

“Refugee Crisis: How Shall We Respond?”
Deuteronomy 10:14-21; Luke 10:25-37; James 1:23-25
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Intro—When Rev Sue gave me this date she graciously allowed me to determine what I would be speak about. I had no idea at that August meeting that I would be talking to you about the global refugee crisis and how we should respond. But as I have studied with you and worshiped with you and prayed with you for the last couple of months, I have noticed that this concern is on many hearts. We have been having conversations about it. We have lamented this suffering. We have wondered in exasperation, what to do. We must begin to discern a response.

Will you please join me in a moment of silence for all of the victims of terror and violence which are tied up in this global crisis – those in the news and those missed by the media? **Lord, we grieve with you- we know this is not your will being done on Earth. Today we ask you to show us your will, Lord, show us how to respond. Amen**

I suspect that many of us have encountered the refugee crisis in some way: Perhaps you have seen a video on the news or Facebook that defined the conditions from which refugees are fleeing. Maybe you have looked into the photographed eyes of a desperate man or woman clutching an injured child like this one.

We have heard about the numbers as depicted in this image of Damascus as of Syrians lineup for UN provided food. What is it like to be one of those faces? To live in a camp like this one in Hungary, to walk, to wait, to risk? The numbers are overwhelming. The images are often horrifying. The suffering is heartbreaking. But we must remember that the refugees are also people, people who should be under God’s care.

And now we must add the events in France on Friday night – ISIS is claiming responsibility for the terror attacks which killed at least 129 people and injured more than 350. For some victims it is a shocking and new occurrence of violence – for others it is the terror they know all too well. It is the same violence which the refugees fled.

“Many fear the backlash of Islamophobia. French police officials found a Syrian passport at the scene of an attack that they believed belonged to an assailant. But because of the refugee crisis, fake Syrian passports are now prevalent and easy to obtain. Whether or not the passport is authentic, news of its discovery promised to help to fan refugee fears — which may have been the intent of the man who brought it to the scene.” (As reported by BBC news)

President Obama recognized the significance of these events in his statement: “This is an attack not just on Paris,” he said, “it’s an attack not just on the people of France, but this is an attack on all of humanity and the universal values that we share.” Many Muslims agree and globally are condemning Islamophobia by tweeting support for Paris with the hashtag “I Am A Muslim.” Their messages are: “I am a #Muslim and I am not terrorist. I believe in humanity. I believe in peace. My Islam taught it! I extremely condemn #ParisAttacks.” “My name is Maz Hussain Raja. I am a Muslim. I condemn the #ParisAttack. Over 1.5 billion Muslims do. Please remember this.” We must remember this and remember our own values. We must not allow terrorists to define our world, relationships, and reality with fear.

I believe that the sympathy we feel for the victims of these attacks and for the refugees is tied to our relationship with a God of LOVE in whom we know ourselves. These three scripture passages have to do with identity. Who are the people of God? What do God’s people look like? How do they act? What do they believe? How do they live and treat others as a result of their relationship with God. As a reflection of their relationship with God?

We begin in the desert with the original Jewish mother laying on a major guilt trip. God has already done some pretty impressive things for the people in Egypt. There can't possibly be any question about how much cares for these people. God claims these people. "He's your God" it says, "hold tight to Him." Accept this identity. Now notice, mixed in here is a promise that God cares for orphans and widows and foreigners...how? God's people, because of that identity, who they are, and because of who their God is- a rescuing loving, oppression hating God – "**must** treat foreigners with the same loving care." You see, belonging to God, being in relationship with God, being a man or a woman of God makes acting with God's same love and care a necessary and natural result of that identity.

According to the wisdom of the Rabbi Schneerson, known to many as the Rebbe and most influential rabbi in modern history: "at the moment that we do not recognize God in our neighbor, whoever that neighbor may be, we are forced to draw the conclusion that we know neither ourselves nor, more shatteringly, God. If I cannot see God in you, then there is not something wrong with you but something wrong with me and with my relationship to God. (as quoted by Philip L. Culbertson)

And this failure to see- to recognize a need for action is part of the Religion Scholar's question to Jesus. The need to define neighbor is a need to limit God's love. To those that are like me? To those I am comfortable with or I deem worthy? Certainly, failure to show God's love seen in the holy men who pass by the suffering man in the road demonstrates their questionable ability to identify themselves by relationship with God. Even when forced to imagine an outsider, an enemy, a Samaritan showing this kinds of love, the religion scholar cannot deny that he is the one defined by God- in all his heart mind and strength. Jesus did not analyze the suffering of the injured man. The Samaritan was not responding to this man because it suited his politics, it may have in fact conflicted with his political views considering the tension between Jews and Samaritans. We are not explicitly told that the man is Jewish, probably, because of the context and the way he was traveling but he is simply names as a man- that is enough. Once again, living action, loving like God, is what defines a person of God in right relationship with their creator.

