

For Future Generations: Refuge

TEXT: Leviticus 19:33-34; Luke 10:25-37

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on October 20, 2024

My Aunt Judy has always been an adventuresome traveler, which is how she ended up visiting a commune in one of the Soviet Bloc countries back in 1971. While she was there, she met a twelve-year-old boy, who I'll call Boris. Since Boris was the same age as I was, she decided that the two of us should be pen pals. And so, it began.

For you youngsters, there was no internet in 1971. It usually took 2-3 weeks for a letter from Boris to reach me and vice versa. But we kept it up, telling each other about our very different lives and worlds. He would ask me for things that were hard for him to get and would send me hand-crafted items from his mother in return. And the years ticked by, letter by letter; package by package.

Boris had a sister who had married a Canadian and was therefore allowed to emigrate to Toronto. The law of his country at the time said that if you had a family member who had legally emigrated to another country, you had to be allowed a visa to visit. Without that, visas outside the Soviet Bloc were nearly impossible to get. And so early in 1979, as I was finishing my junior year in college, I got word that Boris had a visa to visit his sister in Toronto and that he would like to come to the United States and visit me and my family.

The time of his visit was the time my family was already planning a road trip to deposit my brother in Kentucky for his freshman year at Murray State and then winding our way up to Pennsylvania from there to drop me off at Bucknell for the start of my senior year. My parents thought that having Boris come along would be a great way to show Boris a good chunk of the country. Then they would drive to Ohio and deliver him back to his sister in Toronto.

The only issue with the plan was that a visa to visit Canada is not the same as a visa to visit the United States. Boris did not have, and had no way to obtain, the latter. But it was 1979, it was the Canadian border, and we all had pale skin. We drove up in our station wagon, crossed into Canada, picked up Boris, and drove right back with just a cheery wave through at the border crossing.

It was a great trip. Boris was fluent in English, but I still remember stopping at a place for breakfast in the South and the waitress asked, "Y'all want grits?" He turned to me and said, "What's a grit?" We stopped at many tourist sites, but my parents watched with some alarm as Boris bought bumper stickers that were very obviously from the United States and then stuck them on the outside of his luggage.

They reminded Boris that he was not really supposed to be here and that advertising the places he visited with stickers on his luggage could land him in trouble on his return. But Boris lived in a bubble. Although he had never joined the Party that ruled his country, he had also never run afoul of them.

A university student by then himself, he was steadfast in his belief that his sticker travelogue would be no issue at all. He did not believe us when we told him about repression in his home country. We finished the trip and he was safely returned to his sister, again with no border issues, and from there flew home.

Our letters were infrequent after that; but then things were also difficult. My father died the following year and Boris married. In the fall of 1981, a few months after my own wedding, I was at my mother's house for dinner and the phone rang. I answered; it was Boris. He was at the train station in Philadelphia with his wife and wanted to know if they could come and live with us.

When Boris returned from his rogue visit to the US, he was not hassled at the border. But intimidation began at the university where he was studying. He had come here during a period of high inflation, especially in gas prices. When one of his professors said that it was so bad in the United States that women were turning to prostitution to pay for gas, Boris raised his hand to call out the lie. And he continued to do that with the

many pieces of propaganda against the US he encountered. But he believed that he would be free to speak his mind and tell the truth at home. He was wrong about that.

Once he began contradicting the lies he heard, he was increasingly pressured to join the Party, with threats to withhold his graduation if he didn't comply. They approached his girlfriend, also at the university, and told her that if she knew what was good for her, she should end her relationship with Boris.

To make a long story a bit shorter, they both managed to graduate, got married, sold their house and all they had and bought round-trip tickets to visit Boris' sister, never intending to use the return leg of the ticket. Then they went into hiding until it was time for the flight.

