

Welcoming the Stranger

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On Friday, the International Holocaust Day of remembrance, the entire world paused to remember those who were murdered during the Nazi regime in World War II in Germany and Eastern Europe.

At the Nuremberg trials that followed the end of World War II, many of the war criminals involved in the Holocaust were charged with Crimes against Humanity. The global community - including the United States of America - piled the blame on Germany.

They blamed Hitler, of course, and the Nazi party, but also the German people for not speaking out against a fascist government that put such horrendous plans into action.

They blamed German Christians for not standing up for a gospel that says all human life matters and forbids murder and genocide.

They blamed ordinary people for going along with the plan and not fighting back. And they vowed as a world community to never let this happen again.

But there was more culpability. It wasn't just Germany's fault. The whole world was to blame. Even our own country contributed to this catastrophic loss of life.

You see, as Germany began to tighten its restrictions of freedoms for its Jewish citizens, many tried to escape. As they lost basic rights, their houses and businesses, and the freedom to thrive and prosper, some Jewish families made the heart-wrenching decision to leave their homes and start over. Many fled Germany and sought asylum elsewhere. Some of them looked to the US for visas and the chance to start over in the so called land of opportunity.

But fearing an influx of foreigners during war time, and concerned that these German Jews might be Nazi spies, most people seeking entrance into the United States were refused entrance. Most notably, in June 1939, the German ocean liner *St. Louis* and its 937 passengers, almost all Jewish, were turned away from the port of Miami, forcing the ship to return to Europe. Heartbreakingly, more than a quarter of those people died in the Holocaust.¹

Among those who sought refuge in America were Otto Frank and his family, including his wife Edith, and teenaged daughters Margot and Anne.² Mr. Frank desperately tried to get his family to America. When he was out of other options he even reached out to his friend, Nathan Straus Jr., the son of the Macy department store founder.

¹ Daniel A. Gross (2015) "The U.S. Government Turned Away Thousands of Jewish Refugees, Fearing That They Were Nazi Spies." *Smithsonian Magazine*. Accessed 1/28/2017 at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/us-government-turned-away-thousands-jewish-refugees-fearing-they-were-nazi-spies-180957324/>

² Elahe Izadi (2015) "Anne Frank and her family were also denied entry as refugees to the U.S." *The Washington Post*. Accessed 1/28/2017 at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/24/anne-frank-and-her-family-were-also-denied-entry-as-refugees-to-the-u-s/?utm_term=.ac3f908844ed/

Straus, along with Edith's brothers who had already relocated to the United States, wrote affidavits on the Frank's behalf to the state department, imploring them to grant emergency visas to allow Frank and his family entrance into the United States. But as the Frank family filed mounds of needed paperwork, immigration rules were changing — and attitudes in the United States toward immigrants from Europe were becoming increasingly suspicious.

The American government was making it harder for foreigners to get into the country — and the Nazis were making it difficult to leave. By 1941, the United States closed its borders to people from Germany and surrounding nations, even those fleeing for their lives, leaving 300,000 people waiting for visas, including Otto, Edith, Margot and Anne.

Unable to leave, like so many of their friends and neighbors, the entire Frank family went into hiding. However, they would be discovered and end up in Nazi death camps. Edith, Margot and Anne did not survive. After he was liberated, Otto discovered a diary among a pile of papers collected from their hiding space. It had been written by his daughter Anne during their time in captivity. It was later published as *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

On Friday, while the world was remembering people like Anne Frank and mourning again the horrors of the Holocaust, the decision was made by the powers that be to issue an order that again closed our borders to refugees, people fleeing dictatorial governments and war torn countries for their very lives.

Just like during WWII when the ban on refugees was specifically targeted at Germans, Friday's order specifically banned immigrants from several Muslim nations. People who had sold everything, gathered their family, and fled for safety stepped off the airplane on Friday into a country that had promised hope and a new start, to be told that they were no longer welcome, essentially because of their religion.

