourceful and energetic leaders like General John Pershing arose to guide our efforts.

Fort Meade was one of 32 camps established to train soldiers – fully two-thirds of the Army was composed of draft recruits – ordinary young people – from fields, workhouses, and schools all over America. And Epiphany Chapel and Church House – Odenton was built in 60 days – its first services held in June 1918. Epiphany Church is a fine example of one of those unanticipated blessings that follow important decisions. Epiphany has continued to be a place where ordinary men and women come to pray and to work for “the well-being, safety, and freedom” of others. Epiphany was purposefully designed as “home.” Those of you who've been for long periods in foreign lands know something about the longing for home. “Home” is always the foremost thought and desire of the soldier & ex-patriot in a foreign land.

You may know that the United States entered WW1 very reluctantly. Though we had a powerful Navy, we had a very small standing Army. It took us a long time to definitely commit ourselves to war which had begun in 1914. By the time we entered the war, combatants entrenched in defensive positions fought into a stalemate. Then there was terrible carnage along the “western front” as all sides sought to quickly develop new offensive weapons that might break the stalemate – tanks, poison gas, airplanes – anything that could pass trenches and defensive positions. The U.S. only entered the war when Germany began indiscriminate submarine warfare against all shipping – including that of the United States. But atrocities done against civilian populations by Germany in Belgium and by Germany's ally, Ottoman Turkey, in Armenia also were important reasons the U.S. finally decided to go to war. Some of the reporting on these atrocities was pro-war propaganda (which still continues in our own time in more sophisticated ways). But reliable historical studies confirm that the German atrocities in Belgium and the

Armenian genocide in Turkey – the first “modern” genocide - actually did happen. Hundreds of thousands were deliberately and systematically killed, and millions fled as refugees. Humans have migrated in large populations ever since our ancient ancestors came out of Africa. The reasons for forced migration are many – war, persecution, famine, slavery, depletion of water and land resources. Migrants sometimes may also have “mixed motives.” That is, there are factors that “push” migrants out of their homes – like the environmental disaster of the American “Dustbowl.” And there are “pull” factors such as the ability to work, or to enjoy religious tolerance in the receiving countries that attract migrants.

But when refugees have to escape, they lose just about everything they possess. Earlier this year, Rev. Phebe told the story about a family forced to flee China in 1949. The family was allowed a total of only 200 pounds. After arguing about what should go and what should stay, and carefully weighing their prized possessions up to the exact ounce, the family was then asked by the police if they had included the weight of the children. What do you take? What is the most precious thing of all that we have? I don’t know if the widow in today’s Gospel was a refugee, but a widow has to find a way to live without an income in most places and times – then and now. Certainly, a significant group of Jewish rebels was actively fighting the Roman occupiers. And when rebels live among civilian populations, the innocent civilians, no party to the conflict, are frequently labeled “rebels” or “terrorists” by the occupiers or the authorities in power. Men are killed as suspected rebels or rebel supporters. Their property is looted, homes and fields are destroyed, and women are raped and children taken for slaves. Yes, this is still going-on in our world. Most refugees worldwide are women and children. That is why all the great faith traditions ask us to support widows and orphans. Most refugees have lost whatever means they may have had to work and to survive. Jesus used what He and his disciples saw the widow do in the Temple to teach a lesson. It was a “teachable moment.” Her two (2) small coins represented a great proportion of her wealth, while the large donations the important men gave represented a relatively very small portion of their wealth...something to reflect on during our annual Stewardship month of November.

You may know I served over 30 years in the Department of Justice and Homeland Security before my retirement in 2012. Though I worked many different jobs – inspecting applicants for

admission into the U.S. on land, sea, and air borders, interviewing applicants for U.S. Citizenship, and many others, my specialty was refugee work. And I've continued some refugee work with the United Nations in Egypt for temporary periods over the past 2 years. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) works worldwide to protect, assist, and look for solutions for refugees. It reports that about 59 million persons have been forcibly displaced worldwide as the result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. About 17 million are "refugees" outside their countries of origin, and more than twice that number, about 35 million, are "internally displaced" within their own countries. The rest are asylum-seekers in countries that accept applications from refugees within their borders, or they are stateless persons – people without an effective nationality – like the Muslim Rohingya in Burma.

Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon are the countries that host most refugees today – each with over one (1) million refugees. If you're inclined to think ill of these countries for whatever reasons, stop & think what it would be like to host over one million refugees when those refugees represent a significantly large percentage of your own country's population. For example, Lebanon is the size of Maryland and has about the same overall population – 6 million. Imagine over one million refugees escaping into Maryland! These refugee populations strain local environments, social systems, and economies, and UNHCR constantly looks for what it terms "durable solutions" for these refugees. Such solutions include voluntary repatriation, local assimilation, and prioritized resettlement to other countries. Sometimes conditions improve in their home country, and refugees can go home – for example, Poles were able to return home to Poland after the fall of the communist state in 1989. Sometimes refugees can be assimilated into the population in the country where they've found safety – for example, thousands of Burundians were able to become legal citizens of Tanzania last year after living there for decades. But only a relatively small number of refugees have the opportunity to resettle permanently to a new home that will accept them. In coordination with the UNHCR, the U.S. resettles about 70k refugees each year – giving them the right to work, become legal residents, and become U.S. citizens, if they choose.

