

IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - STRANGER IN OUR MIDST

Season

Exodus 23:1-9

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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CENTRAL FOCUS:
That God's call is to overcome estrangement with compassion
and a deeper identity of human Oneness.

Pastor Todd Smiedendorf

This morning we hear again from the book of Exodus, written in a time of existential uncertainty for the Jewish nation and people. Looking back into the mists of cultural and religious memory, into events that may have happened many centuries before, ancient Jews seemingly composed Exodus to stir up national identity and feeling.

In the section of the story we have this morning, the people are in the transition from successfully escaping Egypt to becoming a people – Yahweh's people – in preparation to coming into the Promised Land. They are in sojourn in the Wilderness, having learned to trust that they will find enough food and water, they now receive the Ten Commandments and the extended law code that Moses has received and is sharing. This morning, we read from a section related to conflicts and judicial procedures.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

As we seek to respond to your word and will, and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's scripture from Exodus 23:1-9, read from The Message Translation.

Exodus 23:1-9¹

¹⁻³ Don't pass on malicious gossip.

Don't link up with a wicked person and give corrupt testimony. Don't go along with the crowd in doing evil and don't fudge your testimony in a case just to please the crowd. And just because someone is poor, don't show favoritism in a dispute.

⁴⁻⁵ If you find your enemy's ox or donkey loose, take it back. If you see the donkey of someone else who hates you lying helpless under its load, don't walk off and leave it. Help it up.

¹ *The Message* Translation of the Holy Bible. Old Testament. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson

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⁶ When there is a dispute concerning your poor, don't tamper with the justice due them

⁷ Stay clear of false accusations. Don't contribute to the death of innocent and good people. I don't let the wicked off the hook.

⁸ Don't take bribes. Bribes blind perfectly good eyes and twist the speech of good people.

⁹ Don't take advantage of a stranger. You know what it's like to be a stranger; you were strangers in Egypt.

Pastor Todd Smiedendorf

Now is the time where elementary children are invited to go with Amy for a special sermon time and you are welcome to stay for this sermon time as well.

Pray with me

Living Spirit,
Move in the words spoken and the words heard
Such that your kingdom more fully may come.
– Amen

So, I want to say this morning that I have met Jesus. [*Silence in congregation. "Thank you." Laughter.*] Just a few years ago. In person.

You see he had been working in Issaquah and went out one day to ride the bus. His ID was called into question, the police were notified, and then he was turned over to ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement. And like lots of undocumented migrant workers, he was arrested, charged with a crime of illegal entry, convicted, and served time in detention (right here in Washington State), then was deported to a Mexican border town, in this case, Nogales, Sonora.

And that's where I met Jesus in Nogales. He, like all the others who are deported, was just simply driven over the border and let off the bus with very little, but the clothes on his back. You might not know this, but when apprehended, most detainees like Jesus have to forfeit all of their belongings and they rarely catch up to them in the end. Even if they have worked for the one dollar a day in detention in what is often a private, for-profit prison, the debit card these deportees are issued as payment at the end of their deportation, that cannot be cashed in Mexico where they are dropped off. *It's a nice little system.*

Now, in Nogales, the very first building a deportee will see is the Kino Border Initiative, it's called. You see, there are caring people, caring people who knew the situation of these deportees, and so the Catholic Church bought a small patch of a hill – literally a hill, about 250 yards from the border – hollowed it out and built a simple building with a roof and tarped chain link fences for walls. It has a kitchen, long tables and benches, a couple of changing rooms and bathrooms. And each morning, migrants – deportees really – in need, they line up outside, then enter for food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. Now, our group of visitors helped feed lunch to these men and women and, after lunch,

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set out donated clothes for distribution while others tended to medical needs, especially swollen and injured feet. And still other deportees had art therapy time. It was during this “after-eating time” that we was when we had a chance to talk with people. That’s when I met Jesus – “hey-‘zeus”, he would pronounce it in Spanish. Now, Brianna from the Church Council of Greater Seattle was with me and she knew enough Spanish and Je-sus enough English so that we could hear his story. After all he had been through: the crossing, being threatened by the drug cartels in the crossing, then his apprehension, detention, and deportation. Jesus said he would still be going back to Seattle to work.

I heard the same kinds of stories from others still waiting for their turn to go back.

Now, this all happened during the UCC Border Immersion and Collaboration trip I took in November of 2015, sponsored by the United Church of Christ and Church World Service. Fifteen of us from all over the U.S. met to see firsthand, face-to-face the realities of the borderlands.

So, in keeping with our theme this season, this morning’s reading would remind us that treatment of the stranger, of the alien, of the one who shows up at the door matters in our tradition and in nearly every tradition of which I am aware. Verse 9 says, “Don’t take advantage of the stranger. You know what it’s like to be a stranger. You were strangers in Egypt.”

So in the bigger arc of the story, the Scripture story, as ancient Israel’s story developed from being the oppressed to being the wandering strangers (the outsiders) seeking a home to being those who had arrived, the insiders, the dominant culture; so the message of the Divine Voice changed from being one of liberation, protection, and comfort to being one of law, memory, and a little bit of warning. In other words, God tried to pick them up when they were slaves and wandering underdogs without land, but then, upon arrival in the land, told them to be faithful, just, and humble, to not forget that *they* used to be the outsiders, the wanderers, the strangers, the aliens.