At the same time, those same powers began planning to build a wall along the southern border of our country, in order to keep people from illegally crossing into the United States from Mexico.

Between the wall and the immigration ban policies, the message this week coming from Washington to the rest of the world was clear: **STRANGERS ARE NO LONGER WELCOME HERE.**

This weekend social media has published miles of opinions about what all this means and whether it is good or bad or right or wrong. But as Christians we are not called to examine these issues politically, but through the lens of faith. And from the pit of public opinion on this shift in American policy rises one question loudly and clearly: What would Jesus have us do?

What would Jesus have us do? How would Jesus respond? And how must we as followers of Jesus Christ respond to the closing of our borders and the clear mandate to turn our backs on ones who so desperately need us?

Our scripture lesson today is about a similar situation. When we read the story of Ruth, we usually focus on Ruth herself. We talk about her uncommon loyalty and the fact that she left everything she knew and loved in order to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel. We celebrate Ruth's selflessness and sacrifice, and we praise her love for and dedication to Naomi.

But sometimes overlooked in this passage is the story of Boaz.

Boaz was an upstanding, law-abiding Israelite. He knew the rules of his faith and he followed them. When he met Ruth, he knew she was a stranger, yet he opened his heart and his home to her. Boaz made sure she had plenty of grain so that she could feed herself and her mother in law. He introduced her to the other women working his fields so she might find companionship and friendship. And then, even though it was not the custom of his people to marry a foreigner, Boaz married Ruth, legitimizing her and giving her a new start, a renewed hope, and a legacy.

Ruth was, technically, an abomination. She was a Moabite and Moab was an enemy nation to Israel. The two countries competed politically and militarily. Their religions were incompatible and the Moab god was called an abomination to the Jewish faith. The people were warned to not have any relationship with the Moabites.

Boaz knew this. He understood that keeping the blood line pure was important to his people and their faith. But Boaz also knew Jewish law required him to care for the strangers amongst them. We read such laws in, for example, Leviticus 19:33-34 which reads:

When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. (CEB)

So Boaz followed his heart AND the spirit of the law. He went against popular sentiment that said nothing from Moab could be trusted, and not only did he provide Ruth with food, shelter, and kindness, but he married her, mixing bloodlines with the enemy, to give her a hope and a future.

And this decision made all the difference for Ruth and Naomi. But more than that, God also rewarded Boaz with a son—Obed. Obed would become the grandfather of King David and, of course, a Patriarch of Jesus of Nazareth. Because Boaz extended kindness to a stranger, even one who came from a distant land that was so different from his own, even one whose native religion was in contention with his own faith... because Boaz showed compassion and kindness and practiced justice... history was altered, and Jesus was the result.

As Christians, the way we respond to what is happening in our nation will tell the world a lot about who we are, about the faith we proclaim, about the Jesus we claim to follow, and about the legacy we intend to leave behind.

We have to ask ourselves that crucial question: How would Jesus respond? Thankfully, we don't have to speculate on the answer to that question. The Gospel itself is one of welcome and equality. And scripture is full of mandates on how to treat the least of these.

In Matthew 25 Jesus is explaining that the rewards of our life's endeavors will be based on how we care for others, how well we reach out to the needy, how well we share what we have. The king welcomes those who have fed, clothed, visited and welcomed him and he throws into the fire those who did not. In verse 44, the people say, 'But Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn't do anything to help you?' Then he will answer, 'I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't

done it for me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.

In Luke 10:25-37, after Jesus has said that the most important thing after loving God is loving one’s neighbor and is asked how to define neighbor, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and how it was the foreigner just passing through who showed compassion and mercy—this was how one loves one’s neighbor. Crossing cultural and religious boundaries and risking one’s very life to heal and help and offer hope.

I mean, that’s part of the spirit behind these new orders, isn’t it? The idea that we have a right to refuse a person in need and a right to protect ourselves. And we do have a right to personal safety.

