

The Challenge Refugee Children Pose to Faithful Long Islanders

An October 26th, 2014 Reflection for Christians

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The public ministry of Jesus almost ended violently at its very start, when he rose to preach in his hometown synagogue and spoke boldly about God's mercy toward the people of other lands. The Christian Scriptural readings for October 26 challenge us to take the same risk.

In Luke 4:16-22, the evangelist offers a triumphant glimpse of Jesus preaching to great effect in the Nazareth synagogue, citing the prophet Isaiah, bringing glad tidings to the poor and proclaiming liberty to captives. The start of that sermon—even his startling announcement that Isaiah's prophecy was being fulfilled in their hearing—moved his hearers deeply.

“And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

Then Jesus pushed the envelope. “Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.” As if to prove his point about hometown skepticism, he preached about past instances when God's mercy extended not to the Israelites, but instead to the Gentiles, the people of other lands. This did not go over well.

“When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. But he passed through the midst of them and went away.”

Right now, we face a similar challenge: the need to speak out boldly about caring for people from other lands, the increasing numbers of children fleeing murder in their native countries and entering the United States without the benefit of papers. Happily, the Christian Scriptural readings for October 26 present a fertile starting point to raise the awareness. What follows is a reflection based on those readings.

We Christians are called to read the signs of the times through the lens of Scripture. Some Sundays, that task is difficult, when the texts seem not to have much relevance to what's happening now in the world. Today, though, we are presented with a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures that was written almost 3,500 years ago, but seems to be ripped from today's

headlines. It talks about aliens, a word that comes up a lot these days. Then there's the Gospel reading, which offers us a chance to reflect deeply on the meaning of "neighbor."

We've all been reading and watching numerous stories about the increasing number of what we're calling "unaccompanied minors" crossing the southern borders of the United States—often without proper immigration documents. One number that's out there is this: More than 66,000 unaccompanied children were apprehended at the southwest border between last October 1 and August 31. In response, right here on Long Island, a Lutheran pastor in Commack suggested that his church might provide a temporary home for some 30 to 40 of them awaiting their legal hearing and/or reunification with family members. And we all know what happened: Storms of outrage erupted in Commack, and the pastor was forced to drop the idea.

That anger is reflected elsewhere in the states where these children are landing, including New York. The politics and the policy are both complicated, and we'll get back to that briefly. But first, a much less complex commandment from today's first reading, Exodus 22:

Thus says the LORD: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry...."

The Book of Exodus records the flight of the Israelites from oppression and slavery in Egypt. They were well acquainted with the pain of being marginalized aliens, slaves in a wealthy and powerful neighboring nation, forced to meet their brick-making quota without even the benefit of straw to hold the bricks together. And God is not subtle in reminding them about those tough days—and about the way his anger will flare up if they forget their own pain and dare to inflict suffering on any alien.

Nor is today's reading the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where God makes very clear his attitude on aliens. Listen to these words from Leviticus 19:33:

You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God.

So, God does not divide aliens into categories, like documented and undocumented. For the creator, all aliens deserve love and respect. In fact, for God, there really are no aliens. We are all created equal.

Our own nation's founding generation exalted the idea of equality—even the author of the Declaration of Independence, the slave-owning Thomas Jefferson, whose philosophy of equality was loftier than his actual practice. But these days in America, we are quick to file people unequally under "A" for "alien" and "I" for illegal. We reflexively fear the remote possibility that these endangered children might somehow lower our "property values," overcrowd our schools, or incite a rise in criminality.

But we have to remember a few facts about these children. First, they're not coming here simply to raise their standard of living a notch or two. In large part, they are coming because they

fear for their lives. The largest concentration of them are coming from Honduras, which happens to be the location of San Pedro Sula, the city with the largest murder rate in the world. Drug cartels and gang warfare make every day a life-threatening experience.

So they do what they have to do in order to escape the danger. They come here, to be reunited with parents they haven't seen in years. Nationally, 75% of these children are being reunited with relatives. The parents have been here, working to earn enough money to make life easier for the children they left behind. They have been suffering the pain of separation from their children, and the children have been feeling the loss of their parents. But the reunion can be painful, too. Living again with your parents after years of separation can be awkward and dislocating—especially when the reunion is complicated by the noisy furor that their arrival has caused in communities like ours.

As difficult as the reunion can be, the situation can be even worse for children who arrive here without family members to receive them. That raises the question of where they can be sheltered, as it did in Commack. It leaves them for too long in prison-like congregate facilities where none of us would want to see children housed. And they face complex court hearings over whether they are truly refugees, or whether they should be deported back to the murderous streets of Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico.

In those streets, they face gang members and drug dealers who supply the steady demand for drugs right here in America. In too many ways to enumerate, from drug abuse here to faulty government policies, we in America are complicit in the conditions south of the border that lead these young people to start on a perilous journey away from the only home they know. Yes, many are coming here illegally, in part because our legal system of immigration is so broken and slow that it can't respond to emergencies like the ones these children face. But their illegality is civil, not criminal—not very different from running a red light or fudging on our tax return.

But we don't need to drill down into those political complexities. What we are called to do is to probe the depths of our own hearts, to examine our consciences, to decide whether we are allowing words like “property values” and “illegal” to obscure the very clear and unambiguous command to treat strangers with the same love we reserve for our own children.

In today's Gospel reading, from Matthew 22, Jesus also makes the obligation obvious, in answer to a question about the greatest commandment, a question designed to trip him up:

You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.

For Jesus, the definition of neighbor is far broader than our own. If we are defining that word narrowly, excluding people like these children, we are clearly not obeying his command—and the Torah's unequivocal mandate of care for the alien.

To sum up, as we form our own attitudes toward the current immigration crisis, those two readings provide us with guidance far clearer and more trustworthy than the overheated fear-of-

the-other rhetoric we keep reading and watching in the news. So, let's take those texts home with us and inscribe them on our hearts. And let all the people say: Amen.