

Sermon on Refugees

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As some of you may know, I came to Brattleboro in the year 2000 and joined Centre Congregational Church, the big white church on Main Street, almost immediately. However, before I came to Brattleboro, I lived in New York City very close to Riverside Church and was a decades long member of that congregation. Beginning in the late 70's William Sloan Coffin was the minister there. If you have heard of him at all you would know that he was a vigorous spokesperson for liberal Protestantism during his tenure at Riverside.

At about the same time, there was a dramatic conservative movement in various countries in South and Central America that was causing many people to flee for fear of their lives. Some sought refuge in this country even though our government, at the national level, was actively supporting conservatives in the countries from which they came. Many liberal churches here in the United States began to develop the concept of Sanctuary and were working to provide safe havens for those fleeing from their own repressive and dangerous governments. Those churches became known as Sanctuary churches and Riverside, after much intense internal discussion, became one of those churches. This was clearly in opposition to the policies of our government at the time.

Very soon after our decision was taken, we received Anna and Federico. They were a very young couple, originally from El Salvador, who had made their way across our southwestern border and were taken in by a church there that was part of the Sanctuary movement. Anna and Federico needed a place where they could be protected until they could ultimately find a way to go on to Canada where they felt that they would be completely safe. At Riverside we made a small apartment for them in the tower of the church. We guarded access to their apartment day and night. We took them out for shopping, for visits to other Sanctuary churches in the city, and to a lawyer who was providing legal documents for them. After a year of "stealth living" they wanted to move on at least in the direction of Canada. So, we arranged for them to join a Salvadoran family that had found Sanctuary with the Weston

Priory and the community of Weston. From there they were eventually able to make their way to Canada. We were happy that we were able to help them when they most needed it.

Fast forward about forty years and our church here in Southern Vermont was part of a group that offered sanctuary to Afghans who had fled their country when it was taken over by the Taliban. Many people in this congregation participated in welcoming the Afghans and, most specifically, the Masoudi family. We found a nice apartment for them, we enrolled their children in our schools, we saw that they all had good medical and dental care, We drove them everywhere and helped them to begin the process of becoming citizens. We did very well by them but, eventually, the father was able to find good work in Bethesda , Md. just outside of Washington D.C. and they moved there at the start of our New Year. Our group can be proud of our contributions to their lives.

In both cases, the adversaries were clear. There was an obvious need for many people to move. But, now, we have climate change and climate change is different. There is no single, obvious villain. The effects of climate change vary hugely from one place to another. I wonder what comes next for us and I think about what our role as Christians might be.

As I speak, people from many countries in South America are virtually storming our Southern borders. Climate change has made it extremely difficult for them to make a living off their lands. They move to cities hoping to find work only to encounter criminal gangs that threaten their very lives. So they come north to try to enter our country which they consider a more or less safe haven. This creates for us a huge problem – some might consider it simply a lawless invasion and others might think of it as an humanitarian crisis. However you see it, it creates a problem which, so far, we have not resolved. This same thing is happening all over the world. The deserts of northern Africa are expanding and making it almost impossible for people to live there. Many, the boat people, are coming across the Mediterranean to Greece, Italy, and Southern France. There they were accommodated initially but, now, the sheer volume of emigrants has made those countries wary, perhaps even hostile, to receiving more. Just last week, the new Prime Minister in England made a dash to France to shore up agreements about

immigrants because so many were coming across the channel and flooding communities in England. They settled on new quotas – a minimal response. I could go on but here's the point. While I have been citing climate change as a cause for large movements of people, there are others as well. Think of the war in Ukraine which has caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

However you imagine the cause, we need to be thinking about our responsibilities as a Christian people. How can we be the welcoming and generous people our scriptures suggest and, at the same time, maintain our own safety and standard of living? I leave it to you for your consideration, recalling the scripture for the morning which is Ephesians 5:8-14 – For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but instead expose them. For everything exposed by the light of day becomes visible, for everything that is visible becomes light, Therefore it says, “Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you.”