And so in this story, this ancient story, there is an ancient struggle which goes on still today. Today it’s called “othering.” Other becomes a verb, it’s an active process.

Research tells us that it’s based in our evolutionary wiring to quickly evaluate threat. Our brains are set up to create categories. It’s a short cut – helpful at times, tremendously useful from an evolutionary standpoint AND ... and ... also has a huge downside, especially during times of psychological, economic, or political instability. You can probably figure how that goes. Whether in the individual or the collective, the temptation to “other” another is ever present. So, just name your favorite “ism” – any one of the “isms” will do that plague our society (racism, sexism, heterosexism, -ism after -ism) and you will find a form of othering in its particular flavor. It does not even require distance. You don’t have to be from the other side of the planet. You don’t even have to look different or [be] perceived as different. Othering can happen inside any nation, any village, any family, even inside of ourselves.

Now it’s not that differences, variations, and diversities are not present in life and in people and that they can’t be celebrated, enjoyed, and used for the good. They can – and I pray that they will be always and forever. Wonderful! It is that these same differences or, I should say, it’s when these same differences and un-familiarities are placed into conscious and unconscious – there’s the trick part – *unconscious* stories of fear, suspicion, and threat. We have that tendency to make the stranger into a source of danger (though the data rarely support that). We have that tendency to make them

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into something else, just not the same as us. Maybe we pity them or envy them. Something that essentially says “You are not me. You are not us. And you’re not really fully in my circle of trust and solidarity, of equality and deservedness. *You don’t really deserve the vote, do you? Just stay in your place.*”

French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (you have to go back a long way to remember that, for me a long time to undergrad) **noted that in history**, cultures usually tried to deal with the perceived other – you might guess this – by incorporation or by exclusion. So often, our wounds are characterized by behaviors of extremes, on side or the other. You assimilate them or you erect strong boundaries and isolate them. Our nation has done both. On the one hand of assimilation, we have the melting pot. And we have policies to erase cultures like American Indian nations’ culture. And, on the other hand, we have strong separation and isolation with slavery, segregation, ghettos, (as we heard here recently) redlining, internment, and mass incarceration among others. So many options to do that.

Now, you might guess, **neither segregation nor assimilation ultimately work for the good**. As Dr. King reminded us. They are neither good for the oppressor nor the oppressed. There is something false, untrue about both. They simply do not reflect the truth. And the truth is we are *Oneness* in our diversity. You cannot have assimilation *or* isolation and separation *and* reflect this beautiful paradox that we are One, even amidst our diversity, even amidst Our inter-dependence with all of creation.

There’s a little secret – maybe not so secret. Hopefully, it’s been spoken here and will be spoken many times in this sanctuary and in other places: **There really is no such thing as an “other”**. In our tradition at its deepest spiritual truth there is no such thing as “other”. Cultures around the world acknowledge this in their deepest wisdom. I am me because you are you. We exist because of each other. We all are of one life web, all of the same origin, all from Africa if the anthropologists are right. “God made from one blood” is the line from our hymnal.² **The Hebrews were reminded of this oneness by the oft repeated Biblical phrase “you too were once aliens”**. “You too were once strangers, wanderers.” Our government’s current policies of enforcement of so-called “illegal immigration” show little awareness of this truth. Sitting in the comedor (the shelter) with those migrants was a powerful, direct reminder. It was said beautifully and simply by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas³ who said the only thing that really converts people from painful ways of othering is a face-to-face encounter.

Before lunch was served that day in Nogales, a local priest came in and spoke.

He told these hungering human beings simply,

No person is illegal.

No person is illegal.

No person is illegal.

You are not illegal.

² Hymn 427 “God Made from One Blood”, lyrics by Thomas H. Troeger, 1988, in *The New Century Hymnal*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, OH, ©1995

³ Emmanuel Levinas, 1/12/1906-12/25/1995 was a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry who is known for his work related to Jewish philosophy, existentialism, ethics, phenomenology and ontology. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmanuel_Levinas, accessed 2/7/2019.

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He was countering and offering healing for the dehumanization for the separation that naming them as “illegals” was trying to do. He gave these people back their dignity, reminded them of their dignity, their humanness.

Talking to Jesus was as simple a teaching as I needed. Ultimately, there is no “Other”, only other human beings with human needs: human needs to work, to be with loved ones, to find a decent place to live and simply try to be human. Like the Last Supper mural painted on the wall in that Nogales shelter, all sit together at the table. *We are one.*

We affirm this truth of inclusion and interconnection *every* time we come to God’s Table. Every time. It is our reminder that this is a place where estrangement and fear and separation can be overcome with God’s overwhelming and outrageous Grace and Compassion, where separation and brokenness *can be* transformed into solidarity and hope.

Will you believe that?

Do you dare believe that?

Love bids us welcome at God’s Table. Will we have the courage and vulnerability to come and to invite another who seems “stranger” to us to sit with us there? God is always ready. Are we?

And let the people say – Amen

UCUCC: TS

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew 02/07/2019 from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to “More Podcasts” and SoundCloud as needed.