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Sunday Sermon: “No Room in the Inn”

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Welcoming the immigrant and the refugee is really about hospitality. The culture of Middle East has always been one that values hospitality. The two biblical stories that exemplify this is no room in the Inn from the Christmas story, and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities along the Dead Sea. The biblical story has some historic truth but is mostly a myth to exemplify hospitality. There was probably an earthquake in the area in early biblical times that eventually lit a layer of oil in the shale which burned when the cities were destroyed, thus it was destroyed in fire and brimstone. Archaeologists have found charred remains in a layer that would approximate the age depicted in the Hebrew Bible. The writers use that event to tell the story of Lot and the three strangers. In Islam and in Bedouin culture, it is required that even an enemy must be given shelter and care for some days. So the greater sin and the real lesson of Sodom and Gomorrah was not the crime against nature, but the crime against hospitality that was important. In Arabic it is closely linked to Sharif, their word for honor, and from which sharia law emanates. One biblical scholar put it this way, “Reading the story of Sodom as being about homosexuality is like reading the story of an ax murderer as being about an ax.” Looking at the hospitality that the Arab world is offering to Syrian refugees is an example of Sharif. Currently refugee camps in Turkey care for 2.2 million, in Lebanon 1.2 million, in Jordan 1.4 million, and in Saudi Arabia 2.5 million. By comparisons our offer of 10,000 for a year is minuscule, given Canada has offered a place for 25,000 before the end of this month.

In the Christmas story, Mary and Joseph seek refuge in an inn, but are offered a place with the animals. Our modern culture, view this negatively, but two millennia ago this was hospitality, and besides the stable with clean hay was probably more acceptable than the inn. There is a story about a church that had the Christmas pageant every year as we do. And one of the traditions of this church was that they made a spot for every child in the church school. When they had a large church school the characters in the Christmas story would grow in numbers. The wise men would always have many servants. Now this particular year the

church had as one of their students a child that was developmentally challenged, and that year they didn't have a vast number of children in the past available for the pageant. So they offered this boy the job of the innkeeper. He practiced his line for weeks. "There is no room in the inn, but you can stay in the stable." The Sunday morning of the pageant all the parents arrived with their angel costumes, and all the bathrobes that you could possibly want for the rest of the cast. The play began and Mary and Joseph begin the long track from the back of the church up to the front where they created a manger scene. So Mary with a pillow wrapped around her stomach under her bathrobe and Joseph arrived at the Inn, and the innkeeper stepped up to the door. When asked about a room, the innkeeper replied, "no room, no room." And Mary and Joseph started to walk away when the innkeeper came running after them and said, but you can have my room. You can have my room. Hospitality to strangers is really our natural condition. Sometimes I feel that many times the people with the least resources can be the most generous especially in spirit.

Yesterday I went to a presentation on national security and specifically about accepting refugees into the US presented by our Congressional Representative Larson. He talked for about an hour about security and gun legislation. In the question period that followed, the first person ranted on about the Koran saying that you spent three hours going through and finding things that indicated that Muslim people are violent. If she had spent the same time cherry-picking passages from the Hebrew Bible she could've come to the same conclusion. Her analysis and rhetoric was vile, and she hadn't factored anything into our discussion of what the congressman told us. This is the primary reason I choose to use the Sodom and Gomorrah reference. I understand that the same xenophobia and Islamophobia could affect the ridiculous things we are hearing our elected officials saying in the media. The reaction is of course fear, but it was fear that was misplaced. The incident in San Bernadino was significant, 14 people lost their lives in an incident that was terrorism. But this year so far 462 people have died in the 355 mass shootings in 47 states. The same time there have been 28 gun fatalities in Hartford. The congressman pointed out that though we have a no-fly list, these same people are permitted to purchase firearms. Reactions of fear have also resulted in a surge purchasing firearms. Last Saturday's rally at the Capitol and other statements of support are important if we want to be a state in our country that shows compassion. The counter rally of about 25 people on the other side of the capital surrounded themselves with American flags and I suspect the same ideology as the

questioner at the congressman's town meeting. We need to be speaking truth to fear.

