

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – November 10&11, 2018 – Reflection: “Welcoming the Refugee and the Migrant” – Part Two

Elijah, the prophet of Israel, the last faithful to the one God, dared speak truth to power. Ahab, the king, and Jezebel, his queen, had led God's people away from their faith, away from the true God, and into the temples and sacrifices of Baal, the god of the Canaanites. Elijah condemned the king for his apostasy, the queen for her treachery. His life in danger, Elijah fled the kingdom and went into hiding in pagan Sidon in a town called Zarephath. Famine gripped the land and there was starvation and death all about. Still, the prophet asked a poor widow if he might stay with her and her son. He asked her for food and drink. She had almost nothing ... she and her son were on the point of dying. Even so, she gave the Holy Man what little she had, water for his thirst, bread for his hunger. Her kindness to the stranger yielded a miracle: for a whole year, the three of them; prophet, widow, son, ate from the flour jar that never emptied, drank from the well that never ran dry.

It was May, 1939 and the clouds of war were once again gathering over Europe. The German liner St. Louis sailed from Hamburg bound for Havana in Cuba. The ship's officers had in their hands the required landing permits from the Cuban government. Onboard that ship were 937 passengers, almost all of them Jewish refugees running from the

Nazi scourge. Political changes in Cuba were afoot even as the ship crossed the Atlantic and sailed into the Caribbean. Right wing forces on the island wanted nothing to do with refugees. Pressure was brought to bear. Landing permits were cancelled and the ship was refused entry into Havana harbor. On the ship sailed, off the coast of Florida but the U.S. government refused to allow the passengers to land. They did not have U. S. immigration visas and hadn't passed security screenings.

Out of options, the St. Louis sailed back to Europe. Great Britain, France, and Belgium admitted a percentage of the Jewish refugees when the ship returned in June, 1939. Some later obtained visas and left for America before the Nazi panzer divisions invaded western Europe a year later in May. 254 of those unwelcome Jewish passengers lost their lives in the ovens and the death camps of the holocaust. They never had papers. They never had a chance.

In the 1920's, what is now Slovakia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Slavs were looked down upon by the Austrians and the Hungarians, pawns in the chess game for power and domination in that part of the continent. They were dispensable fodder for the imperial war machine and my grandfather Konstantin had enough; enough war, enough poverty, enough hopelessness. He would go to America. He would take his family to America. He went first and settled in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Then he sent for my grandmother Ludvika and their seven year old son, Frank. Mother and child left their little village of Trnova in Slovakia for the first time in their lives and made their way to Germany where they boarded a ship and sailed across an ocean in steerage. My grandmother was poor. She couldn't read English. She couldn't write English. She couldn't speak English. But, when that ship sailed into New York harbor and she saw the torch

of hope held high by Lady Liberty, my grandmother spoke her first word of English: "America!" and dared to dream of freedom and a better life. My grandparents were poor ... what could they possibly give to America? They gave their children: one who farmed almost 300 acres of land in Pennsylvania, one who served in the Marines in World War II, one who served in the Navy in the same war, one who spent a lifetime in nursing, one who worked for the Department of Defense in the Pentagon. And, their grandchildren became teachers, and bankers, lawyers, EMT's, financiers, parents, servicemen and women, and even one not overly holy priest! All because the refugee was welcomed, the migrant found a home, the stranger became a citizen.

Every sovereign nation on the planet has the right to secure its borders, to insure the safety and prosperity of its citizens. Every country has the right to enact laws and policies to protect their people and allow their citizens food, shelter, and freedom from persecution. But history, if it teaches us nothing else, has shown us that not all laws are just, not all policies are moral, not all plans respect the inherent dignity of the human person: resident or alien, child or elder, able-bodied or infirm.

For weeks we have been hearing about a caravan, an invasion of forces that is marching inexorably toward our southern border. We have been told they are men, angry men, violent men, criminal men, lawless men, drug-addled men, that they are coming to use us, mooch off of us, give us nothing but problems. Go home, many of our people say. Go back to your perfectly good lives, they are told.

In fact this five to seven thousand person army are largely Mamas y Papas, ninos y ninas, grandparents and little bambinos. They are

overwhelmingly poor, fleeing the drug violence in their native failed state of Honduras, fleeing no jobs, no prospects, no future. Most of all, these people, who are by and large fellow Catholics, are willing to walk more than a thousand miles with only the clothes on their backs, relying upon the kindness of strangers along the way, willing to die rather than live like that back home, all to find refuge in that bright shining star of el norte, America.

Should this country, under God, founded by Christians fleeing persecution, should this country then welcome them with guns and turn them back like the Jews who sailed on the St. Louis, because of no papers? Or should we listen to their stories, each one, each family; and determine fairly and justly whether they are refugees, whether they are seeking and needing sanctuary, whether they should be welcomed or turned away?

Each country must defend its just borders. Each country must enact laws for the common good. And, our country has the right to demand of each of us citizens loyalty to our founding principles and ideals. But we Christians have an even higher calling, an even deeper loyalty, for we have our citizenship in heaven.

Every Good Friday, Catholics line the aisles of our churches to adore the cross, to kiss the feet of the crucified Lord. It's almost easy to kiss wood or gold or silver. It's much harder, much more of a dilemma, much more retching to kiss the feet of the brown stranger, the Jew on a ship, the Irish rag picker, the Slavic peasant. In those crosses, the feet are not so clean, they smell from sweat and dirt and fear; they may be misshapen and calloused and, yes, they may even track their problems through our lives ... but they are, no less than the feet of the

Crucifix in our church, JESUS ... JESUS ... JESUS ... "for I was a stranger, and you welcomed me."