Boris' sister let them live with her in Toronto for a time and then arranged for them to get a work visa for a resort in the Pocono's that was owned by a relative. When Boris called me, they had been working at the resort for some time, but were treated like slaves. Little to no pay, no real way to support themselves. Boris told me that his wife had already passed out several times from hunger. His sister would not take them back and they feared what awaited if they returned to their home country. And so, he called his pen pal and the family he had met just two years prior. Can we live with you?

I told him, "Hang on...I'll go ask." By midnight, we had turned part of the living room into a bedroom and were at the Providence train station when Boris and his wife arrived. They lived with my mother for years. She fought for them to get political asylum, advocating for them with immigration officials at every level of government, going all the way up to the office of US Senator Claiborne Pell to overcome the many, many obstacles.

She then helped them get Green cards, saw them both through getting Masters' degrees at Brown University, and eventually was there to celebrate their naturalization ceremony as new citizens of the United States. Their two children grew up calling my mother "Grandma." They eventually moved out of state; Boris became an insurance underwriter and his wife found a career in finance. Neither could visit their families or introduce the grandchildren until the breakup of the Soviet Union and the independence of their home country.

So, when people scream "Mass Deportation Now!" and spread fear-inducing and hateful lies about those who come to our borders seeking refuge, I have a view.

The Bible also has a view. In Leviticus 19:18 we find one of the two commandments that Jesus ties together and calls the Great Commandment. It reads, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." That is the passage that a lawyer is discussing with Jesus in Luke 10 as he tries hard to parse who, exactly, counts as a neighbor.

We'll get back to that in a moment, but the lawyer—who provided his own answer to Jesus and so clearly knew that chapter of Leviticus—could have answered his own question about who counts as a neighbor also, if he just stayed with Leviticus 19.

Here again are verses 33-34 of that same chapter: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

An interesting sidebar on those verses is that the word for "alien" there is simply the word for a stranger or foreigner, specifically one with no rights in the country where they find themselves. The King James uses the word "stranger" in those passages and it's a fascinating glimpse into the world of Bible translations to see translations from centuries later—especially those that are put together by supposedly more liberal denominations—use a word like alien, when "stranger" is a far less loaded and perfectly sound meaning of the word.

But the important part of those verses in Leviticus is the reason given for the law that foreigners living in the land should be treated as citizens. That rationale comes at the end of verse 34, "For you were aliens in the

land of Egypt.” God calls Israel to remember their own difficult history many times in the Bible. It’s the backdrop of the Ten Commandments. Remember your own experience, which was not only that they had been actually enslaved and brutally mistreated in Egypt; but the whole reason they were in Egypt to begin with was that there had been a famine in their home country and Egypt had food.

The sons of Jacob, who would later become the twelve tribes of Israel, went to Egypt and settled there because Egypt had food and they did not. They were refugees. And they stayed in Egypt for so many generations that their numbers grew to a point where a new Pharaoh saw them as a threat to his power.

The new Pharaoh made up lies about the Hebrews to scare the native Egyptians into thinking the Hebrews were a threat to them, and then—with that fear-mongering, got the people to agree to enslave the Hebrews. That’s why God had to send Moses to get them out of slavery, but they were enslaved for centuries before that happened.

So, now that the Hebrews have left Egypt and gone back to the home of their ancestors, God tells them to remember that experience. Remember that your own ancestors were starving and had to go settle in another country just to be able to eat. And remember what happened when that country turned on your people and enslaved you, even though you had lived there peacefully for generations—all because of the lies of an insecure king.

In Leviticus, God wants to be clear. You are not to be like that. You shall treat the foreigner living among with you no differently than the Israelite citizens who are your neighbors. Why? Because their story is your story, too.

In Luke 10 we’re told that a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. In this case, we’re talking about someone schooled in the law of Moses. The test question is “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus wisely turns the question back on him. As a scholar of the law, this man should be able to answer his own question; and he does. The man answers the eternal life question with, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ Jesus says, “Ding! Ding! Right answer. Do this and you will live.”

