

"Offering Refuge"
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

selection from "Among the Syrian Refugees" Bob Janis-Dillon

This reading comes from a reflection written by the Rev. Bob Janis-Dillon at the end of a week he spent in November 2015 working in a Syrian refugee center in Samos, Greece.

"The people of Samos, Greece have done something that sounds ordinary, only it's not: they have treated the Syrian refugees like human beings. Past the terror of the rubber dinghies, and before the long and weary trudge through Europe, the normalcy that Samos offers to the refugees is a gift and a blessing. The refugees are dehumanized in so many different ways on their long journey, that it's difficult to keep track. But the everyday people of Samos are not lining up to protest the existence of the refugees, or the impact on their lives. On the contrary, quite a few of them are actively helping their plight, and most of the rest are civil and respectful. On the whole, they have welcomed these refugees from many lands as visitors...

My week has been filled by the kind of people who drop everything to go and help people they've never [met]. How could I not feel that the humanity I know and love, the humanity of decency and compassion and friendship, is every bit as real as I always suspected? This is not to say that evil doesn't exist in the world – we all know what people are capable of. But I have been reminded of how astoundingly generous and kind human beings can be to each other...

We must always fight against the inclination to distance ourselves from the lives of refugees by thinking of refugees as a number, or a problem, or a monolithic group, a "them" in contrast to an "us." I come back with a buoyed awareness, a lived awareness, that the refugees are us, vastly different in their situation but as human beings very similar."

In 1939, the United States was just beginning to understand the scale and impact of the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in Germany. Waitstill Sharp was a Unitarian minister in Wellesley, Massachusetts at the time. His wife, Martha, was a social worker. They had two children - a two year old daughter and seven year old son. With news beginning to make its way to the United States of the Nazis' rise, Waitstill received a call from Frederick Eliot the president of the American Unitarian Association asking him to take on a mission to assist Jewish refugees.

As Waitstill's wife, Martha was expected to be by his side. The Sharps were torn about this decision but ultimately decided to go leaving their children in the care of members of the congregation. They were in Czechoslovakia for just two weeks before the Nazis invaded. For the next several months, they worked tirelessly and clandestinely to help hundreds of people escape and many more to obtain the documentation they needed to try to escape. Martha Sharp, in particular, risked her life by personally accompanying individuals and groups to safety in other parts of Europe on that first mission.

The Sharps' story is captured in the film, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War*, produced by the Sharps' grandson, Artemis Joukowsky, and Ken Burns, which was recently released on PBS.

I appreciated learning more about the Sharps story for many reasons. The story of the Sharps is certainly one of courageous action. It is a story of sacrifice. It is a story of being willing to be the one to answer the call. Reflecting on the Sharps' story helps me to broaden the scope of my views on the world, to remember that there are issues at stake that go beyond our brief news cycle and that keep coming back.

It is also a story with lessons for our present day as we grapple with a refugee crisis of enormous scale in a climate of similar fear and anxiety.

Today, millions of people flee or are forced from their homes. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that there are 65.3 million people who are displaced. And, 21.3 million of those are considered refugees.¹

What has been dubbed the "Syrian refugee crisis" is especially alarming. For nearly six years, the civil war in Syria has raged on. There are nearly 5 million registered refugees

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

from Syria.² And, there are another 8.7 million Syrians who have been forced from their homes but remain in the country.³

Calling the influx of refugees into Europe the “Syrian refugee crisis” is not entirely accurate. Only about half of all refugees arriving in Europe come from Syria. Another 40% come from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea.

Because of social media and a never ending news cycle, we are more aware of the crisis and witness the impacts in a more vivid way - through photographs and video footage. The magnitude of suffering is heart-breaking, gut-wrenching, and humbling.

The sheer number of people who are currently refugees is staggering and approaches historic levels but the need for us to open ourselves to the plight of our fellow human beings in crisis and displacement is far from new.

It is as ancient as biblical times when the Jewish people were instructed to treat strangers amongst them as if they were their own for they, too, had once been exiles.

The Sharps responded to the same cry of humanity at the outset of World War II as they did what they could to help those desperately seeking safety.

This “crisis” isn’t just something happening out there. If we understand ourselves as connected, then we recognize that we are all impacted by the displacement of millions of people across the globe.

And, the crisis is brought closer to home as our country and even our state struggles with its own response and willingness or unwillingness to take in refugees.

In recent months, this issue has come into focus in Vermont as the city of Rutland first began a process to become approved as a refugee resettlement site. The announcement was made on September 28 that the Department of State had accepted the application, and around 100 Syrian and Iraqi refugees will likely be resettled in Rutland in December or January.

² <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>

As some of you know, a group of folks, including some members of this church, have started convening to figure out how central Vermont and Montpelier can be a place of welcome and assistance to refugees.

The issue of whether Rutland ought to welcome refugees was controversial. As there was in Rutland, I imagine that there would be both support for this happening and also potential resistance. The resistance is understandable.

It can feel like there are simply limited resources and that making room for anyone who is not currently part of the community has costs and places a burden on those of us already living here. There might also be resistance to welcoming in people of Arab and Muslim background. The narrative being told in mainstream media makes it too easy to believe that all Arabs and all Muslims are a danger and a threat.

The parallels to World War II, a time of historic displacement of human beings, are strong.

During the time of the Sharps' missions, the United States, on the whole, remained largely ignorant of what was happening in Europe and resistant to doing much to help the Jewish and other refugees attempting to flee.