Finally, the simile found in James reminds us of how closely our personal identities are tied to God as Christians. "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." Our very image- our face- ourselves – forgotten if we don't "do."

This text reminds me of the lyrics written by Mike Weaver:

If I told you my story

You would hear Hope that wouldn't let go

And if I told you my story

You would hear Love that never gave up

And if I told you my story

You would hear Life, but it wasn't mine

If I should speak then let it be

Of the grace that is greater than all my sin

Of when justice was served and where mercy wins

Of the kindness of Jesus that draws me in

Oh to tell you my story is to tell of Him

When we are in relationship with God, knowing ourselves is knowing Christ in us. Our identity is so tied to God's will that to deny the teaching of scripture, to ignore the will of God, is to deny our own self and everything we know to be true about who we are as Christians- made, claimed, loved, saved, and sustained by God. It's just foolish and it does not make sense to be a person of God who is not a person of God- one who loves, one who does, and is blessed. How does this apply to Salem and the Refugee crisis?

Well, let me answer that with a story: The organization, Act for Peace, conducted a social experiment on a busy street filled with commuters in Australia. It begins with a man attempting to distribute literature while wearing a sign that reads "refugees are scum." This incites angry reactions and interaction: dirty looks, disapproving comments, questions, challenges, and one pedestrian even rips the sign off of the demonstrator to the sound of applause from others nearby. The experiment continues with the same man on the same street, again with flyers in hand but having switched his placard to say: "Help the refugees." Now no one will make eye contact, people rush past without comment, response, or interest. He became invisible. The organization concludes that people care about refugees...but challenges us by asking do you care enough to act?

I know you care- that's why I am speaking about this today. The heart of God in us responds to this suffering. And we want to act, in authentic expression as people of God. So Can I tell you how we should respond? Here is where I tell you- yes and no...

Yes- What I am sure of, is that we can't do nothing. So we struggle with the question work to discern an answer together. Today I am calling you to three ways that you can begin to act.

There are three ways every person of faith can act:

1. **PRAY:** Pray for the children and their families, their countries and those responding to their needs. Pray for discernment as we all consider how God is calling Salem UMC to respond to the needs of refugees. Use this prayer and find more resources on the table in the hallway.
2. **REFLECT:** Learn and seek to understand the underlying issues and the personal stories of these refugees and migrants. Visit the resource table in the hallway to collect biblical information and material to aid your discernment.
3. **COMPASSION:** Engage in acts of compassion

It is times like these that we feel the strength of being a global church. Through the united Methodist church we are connected to many different countries. We are able to reach out through the arm of UMCOR= the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Now we are going to share an UMCOR video from Messetetten, Germany.

You can donate to this project by placing a contribution in the basket passed during the offering today, marking your contribution for refugees and placing it in the offering plate in future weeks, or by visiting umcor.org. You can this information and the specific goals of the Global Refugee/Migration Crisis Project on your bulletin insert.

Another example of action which has inspired me is happening in place not too far from us. Last June in Lancaster, PA the first Syrian family- A mother, father and four children- arrived through a resettlement program coordinated by Church World Service. Lancaster churches are forming welcome teams to help refugees get settled. Forest Hills Mennonite church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), interfaith networks worked to transform a house into a home. They began by cleaning and furnishing the place, they made-up the beds, they brought groceries, dishes, a hot meal for the first night, a stockpile of toys and placed a box of candy on each child's bed. The team assists the family for about six months. They welcome the family, help them enroll in English classes, provide tutoring, show them where grocery stores are, help them get library cards and show them how to use them, show families how to handle bills or health insurance. Most importantly, they provide friendship.

The community is united by its service as denominations and bodies of faith, and local employers and agencies in the community come together in a spirit of welcome. The welcome will continue as more families

are placed in Lancaster. First United Methodist Church in Lancaster resettled two Iraqi families five years ago and assisted them in the process of integration. With the understanding that more refugee families need congregations to accompany them, they are rebuilding their Welcome Team and hope to welcome a new family in 2016.

This cartoon was done by *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist Joann Sfar on Friday night in response to social media posts about prayer. It says, "Friends from the whole world, thank you for #prayforParis, but we don't need more religion! Our faith goes to music, kisses, life, champagne and joy, # Paris is about Life." Surely, for some, terrorists and extremists have become the loudest voice and the strongest action of religion, or theists, or those who believe in God. This cannot be our representation. It is not our Christian identity. SO, as people of God, how will we start representing ourselves?

For our reflection time today I want to share a video and song which inspires me. It is a catchy song by the contemporary Christian artist Mathew West called "Do Something." I hope that it gets stuck in your head and then stuck in your heart. I know that it forces me to have a different perspective and as I view the world around me.