



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

Welcoming the Refugee in an Age of Hatred

August 26, 2018

Psalm 137.1-4

*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for song,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?*

Luke 4.17-19

*Jesus unrolled the scroll in the synagogue and began reading in the place where it was
written:
“The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me
to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

The year was 597 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar II had successfully sacked the city of Jerusalem and deported the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah to Babylon where they were held until sometime after the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE. It was on the willows of the Babylonian rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, where the Israelites, in defiance, hung up their harps after their captives mocked them with taunts about their powerless god and the songs that they so lustily sang in their homeland about the god who would never abandon them. This hymn of lament expresses the anger and humiliation that is exacted on prisoners. The Israelites could not sing their songs of Zion in this foreign land, partly in defiance of their captors and partly in anger that their god had abandoned them. They were strangers and aliens in a foreign land; political prisoners mocked and tormented as something less than human.

Fast forward a couple thousand years to 1892 when Annie Moore stepped off the boat into Ellis Island, the first immigrant to enter the States via this isle of hope under the protective gaze of the Statue of Liberty and the banner of that famous welcome: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free..” the words of Emma Lazarus, words of invitation and welcome to that beacon of freedom and opportunity for millions of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island.

Annie Moore was just 15 years old, traveling with her two younger brothers on the *SS Nevada* in cramped and unsanitary quarters in steerage to join her parents and older siblings in a new country. Here they hoped to find freedom from the oppression of their native Ireland where starvation from the potato famine and the domination of a foreign power had made her family prisoners in their own country.

It was in Cobh, a coastal town on the southern border of Ireland, that Annie Moore boarded the ship that would bring her to America. She was leaving an isle of fears, an isle of tears where life had become all but impossible for the natives where millions had died of starvation while the foreign government in power was shipping food back to England and taunting the likes of Annie Moore with her Irish backwardness. It was a bittersweet adventure, for indeed, she was leaving “an isle of hunger, an isle of pain, an isle she’d never see again” only to face an unknown, unwelcoming world but one that offered some semblance of hope and freedom. Imagine the gamut of emotions running through her 15-year-old mind as she found herself the first person to pass through Ellis Isle on January 1st, 1892, frightened and excited at the same time.

I’ve been to Cobh many times. There is a statue of Annie Moore and her two brothers on the dock of the Heritage Center that documents the likes of this young girl who left from this port to find a new life. This was the last port of call for the Titanic and the Lusitania before they sank and was also the port from which those political prisoners in Ireland were separated from their families to penal colonies in Australia. As one reads the stories of people as recorded in this heritage center, one is overwhelmed by the emotional rollercoaster of those who had to leave, those who wanted to leave but didn’t want to leave, and those who left willingly but reluctantly, knowing they’d never see their families or their homeland again.

Come with me, then, to 2017, just a year ago, when a group from our church visited Ireland, spending time one day in this little village of Cobh, learning about the lives of those who had passed through this harbor on their way to America. Ina and Jim Heup, who sang of Annie Moore this morning, were among the group that visited this Heritage Center. Ina told me of a profoundly moving experience she had as she approached the building at the dock where passengers were processed before getting on the ship. Though she had never been to Ireland before, when she saw this building, she had the eerie sense that she, indeed, had been here before.

As it turns out, upon returning home, she learned from her mother that when Ina was just 20 months old, when she and her parents and siblings emigrated from Scotland to the United States they passed through Cobh, Ireland to board their ship to a new homeland. When she showed her mother the picture of the building at the dock, her mother recognized the sign that had not changed in all those years, for it was in front of that building that Ina was carried in her mother’s arms when she was less than two years old. Ina said it was a mystical experience connecting to that place of which she had no cognizant recognition but through which she had come to this country to make a new life.

Ina and her family know something of what it meant to leave the homeland to come to a new land to make a home in a foreign land. It wasn't easy. There were people who shunned them and there were people who welcomed them with open arms.

The year was 1983 when New England Church agreed to sponsor the Thepavong family, resettling from Laos to the United States. We arranged for housing, helped them furnish their home, helped them find jobs, went shopping with them and assisted in learning the language and the culture. They are still an active part of this church, having been successful business people and significant contributors to the community at large. We are grateful for the relationship we enjoy with them these years.

New England Church is not a stranger to welcoming the stranger. It was around 2003 when the congregation heard of the plight of a student at West High, Musawir by name, who had come to this country with his mother after spending years in a refugee camp. This bright young man was a model student but had dropped out of school to get a job so he could support his mother. His father had died in the refugee camp, and now, at 17, it was his responsibility to care for the family.