The Sharps and others who were active in relief efforts also had to figure out how to build support for refugee assistance within the United States. Then, as now, people fleeing war-torn regions were seen as potential dangers to society by elected officials and the public at large. Our record of offering asylum was abysmal.

Most notoriously, in 1939, a German ocean liner, the St. Louis, attempted to dock in Miami. The ship, which was carrying 937 passengers, mostly Jewish, was turned away from the port and forced to return to Europe. More than a quarter of the passengers died in the Holocaust.

And, immigration restrictions tightened as the refugee crisis worsened.

When I think about what we can do, there are certainly policy changes to make, but since we're here as part of spiritual community, I want us to also consider what spiritual work it might take to respond to the refugee crisis.

bell hooks, the feminist philosopher, developed a theory for power relations that I think is helpful for us in considering our response to the idea of welcoming the stranger into our communities. Basically, hooks says that for any defined group there is a center and the margin. Those with power exist in the center while those with less power are at the margins.

This theory can be used to understand how social and political power works in relation to gender, sexual orientation, race, religious identity, class, immigration status.

I believe that our task - one that we can take on with humility - is to notice how and when we are at the center and to challenge ourselves to move out of the center.

The refugee crisis as well as issues of racial justice, indigenous rights, LGBT rights - all challenge us to notice who is at the margins and to make way for those people and groups to become central.

This reorientation is important especially now.

The recent leaking of Donald Trump's comments regarding his sexual exploitation and assault of women reveals how dangerous it can be to pin oneself at the center of reality.

This isn't merely a political issue. This is also clearly about the moral compass we create for ourselves. It's about the worldview we choose to live by and that we choose to pass onto our children and future generations.

In times like these, in which narcissism is confused for heroism, we are called to lift up a view of the world that says "I am not the center." "I am not God." I am part of an interconnected and interdependent world in which my needs are not more important than someone else's because I happened to be born a certain sex or a certain race or have money or lots of degrees.

Embracing humility leads us to recognize the limitations of our own individual perspective and to be willing to change because of the perspectives and needs of others, especially those at the margins.

Let's be humble enough to ask ourselves, what is my role in this world? what is the work I need to do to create a world that is more whole and more just and more peaceful?

It is hard for me to imagine answering the call the Sharps did in 1939 and choosing to leave behind the comfort and safety of my life to take the risks they did. The Sharps were extraordinary in many ways. Yet, the same impulse to recognize the world beyond themselves and to respond with humility and conviction to those needs resides in each of us.

It is the impulse to respond to the humanity of another with gentleness and welcome, to create an opening in which true human relationship based in honoring the worth and dignity of others might flourish.

This humanizing of experience and drawing into our attention of people at the margins is something I appreciate greatly in the work of Brandon Stanton, the photographer behind Humans of New York. In 2015, Stanton traveled to Jordan and Turkey to talk with 12 different Syrian refugee families preparing to embark to the United States. Stanton took their photos and shared bits of their story on social media. ⁴(He has more than 16 million fans on Facebook.)

He shared the story of two brothers who recounted what is like when they were sitting in class and their school was bombed and also how one of them wants to be a professor that examines the bones of dinosaurs because he likes dinosaurs a lot.

He shares the story of a couple who met just as the war was beginning and despite the tenuous circumstances fell in love and married and have two young children.

And, he shares the story of a man who is inspired to contribute to the world through his scientific inventions like a device that can predict earthquakes before they happen. The story of “the scientist” caught the attention of actor Edward Norton who started a fundraising campaign for him and his family that raised over \$300,000.

There is a place inside of us that is softened when we meet another in a true encounter. When we can no longer hide behind stereotypes or the stories we are told and made to believe in mainstream media or by politicians.

⁴ <http://www.businessinsider.com/syrian-refugee-stories-told-by-humans-of-new-york-2015-12/#istanbul-turkey-1>

Recognizing one another's humanity draws us closer. As we are willing to be moved by and to honor the humanity we recognize in others, the more we can change the dynamics that keep some people at the margins.

On one rescue mission, the author Lion Feuchtwanger asked Waitstill Sharp why he was doing this, and Waitstill replied: "I'm not a saint. I'm capable of any of the many sins of human nature. But I believe the will of God is to be interpreted by the liberty of the human spirit."

I think it takes humility to recognize both our flaws and limitations and also the freedom and power we have to take action. Each of us here has our limitations and also has the power to act with moral courage and imagination to create an environment that welcomes the stranger, that breaks down the divisions between "us" and "them."

Over the summer, Jared, Liam, and I were out in our yard in the early evening when a young man walked up our driveway. He had a clipboard and was wearing a t-shirt in support of clean energy - two sure signs he was a canvasser. He asked us to sign a petition and then we spent a few more minutes talking. I asked how he had gotten into canvassing and he mentioned that he was studying political science at UVM and a friend had inspired him to join. Liam wanted to know the young man's name, so we made introductions. Benny came to Vermont when he was nine years old. He had been born in a refugee camp in Tanzania. Before leaving, he turned to Liam and said with a smile on his face, "Liam, maybe one day you'll be voting for me for governor."

Witnessing this exchange gave me a a bit of hope.

Hope for our community that we might find the will and the humility to be a place that is willing to widen the circle of who we consider to be one of us so that the stranger is welcomed as guest and there are no divisions between "us" and "them" and instead we live into the truth that we are one.