

A young mother clutches her child as she and her husband pack quietly in the middle of the night. They can't take much, only what they can carry with them. Once they've gathered what they need, they sneak out under the cover of night. Fleeing an oppressive government and death, they don't even tell family or friends where they are going. They flee for their own safety and for the safety of their young child. They grieve for those left behind. Though they hope to leave danger behind them; the journey itself promises to be treacherous. They have limited possessions and limited food. Can you imagine the questions they're asking? What will they eat? Will they find water? Can they avoid the people that are seeking to harm them? Can they keep the baby quiet as they hide and run? And the questions and the dangers are not over when they arrive at their destination—a new language and new customs. Will the people they meet there be friendly or hostile? How will they raise their child so far from family and community? Can they ever return home?

Sometimes we jump from the Christmas story with the angels and the shepherds and the wise men and the star, to Jesus's ministry, miracles and parables. But when we make this leap and jump over Matthew 2, we miss something important about Jesus' life—Jesus was an immigrant and a refugee. Jesus was an immigrant and a refugee. He and his family were forced to flee their home, to leave their family and community behind because of an oppressive government that threatened to kill their child. And so they fled, seeking a new home in a far away place where people spoke a different language and had different customs.

And this Gospel reading is really not that different from the experiences of many refugees and immigrants today. This weekend we are participating in Refugee Sunday, which Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services describes as “an opportunity to learn more about global refugees, pray for people that are forced to leave their homes, and celebrate our refugee neighbors.” Right here in Colorado we have refugees who have fled the war in Somalia only to face terrible conditions in a refugee camp in Kenya as they wait, sometimes for 20 years for refugee status and permission to enter the United States, or another host country. There are students in our high schools who have families that came to the United States on temporary work visas from Mexico or Honduras. Fearing the drug and gang violence in their home cities, these families over stayed their visas in order to give their children a chance at survival and an education. They cannot return to their homes even when parents or loved ones pass away and they live in fear of what will happen to them, or their children, if they are ever caught. There are refugees from Burma who lost parents and young children on the dangerous trek across their country, hoping to make it to Thailand and be resettled in the United States. The U.S. has become home to many refugees and immigrants.

Refugee/immigration Statistics from the Pew Research Center:

- In 2015, the U.S. foreign born population reached 43.2 million, 13.4% of the population. Most of these immigrants are from Mexico and South and East Asia.
- Last year the United States admitted almost 90 thousand refugees, that is filling up every seat in Sports Authority field plus another couple thousand, most of them from the Congo, Syria, and Burma.
- There were 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. in 2015, making up 5% of the U.S. labor force.

Maybe these statistics are exciting to you and you find joy in the diversity immigrants bring to our communities. But maybe these statistics are concerning to you, maybe they even make you feel afraid. You are not alone, over half of the U.S. public has some degree of concern about welcoming refugees. As humans, we sometimes have a hard time welcoming people that are different than us. It seems to be an easy tendency to distrust someone who is different than the people we work with, our neighbors, or the people we sit next to in church every weekend. But God, in God's wisdom, knew this about us as people and so God included some provisions in the law to make sure that ancient Israelites saw more than just a stranger in the refugee or the immigrant.

In our reading from Leviticus this morning, God instructs the people of Israel to care for the alien or the immigrant among them. This command is actually unique to Israelite law. Other nations around Israel had law codes, just like they did. And also like Israel these other nations often had laws providing protections for widows, orphans, and the poor, the most vulnerable people in society. But unique to Israel's laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy are commands to specifically care for the immigrant. And the law even provides a reason for showing this care and protection for the immigrant or the refugee—Israelites are to show special care to the immigrant because they were slaves in Egypt. Israel is to care for the migrant, because they are migrants too. The ancient Israelites had more in common with the alien than they may have recognized.

And though we were not slaves in Egypt, we have things in common with our refugee and immigrant neighbors. In fact, unless you are Native American, all of us are the products of immigration somewhere in our family history. Especially as Lutherans, we are members of a Church that came to the United States because of immigrants. Beyond immigrant ancestry, if we look closely, we will also find that our refugee and immigrant neighbors are not so different from us. After graduation from college in Greeley, my husband Andy and I wanted to get to know and to serve members of the refugee community. So we intentionally found an apartment complex where many refugees in Greeley lived and we moved in to the neighborhood. At first the differences between us and our refugee neighbors were overwhelming. They ate incredibly different foods with spices that we had never heard of. When they invited us to eat with them, we ate meals on the floor and often ate with our hands. They spoke a different language and wore different clothes. But as Andy and I learned our new neighbors' customs and habits, we found that we were far more alike than we originally supposed.

I sat with Ah Winn in his basement apartment. His kids watched a cartoon on their TV. He explained to me that in Burma, he would make some money sometimes, but because he was Muslim, the police could come and put him in jail anytime. And all the money he made from working that day would go to bribing the police to let him out of jail so he could work again the next day. He told me he didn't have enough money to send his kids to school, to get his wife the medicines she needed, or even enough to feed his family. He said he was so grateful to God for bringing him to the United States. Here he had enough to feed his family, his wife had access to health care, his kids went to school, and sometimes he could even take his kids to do something fun like a movie or swimming at the local pool.