When this congregation heard the story, we decided to get involved, not only to welcome them to the community but to support them as well. Musawir had a part-time job at a hardware store and we were able to collect money from members of this church to keep them in their apartment and Musawir in school. This Muslim family was grateful for the response of a Christian community and we in turn were grateful for the opportunity to learn from them by bridging the divide between religion, politics, and culture. Musawir graduated with honors and went on to medical school in Chicago. Unfortunately, we have lost touch with them, but are thankful for the time our lives intersected.

The year is 2018, and each day we are reminded in the news of the trauma that comes to those who must flee their native country or be killed or be held prisoner in their own home. They come here to find freedom and a new life only to find their families separated or turned away. It is distressing in the extreme to hear talk of "an infestation" of immigrants as if they were some form of rodent to be exterminated. And while, indeed, there are people of other nationalities and religions and ideologies that have perpetrated hideous violence against others, the recent edition of *Time* magazine cites studies that have shown that undocumented immigrants don't actually commit crimes at higher rates than U.S. citizens. (September 3-20, 2018, page 12).

But let's step outside the arena of politics and let our scriptures have the final word about welcoming refugees, immigrants, aliens, and strangers. Here are but a few:

Exodus 12:49 and Leviticus 24:22 – There shall be one law, the same law, for the native and or the alien who resides among you.

Exodus 22:21 – Moses gives God's law: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22 – Moses gives God's law: "You shall not strip your vineyards bare...but leave some there for the poor and the refugee."

Leviticus 19:33-34 and 24:22 – When the 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.

Deuteronomy 6:10-13 – The people of Israel are made aware that the land had come to them as a gift from God and they were to remember that they were once aliens.

Deuteronomy 10:18-19 – For the Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Ezekiel 47:21-22 – The aliens shall be to you as citizens, and shall also be allotted an inheritance.

Zechariah 7:8-10 – Do not oppress the alien.

Malachi 3:5 – The messenger will bear witness against those who thrust aside the alien.

Matthew 25:31-46 – Jesus said "...I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

Luke 4:16-21 – Jesus has come to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind...let the oppressed go free.

Romans 12:13 – The mark of the true Christian is to extend hospitality to strangers...

And lest we forget, this Jesus who is the very center of our Christian faith, was a refugee who, along with his parents, were forced to flee their homeland because Herod, in his jealous protection of his power, had ordered the massacre of all babies under two years old, of which Jesus was one. The family fled to Egypt, living as aliens and strangers in a foreign land, until Herod died and they could return home.

This is the same Jesus who said: :

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me

to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Can we do any less if we are going to be called by his name and claim his love?

--Rev. Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, who oversees the formation of new planets on the far reaches of the universe, yet also dwells in the inner soul of our beings, be to us today a presence of hope and peace. You are like the sun, still shining above the darkness, and like the air that is all around us, though invisible, yet vital and available for our every breath.

We come today seeking liberated lives. Free us from the inner tyrannies that imprison us. Deliver us from our fears that hold us captive. Haunted by dread and enfeebled by timidity, we make jail cells of our souls and jailers of our anxieties. Grant us fresh faith and new courage that we may go out from this place restored in spirit, confident in ourselves and in those who live in the world with us.

Free us from the imprisonment of our griefs. Let not our sorrow be a master of our lives, but give us the strength of character to rise above life's hardships that we might be victors over them. Forgive us the times that we have hindered your light shining through us, for we have all too often defeated your purpose by the way we treat others and the manner in which we take greedy advantage of this planet.

For the myriad people who have been weighed down by the tyranny of systems, we pray. We especially think of those refugees who seek a place of peace and freedom; we think of those whose health is in the balance because of the lack of healthcare; we think of those youth whose potential hangs in the balance for want of opportunity that has been denied them because of their race, their social status, their gender orientation, or their physical and emotional limitations. Give us courage to be agents of freedom and opportunity for those most oppressed. And raise up leaders of political and social change who care more about the well-being of the masses than about their own power and wealth.

For ourselves and this congregation we pray, that we may not fail you or the world you call us to serve. Match our opportunity with our devotion that we may rise to the occasion that invites service to the community, the nation, and the world. So enlarge our vision, our generosity, and our dedication that we may deserve your approval as good and faithful servants. In the name and spirit of the Christ we make our prayer. Amen.

(adapted from Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Book of Public Prayers*)