Truth alone cannot combat the emotional tie that fear produces. Some of our most horrendous acts as Americans have been reacting to fear. The patriot act and the creation of Homeland security are two such reactions to fear. I certainly don't feel any much safer when I take my shoes off going through an airport, but it was advantageous to the sock manufacturers of the United States. Fear reactions work on our primordial psyche, the part of us that produces fight or flight reactions; as a more primitive reaction. Logic, truth, and compassion are a higher order response. This is why fear is so hard to contest. The governors of the 34 states that opposed Syrian refugees were not reacting from the position of logic nor understanding. This was the same reaction we saw this summer to the Ebola healthcare workers in New Jersey and Maine. These were simplistic answers to complex problems, and it explains the popular response to the real estate mogul in Iowa and New Hampshire.

This fear posturing also explains some of the reaction we hear about this country's foreign policy these last few years. Arguments and explanations that base themselves on reason and experience are a hard match for emotion and fear. For those of you who can remember trying to reason with teenagers, this is the same issue. It is also the primary tool that ISIL uses to recruit the most vulnerable into their world of carnage. How powerful this appeal must be to induce a 29-year-old mother to abandon her infant to orphan-hood and become a martyr. Now this is something to fear; an ideology that uses fear to induce psychotic action, and a castrated political system that chooses not to control firearms.

The only thing that I know is powerful enough to combat fear is universal love, the cornerstone of this church, no all religions. This must be our reaction to this resurgent fear. I believe movies like *The Good Lie* can help us move away from fear and towards love and compassion. About 35 of us watched it here on Friday, and many of us had the opportunity to watch it on HBO during the week. Seeing it, you can't be unmoved. The story is a story of the lost boys, children who escaped the genocide of the Sudan. They traveled by foot, experiencing starvation and thirst, and threats from the human as well as the animal kingdom. They endured the experience in United Nations refugee camp for up to 13 years. And then, those lucky few, who get through the screening by the United Nations and at least five departments of our government get the opportunity to come to this great nation.

This is a journey that starts with fear and ends with hope. This particular movie was based on truth; both fact and emotional truth.

What makes this story particularly engaging is that all the African characters have a direct connection with the events of the era. The characters that portray Jeremiah and Paul were lost boys who endured the brutal treatment as child soldiers. The actor that portrayed Mamere was born of a Sudanese father and a Ugandan mother and escaped after his father was killed. The actress who was Abital in the movie lost her doctor father to the war and one of her brothers to child soldiers. The director of the film had done a documentary on the lost boys previously. This is as real as Hollywood can do.

The story is real in another way. The emotions and experiences we see displayed are the encounters of all refugees. All refugees from any conflict react to fear and flee their homes. They leave that the only lives they have known to journey on paths that are unknown. This decision takes the courage few of us have ever had to face. How much easier are those decisions where we latch onto something we know. But those decisions that involve leaving the known, no matter how safe and comforting, for the unknown takes a degree of determination that few of us will ever face. How horrific must be the consequences of staying to decide to leave. Certainly most refugees have been traumatized, and therefore telling their story can be agonizing, in the same way our war veterans can't tell their stories. Then all refugees experience a UN refugee camp for at least two years. How many make the journey to these camps in search of hope and find despair in poor housing, clothing, and food. This part of the journey involves a different kind of courage; the courage to discover hope in depression. The last part of this journey for those who get to leave the camps is another journey into the unknown, into a culture that simultaneously accepts them and rejects them. Even the most empathetic and compassionate among us cannot fully understand their journey.

So at the end of the journey if we meet and hopefully sponsor a refugee family what can we expect. I expect these people to be broken, determined, and strong. I expect this refugee family to make a positive impact on my country and community. I expect this refugee family to feel the blessing of being an American in a way that few of us could. I expect this refugee family to live in our hearts for the remainder of our lives.

I am reminded of a story told by Loren Eiseley about walking along a Pacific beach and seeing, miles away down the sand, what appears to be someone doing a movement that looked like ballet. The person would drop to their knees facing toward the land and pick something and then like a discus thrower whirl toward the sea. As Eiseley walked closer he noticed that the man was picking up single starfish from a beach that was littered with thousands and was throwing them into the surf. He was also struck by the fruitlessness of his effort and expressed to the thrower when he got close to him, "that he could never make a difference to these thousand dying creatures." The thrower looked at him and held up one starfish and stated, "I can make a difference with this one." May we do likewise.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world, Amen.