

NEIGHBORS IN NEED<sup>1</sup>  
Leviticus 19: 33-34  
Luke 10: 25-37  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
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Last Sunday evening, April 19, Hallmark Hall of Fame presented a televised movie entitled *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*. It recounted the inspiring true story of the brave Polish woman who helped save the lives of 2,500 Jewish babies and young children by smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II.

There is a striking line in the movie that comes from the wife of the Jewish rabbi. The rabbi has been arguing that they should not allow their children and grandchildren to be smuggled out of the Ghetto to be raised by Christian families. But his wife disagrees and whispers to him saying, "You knew me when I was 13, and we have been married for 40 years, and you should know by now that when I state an opinion, it is not a suggestion!"

I

Now here is the biblical notion of God's opinion, and it is not a suggestion: *The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were*

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*strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.* Now I am ready to admit that this text comes from the book of Leviticus, and surely Leviticus is far down the list of favorite biblical books. It has probably been a long, long time since a sermon has been preached from this pulpit using anything from the book of Leviticus as a primary text. But I want you to know that God's good news is even here in this book!

This church takes justifiable pride in its welcome message that is printed in the Sunday bulletin each week. We mean it when we say that we believe that God's unbounded love and grace are offered to all and meant to be shared and celebrated by all. When we hammered out our Strategic Plan, the very first of our Values Statements was inclusion, by which we mean that we welcome all in Christ's love. Welcome is an important word in this church. It is our intention each week to make this a place where visitors and newcomers feel welcome.

BUT, as important as it is to welcome people, I want to state the obvious: welcoming is only a beginning. It is a crucial beginning, but welcoming alone is not the standard by which God's people are judged. We are not called just to welcome people. Welcoming alone can be superficial; it can be seductive; it can easily move us to the position of self-

congratulation because many churches do not welcome to the extent that we do.

We mean for welcome to mean our openness to all, our openness to diversity. We really want to welcome those with profoundly different backgrounds to be an integral part of this community. Perhaps the real challenge of any welcome statement is to move from being welcomed to belonging, for all to understand what is at the heart of being community for any gathered congregation.

## II

This idea of welcoming and enabling others to be a part of the community becomes even more poignant when we consider the plight of the refugees. Let us remember that a refugee is not an immigrant. A refugee is a victim, someone who has been wronged, someone who has suffered and comes to this country for refuge. In the image Jesus would later use, a refugee is someone who has been beaten and robbed on the road to Jericho. A refugee is someone who is not welcomed in his or her own country.

The refugees from Bhutan, for example, were not forced to leave their country because of civil war or foreign intervention, but because of the racist policies of Bhutan's all-powerful king against the citizens of southern

Bhutan who come from a different ethnic background than the king. Because the king declared that Bhutan can only have one ethnicity, his government has practiced an ethnic cleansing policy.

Bhutanese security forces have resorted to such tactics as torture, murder, indiscriminate arrests, looting, rape, plunder, and the burning of homes of southern Bhutanese, finally compelling them to leave their homes in Bhutan. Over 134,000 Bhutanese citizens, approximately twenty percent of Bhutan's total population, are now living in refugee camps in Nepal and India. Bhutan is thus responsible for the highest per capita number of refugees in the world.

Wherever refugees have come from, they have all experienced a fundamental UN-welcome, an unwelcome that penetrates to their very soul. Little children have frequently seen hatred that no child should ever see. They have imprinted on their very souls the sense that they are not welcome.

So that fundamental passage from the book of Leviticus could be translated this way: *When a stranger lives with you as a stranger in the land, you must not wrong him. As a native among you, so shall a stranger be...you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

The command, in other words, is not just to welcome the stranger, but to LOVE the stranger. And that love is born from Israel's experience of being strangers themselves, living in a land of violence and demeaning, diminishing treatment. The opposite of such treatment is love, love that remembers what it was like to be treated brutally, forced to live in the margins of society, vulnerable and always threatened by violence, always feeling like an outsider.

Because we are people who are called to be the church, we have the privilege of doing more than welcoming the stranger, but of loving the stranger. But the question remains hanging in thin air, %how do I go about loving the stranger?+

### III

This is the question behind the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that familiar story the priest passing by might well have said, %welcome this traveler on the road to Jericho. But the religious establishment I represent has no responsibility to this stranger who took his chances on a dangerous road and lost. I'm sorry for him, but he is certainly welcome to walk this dangerous road.+ The Levite who came along could easily have said, %welcome this stranger on the road to Jericho. I'm very sorry that he has been beaten and robbed, but the government has a tight budget, and

we have no responsibility to help those who are beaten and robbed. But we do welcome them to attempt to travel this road.+

As important as it is to welcome the stranger, welcoming alone will not lead us into real community. It may bring us together; it may get us talking to one another; it may place us in the same room. But welcoming alone cannot enable us to understand what it must be like to try to adjust to a completely new language, a radically new culture, new types of food, new social expectations, new laws, new everything!

Welcoming alone cannot teach us to learn from one another, to respect each other's gifts, or remind us to see the value of our differences. We are called to love, and the parable of the good Samaritan shows us what love looks like from the perspective of the one who is bleeding on the side of the road. Love rolls up its sleeves, treats the wounds, finds shelter, and gets its hands dirty in making sure that the ordinary necessities of life are provided for those who have been wounded in this world.

There are plenty of people out there who resent differences, who ignore the needs of refugees, whose hearts refuse to beat with compassion. They fill the airwaves on talk radio and poison the atmosphere with their hatred, but the church is called to a different

standard. The church is called to follow another Way; we call it the Way of Christ.

#### IV

This opinion from God that is not a suggestion comes within a section of the book of Leviticus that is called the Holiness Code. Holiness, to them, had nothing to do with being narrow-minded, sanctimonious, wearing a halo, or being primly pious. When you read the Holiness Code, you discover that God's idea of holiness is rolling up your sleeves and joining in with whatever God is doing in this world.

That is the reason that the Holiness Code emphasizes social justice. In Leviticus, if you want to be holy, don't pass out a tract; love your neighbor, show hospitality to the stranger, and be a person of justice and compassion. We are fortunate to live in a time and a place that gives us the privilege to act on this ancient word from the Torah: *ō you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

Last week, as many of you know, I sat out in a pew with my wife as George Sinclair and Barbara Ward led the service. It was a good experience for me. One of the things that moved me most was at the time of the offering. I looked over at the refugees as the plate was passed, and

almost to a person each one of the refugees put in something. a dollar bill, a coin or something. I was deeply moved by that.

Then this week I was given an envelope that contained three coins. They are coins from Nepal that were found in last week's offering. These coins represent both the need and the generosity of the refugees we are privileged to know. I immediately thought of the story of the widow's mite. But even more, these coins represent a longing to contribute, to be a part, to love and to be loved.