Someone asked me recently if I thought the European migrant crisis was “an invasion.” I don’t think so. An invasion means purposeful aggression – like Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 or the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066. But the vast majority of all the refugees fleeing Syria and other places in the world don’t want to leave home. They’re forced to escape. And they’re making treacherous journeys, as you know from the news.

The unfolding humanitarian crisis in Europe is driven by people trying to escape civil war in Syria and Iraq. Words can scarcely do justice to the scale of the crisis. They are simply people looking for a safe place to call home. Let us not forget that Jesus and his parents migrated to Egypt to escape Herod's infanticide. Remember too that Moses and the Israelites were delivered from Egyptian tyranny into the promised land – all were forced to move.

Are there bad actors trying to take advantage of these huge movements of persons across borders and failed States? Yes, there is always that element. But if we let fear of relatively small numbers of criminals dictate immigration & refugee policies, we may be inhumane toward the vast majority of migrants and refugees. The key question is, “Will we show compassion, or will we turn-away out of fear?”

There are many immigration and refugee issues here in the United States:

- Should we provide for comprehensive immigration reform to enable an estimated 11 million undocumented persons to enjoy secure legal status without the threat of deportation?
- Should we better secure our borders? How, in this age of globalization?
- Should we eliminate birth-right citizenship?
- Should we admit greater numbers of immigrants with special skills?
- Should we raise the number of refugees we resettle from about 70k per year to 100k per year in the next two years, with perhaps a separate program on resettling Syrians? (I believe we can and should do this, and it’s been proposed by the current administration)

Opponents of immigrant and refugee arrivals in the United States most often have two (2) basic reasons:

1. Immigrants and refugees, especially those from Muslim countries, pose a security threat and may be planning terrorist activities within the U.S.;

2. Immigrants and refugees come primarily to take advantage of Federal public benefit programs.

I believe these arguments are unfounded.

First, the record of the U.S. refugee resettlement program does not support fears of security threats. The United States has resettled about 784k refugees since Sept 11 2001. To date, only two (2) have been arrested for planning terrorist activities, and they were not planning an attack on the U.S. They were plotting to send money and arms to Iraq, and following a skillful investigation and prosecution, were sentenced to life and 40 years in prison, respectively. So the record of U.S. refugee resettlement over the last 15 years since 9/11 is cause, in the words of a recent report by the Migration Policy Institute, “not for complacency, but for confidence.” I myself was a victim and survivor of the terrorist attack at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi in 1998 that was planned by Al-Qaida. But I do not believe we should allow the criminal acts of the few to dictate humanitarian policy.

We should also note, especially within the context of Epiphany’s focus on children, that when immigrants and refugees are not welcomed and are kept on the margins of society and discriminated against, the children of those migrants are more likely to become vulnerable to extremist and violent ideologies through on-line recruitment. This is happening in Europe and to some extent in the United States and elsewhere around the world. We should recognize that such treatment is discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, nationality, and identity. How good is it to protect refugees fleeing persecution on these and other grounds, and then have them experience similar targeting in their new homes? The parental generation usually tells the children to keep a low profile and count their blessings. After all, they escaped death in many cases when they fled their home countries. But many young people seem to sense discrimination more acutely than do their elders.

Second (regarding public benefit programs); the USG refugee resettlement program works through domestic voluntary agencies, many of them affiliated with religious organizations. While it is true that each individual refugee gets about \$950 per month for their initial 7 or 8 months in the U.S., the resettlement program insists on quick self-sufficiency. Studies have

shown that the longer these refugees remain in the U.S., the more their income and use of public benefits approximates that of U.S.-born persons.

Last year, we began to reflect on whether we might assist refugees as part of our social ministry outreach at Epiphany. And in light of the Central American unaccompanied children crisis in the U.S. and the Syrian refugee/migrant crisis in the Middle East and Europe, we decided to begin to help refugees arriving in the U.S. in some way. We're about to begin to assist refugees sponsored by a local refugee resettlement agency, World Relief – Anne Arundel. We're starting with English language tutoring. When traveling or working overseas, or even in some parts of the U.S., many of us have experienced the profound disorientation that comes when we can't read signs and don't understand a word that's being said. And so we hope this work will be a way to help refugees learn English and to integrate faster in a new land. And it is also a ministry of welcoming at the same time – one that says, “We're happy you're here. Welcome.”

So here at Epiphany, in 2015, nearly 100 years since our church was built, we're beginning some work to assist recently-arrived refugees as part of our social ministry, and, in the words of William H. Murray, “all sorts of things are occurring to help that would otherwise never have occurred.” This is the kind of help that is in keeping with Epiphany's history as a place of “home away from home” - a place where the uprooted can find roots – a place where the broken can be healed.

As we remember and honor those ordinary men and women recruited from the farms, workhouses, and schools of America and sent to fight in foreign lands, may we today at Epiphany and in America continue to pray and work for the well-being, safety, and freedom of others. That was their dream in the “war to end wars.” Home was where they wanted to be – with family & friends. So may we cherish this treasure of a church - Epiphany.

With God's help, may we continue to offer all God's children a home undiminished in its inclusiveness and solace – a church home that reaches “beyond the wood and stone” in many different ways.

Let us pray,

Oh, God, who created all peoples in your image, we thank you for the wonderful diversity of races and cultures in the world. Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship, and show us your presence in those who differ most from us, until our knowledge of your love is made perfect in our love for all your children;

Amen