But the man is not done. We’re told he was wanting to justify himself when he asked Jesus a follow-up question, “And who is my neighbor?” We’re not told who, specifically, the man wanted to be excused from loving, but from the story Jesus tells in response we can have a pretty good idea.

That exchange is the lead-in to the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. The salient point in the parable is that Israel and Samaria shared a long border. Geographically they were neighbors, with the Samaritans living in what is today the West Bank.

They were both Semitic peoples with a similar family tree, but the disruptions from other empires who conquered both places in the first millennium BC, and some missteps by their leaders when the populations tried to come back together much later, meant that by Jesus’ day Jews and Samaritans saw each other as heretics and foreigners and would not even set foot on each other’s territory.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which is where Jesus’ parable takes place, traverses that border, with Jerusalem in Israel and Jericho in Samaria. The Samaritan, a foreigner in an unwelcoming land, finds a citizen of that hostile place in need and helps, giving his time, physical effort, and financial assistance. Before the Samaritan got there, native Israelites—both religious professionals no less—did not stop to help one of their own. Jesus tells the story and again turns the question back on his new lawyer friend. Which of the three people was a neighbor to the man in need? The lawyer again gets the question right. “The one who showed him mercy.”

There are many ways to address policies on immigration in civil government. Any of those policies that show mercy and compassion for the dire conditions driving people from one land to another are valid for a

Christian to endorse. Compassion doesn't mean giving everyone what they want, and competing interests have to be balanced.

But hate, lies, fear-mongering, violence, using desperate people for political gain, calling people "not even human," housing people in harsh, unsafe, and unsanitary conditions, Border Patrol agents destroying jugs of water left in the desert to help keep those desperate enough to take the journey from dying, and taking nursing babies from their mother's arms and separating families without a record of who is where...well... "When you have done it to the least of these, who are members of my family, you have done it unto me."

Christians do such things, but when they do, it's called sin. When they claim such actions are God's will, it's called blasphemy.

In the summer of 2017, four women volunteers who were part of a faith-based non-profit called No More Deaths were criminally charged and convicted for putting out water for migrants in the desert. There have been more such cases since. I will remind you that when white supremacist Dylan Roof shot nine Black children of God during a Bible study in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, the officers who arrested him took him to Burger King before bringing him in for booking.

Policies around immigration are not easy to manage; and it's only going to get worse as wars and a heating climate drive even more people from their homes. There's not a one of us in this room who wouldn't try to flee the conditions that almost all those appearing at our southern border are faced with at home.

And for those who take advantage of them as they flee—from the cartels who steal, kill, and traffic them along the way; to those at the border who demean and abuse them when they arrive; to those who block legislation to help solve the problem because the problem being fixed might hurt their chances at getting elected, all I can say is those folks had better hope that God is a whole lot more merciful than I am.

Solutions to the problem involve everything from trying to end the wars, violence, oppression, economic devastation, and climate disruptions that make people need to flee their homes in the first place; to balancing the real gifts and opportunities immigrants bring to our country with how many people any given area can absorb over how much time; to vetting and getting people through an understaffed legal process and more. Much of that is beyond the mandate of the church.

But, like with the climate issue last week, the thing that turns a problem which is hard to solve into an existential crisis is sin; and sin is directly in the church's wheelhouse. Rarely is the Bible so direct and clear in addressing an issue as it is in dealing with immigration. Treat the foreigner living among you as a citizen, and love the foreigner as yourself, because you were once desperate strangers living in a foreign land yourselves.

The particular relevance of this for the United States, and the hypocrisy in addressing it, is staggering. At the beginning of this month, a woman running for a state senate seat in Idaho, listened as the man she is trying to unseat denied there was any discrimination in the state. She then called out the various organized hate groups in northern Idaho as evidence that he was wrong. In response, the sitting state senator said he was sick and tired of all this BS and told the woman to "go back where she came from."