But refusing someone one in need the help they require to survive simply because we want to protect ourselves, especially when the other is in desperate need and in eminent danger, is not what Christianity is about. It’s about helping the stranger, even if it carries some risk. That’s the very point of the Good Samaritan.³

In John 13:35 Jesus tells us that the only way the world will see who and whose we are is by how well we love. Love. Not how loudly we proclaim we are Christians. Not by how certain we are that our beliefs are right. Not by how ardently we condemn everything we believe to be a sin. But. By. How. We. love. Love is the only measure by which we will be judged, by the world, and by God.

Even Paul speaks to the way we are supposed to care for strangers in our midst when in his letter to Galatia, chapter 3 verse 28 he writes, There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

No Moabite or Israelite.

No Mexican or American.

No illegal immigrant or legal resident.

No Muslim refugee or Christian citizen.

No impoverished or wealthy.

No president or constituent.

In the eyes of Christ we are all the same.

As people of faith, we are called to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). We must work for justice and peace for all people and envision a world where institutions are transformed into true servants of the people, full of the compassion exemplified by Jesus Christ.

³ James Martin, S.J. (2017) “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.” *American Magazine*. Accessed 1/28/2017 at <http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/01/28/i-was-stranger-and-you-did-not-welcome-me>.

As United Methodists, we have a particular commitment to least, the last, and the lost. Our policy has always been one to welcome refugees and care for immigrants, regardless of their legal status or religious affiliation. It's in our DNA as Methodists and a part of the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church book of discipline.

In New York Harbor at Ellis Island, a place that is famous for receiving immigrants, stands the statue of liberty. Her base bears the inscription:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Today there are more displaced people in our world than at any other time in our world's history. Families who have lost everything. Women, men, children, young and old. They are clinging to their religion for strength. They are clinging to their family because it's all they have left. And they are clinging to the hope that those words on that inscription still mean something.

And right now, as I speak, because of fear, hate and political rhetoric, they are people with nowhere to go. No home. No country. No one to wrap them in love and welcome and say, here, let me show you how my faith compels me to act and what Christian really means.

During the second world war, over 10 million people died in Nazi death camps. Mostly Jews, but also homosexuals, people with disabilities, people with different political ideas, like communists, people with different religions, like Jehovah Witnesses, and Christians from the confessing church who stood against Nazism and fascist ideals.

Today, we stand at the top of a slippery slope that makes a repeat of these horrors of history seem not all that far-fetched after all.

Today, just days after the world remembers this horrible human atrocity and vows never to forget it, it's our turn to decide where we stand. It's time for us to raise our voices, engage our wallets, and stand in solidarity with those who are experiencing the oppression and injustice.

Like Boaz we must commit to welcoming the stranger, loving the foreigner, and caring for the needy, just as Christ commanded us to do, to speak out against injustice and model the love God has for in the way we treat even the ones we have been taught to mistrust, hate, and fear.

I know "what ifs" mean nothing in history. But, I wonder, what if? How it might have been differently if 70 years ago the United States would have chosen a different path, to open the doors as wide as possible and to welcome in the poor, the oppressed, the persecuted, the ones seeking asylum?

Perhaps the Frank family would have gotten their visas and rebuilt their lives in Boston. Perhaps Anne Frank would have fulfilled her dream of becoming a writer. Maybe she would be alive today, 87 years old, telling her great grandchildren what it was like when the Nazis rose to power and how so many died...and that it was almost her, but this country, the land of the free and the home of the brave courageously opened the borders and granted her family a new start.

But of course, that never happened. Instead, Anne Frank was just 15 years old when she died at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany.

But she did leave us a legacy.

Anne Frank is remembered as having written: "Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness."

Friends, we are living in dark, dark times. But the light of Christ living within you invites you to shine in the darkness, to be that candle and to both defy and define the darkness by resisting evil, speaking out against injustices, welcoming the stranger, and choosing to love even when it means sacrificing self.

Be that candle.

It's the right thing to do. It's the Methodist thing to do.

And, it's what Jesus would do.

Amen