And it wasn't just Ah Winn and his family, most of the refugee families we got to know cared deeply for their kids, just like we do. In fact, the best way to show the adults that you

cared about them was to spend time with their kids—helping them with their homework, driving them to church, shooting marbles, or a favorite pastime: playing soccer on roller blades in the apartment parking lot, though Andy and I were exempt from having to roller blade while we played. The parents wanted job opportunities that had enough income to provide for their families. They wanted their kids to be safe and go to school. They wanted to be able to take their loved ones to the doctor when they got sick. They celebrated at birthday parties and mourned together at funerals, a lot like we do. In reality, our refugee and immigrant neighbors were a lot like us.

And the apostle Paul will take this reality another step further. In Ephesians 2, Paul writes that we are not just similar people but that, because of Christ, very different people are now one people. This was an issue that plagued the early church—could non-Jewish people be accepted into the church or was this Christianity thing a Jewish movement. Incorporating different ethnicities, languages, and cultures into the early church was as much of a challenge for them as it is for us today—but Christ brings peace in the midst of hostility and makes us all one people—the people of God, members of God’s household, children of God.

This is all lovely and poetic, but what on earth does this even mean? Being children of God makes us sisters and brothers regardless of language, skin color or cultural practices. And when our brothers or sisters face hardship, we are invited to help and care for them through giving, prayer, and service.

When Andy and I moved into low-income housing to live among the refugees, we expected to serve and love others. We were able to help some of our refugee neighbors do things like navigate the complexities of social services, drive them to and from doctor’s appointments, or help make phone calls. An after school program got started in our neighborhood and we and several other volunteers helped to tutor refugee students. These activities were great, but the beauty of being one people, of all being children of God, is that everyone is in need in some way and everyone has something to offer—even immigrants and refugees.

In our new neighborhood, Andy and I knew very few people, and the refugees offered community. They were always inviting us to birthday parties or just over for lunch on a Sunday afternoon. Many of the refugee women in our neighborhood became convinced that I didn’t really know how to cook because Andy was too skinny and they’d heard a true rumor that he packed his own lunches for work everyday. So every time they saw me crossing the parking lot or in the apartment courtyard, the moms would come out with Tupperware stuffed full of rice and chicken for Andy. This care went far beyond providing food—they were ensuring that Andy and I had the community care and support that they offered one another. When a big cultural festival was coming up, some of the women made traditional outfits for Andy and I, so we would fit in with everyone else, and Ah Winn even helped to take care of our cars.

But more than just providing food and community, our immigrant and refugee brothers and sisters have other gifts to offer our communities and our churches. They understand community and radical generosity in a way that is often desperately needed in our American culture today. They share what they have, even when it’s not very much. They look after one another, always willing to give a ride or translate or have a cousin stay with them. When someone or a family is in trouble they often know exactly what is needed. Naju is a Burmese pastor in Greeley. She is so in touch with all of the things that are going on in her community,

she can stand and pray for 10 minutes for each family in her community and their specific needs and thanksgivings. Naju and many of the refugees know their community so well they don't need to ask how they can pray or what they can do, they already know. For them, members of their community and their needs are never an inconvenience but an opportunity to serve generously.

Generosity took on a new meaning for me as I attended a primarily refugee congregation. Every week they set up an offering basket in the back, and week after week, I watched as families that I knew were relying on food stamps and government assistance to make ends meet put a few dollars in the box. Refugees and immigrants have a lot to offer and teach our churches and communities.

This is a radical view of unity—where groups that our culture says could never get along not only tolerate one another, but seek to care, serve, and learn from one another. Paul makes it clear in our reading from Ephesians this morning, that this unity is not possible through our own efforts. Israel's history is full of stories of them failing to care for the immigrant the way that God had commanded them, and we recognize how difficult this is for us in our time today. Just last week there were competing protests throughout the United States about welcoming or excluding immigrants from Muslim majority countries. Clearly, we are not going to get to a place of radical unity all on our own.

And Paul writes, that is why we need God. Ephesians tells us that it is through Christ's work on the cross that we are restored not only to God but also to one another. He writes that Jesus destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. In the Jewish temple during Jesus's time there was a wall that divided the areas where the Jewish people could worship and the area where the Gentiles worshiped, further from the arc of the covenant and the presence of God. Because of Jesus, this wall is torn down and Jews and Gentiles, men and women, citizens and immigrants, English speakers and Spanish speakers, worship God together. And it is the Holy Spirit at work in the first century church and in us that unites us in the worship of God and builds us into one body in which we love, learn from, and serve one another.

Throughout Scripture, God cares for the immigrant, the sojourner, the refugee, and through the incarnation Jesus even experiences their plight himself. We are invited to reflect God's care for the newest members of our communities as they adjust to a new language, a new culture, and a new home. But because of the Holy Spirit's power to bring unity and peace, to bind together the children of God, we can recognize the gifts that our immigrant and refugee neighbors bring to our churches and communities. We can pay attention and celebrate all of the ways the Holy Spirit is empowering diverse people with diverse experiences from all over the world to use their gifts and talents to build together the household of God.