And here's the kicker. The woman is a Native American and a member of one of the federally-recognized tribes in Idaho. I don't know how long the sitting senator's family has been in the United States, but if both of them went back to where they came from, she would be in Idaho and he would be on a different continent.

The vast majority of US citizens immigrated here at some point in their family's biography. Thousands were brought here against their will, enslaved and sold to the highest bidder. And that is still going on. The Department of Justice estimates that Each year 14,500 to 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States.

We will bring in thousands as long as we can enslave them; but desperate at the border? Those who had the guts and stamina and resources to make the deadly and dangerous journey from Guatemala or Ecuador or Haiti? Those who dare to think they could contribute to our society and hope to become upstanding, tax-paying citizens in a nation they admire?

Nope. Not even those who have lived here for decades, brought here as children, and know no other country as home. Mass Deportation Now! The rhetoric now even includes calls to deport those like Boris who have become naturalized citizens, combined with praise for the Japanese internment camps in this country during WWII.

Love your neighbor. And who was the neighbor to the man wounded in the road? The one who showed him mercy. The answer to how Christians should respond in the face of the unbounded hate, lies, and violence spewed at immigrants today—especially when the vast majority of us are immigrants here ourselves—is clearly covered in Leviticus 19:33-34.

And when it seems that a scholar of the law of Moses remembers only the “love your neighbor” line in Leviticus 19:18, Jesus reminds him of the connection of love your neighbor to foreigners in our lands in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the foreigner behaves better than the natural citizens.

Which actual statistics show is also the case here. A study published by Northwestern University earlier this year looked at US Census data and crime rates over the past 150 years. US-born citizens had higher levels of crime than immigrants in every single year. And in 200 US cities where the immigrant population has grown between 1970 and 2016—in every one of those cities, the crime rate has decreased as the immigrant population has increased.

If everyone in the US who claims Christian faith made loving their neighbors the central value that Jesus claims it is, we would not have a border crisis or immigration crisis. There are enough people in government who claim to be Christians who could decide to actually follow Jesus, put self-interest aside, love their neighbors, especially the immigrants among us who arrive now as almost all of our forbears did however many years ago, and just solve the problem with charity and goodwill.

But, in addition to simply living the faith we profess, we can also support those of many faiths and no faith at all who work around the clock to push back the lies, protect the people, and try to see that they receive justice. As individuals and churches, we can and do support that work. Loving our neighbors means justice for our neighbors, and that just happens to be the name of a non-profit that we support every year.

Justice for our Neighbors, or JFON, targets the overwhelming legal hurdles that those coming into the country must face, just to have their case for asylum considered, let alone granted. Kneecapping the courts by not allowing for enough judges, attorneys, and personnel to handle the caseloads before them is just one insidious way that those who profit from an immigration crisis keep it going.

The branch of JFON in New England that we support provides free legal representation to over 150 clients in their ongoing immigration cases—a process that can take years to complete. Those that don't qualify for free representation receive consultation and advice. They point out that appearing in court without a lawyer reduces the chances of a successful outcome by up to 80%, even when the case has merit.

My mother, who was an English teacher, not a lawyer, provided that representation for Boris and his wife, and I remember her fury after every meeting with immigration officials who did all they could to thwart their case and send Boris and his wife back to almost certain imprisonment. She didn't live to know about JFON, but she would have gladly ponied up for every fundraiser and maybe even volunteered for them herself in some capacity.

Each February we hold a special fundraiser for JFON with our Chili Cook-off, but your regular donations to our operating budget also support them. As part of the United Methodist Church, we pay into a

denominational fund that supports a wide variety of missional work, some of which stays in New England and some of which goes across the country and world.

In 2025, our Mission Shares, which is what that denominational line item in our budget is called, will be \$54,854. Justice for Our Neighbors, which was created in 1999 by UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, gets one of the largest percentages of our Mission Shares. The policy work surrounding immigration is complex. The Christian response to a humanitarian crisis is not. Love your neighbor. Period. “Do this, and you will live,” said Jesus. Amen.