

Our topic was immigration at the annual Interfaith Council dinner this past Thursday. Among other speakers, Bob Cotrell from the Chico State history department gave us a quick synopsis of the often racist and xenophobic immigration laws enacted in the United States over the last several centuries. What is taking place now is actually not new, unfortunately.

Let me lead with a few not-so-fun facts about refugees and immigration. In 2016 the UN High Commission for Refugees reported that the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people topped 65 million.ⁱ This is the highest number ever. Nearly 1 in every 100 people in the world has been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations. More than half of the refugees are children.

Three countries account for about half of the refugees--Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. Developing countries host almost 90 percent of the refugees. Lebanon has the highest ration, with 183 refugees per 1000 inhabitants. Turkey hosts the largest number, with 2.5 million. And how is the rest of the world doing? Just over 1/2 of one percent of refugees were approved for resettlement in 2015.ⁱⁱ The PBS program Washington Week reported that the United States accepted only 85,000 refugees in 2016. I expect the 2017 number will be much less. One might say that the developed world and the United States are not doing our share.

Here is a real life story about a refugee family, as told by the Rev. Michael Tino, a UU minister in Utah.

...Our interfaith rally was Standing on the Side of Love with Immigrant Families. As a minister and volunteer, I was asked to stand on stage to hold up our giant Standing on the Side of Love banner.

...I was standing there not ten feet from the podium when Mr. Larry Love took the stage, holding the hand of his young adopted son, Ozmar. Ozmar stood right next to me as his father told their story.

Mr. Love was born in Utah and is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. [After returning from his mission work in Guatemala] he began attending a bilingual LDS church in Salt Lake City. There, he met Ozmar's mother, who had entered the United States sixteen

years ago from Guatemala without documentation or permission, seeking political asylum because of the turmoil in her home country. Her application was denied.

Three subsequent applications for permanent residency in the United States were also denied.

She chose to remain in Utah because she faced violence, discrimination, and possible death in her village of origin, and because she could not afford to bring her three American children to Guatemala (where non-citizens have to pay a monthly tax equivalent to seven days of average wages). [In Utah], she worked a variety of jobs. She got a Social Security Number (don't ask me how) and paid income taxes on her wages.

Larry and Ozmar's mother married and he adopted Ozmar.

[But] because she had lived in the US as an undocumented worker for so long, her application for citizenship was likely to be denied despite her marriage.

Tino continues with Mr. Love's story. "On March 18, one day after my birthday, I heard this at my front door at six-thirty in the morning. [knock loudly] And it was loud like that. And it was scary. I said, 'Who is knocking on my door?' I opened the door and there were two immigration ICE officers at my door, and they said, 'Have you seen this woman?' They pulled out a big eight-by-ten of this Hispanic woman and they said, 'Have you seen this woman? She's illegally registering cars to your address.' And I said, 'No.' They said, 'Can you have your wife look at this picture?' I said, 'Certainly.' I called my wife – she was getting ready to go to work – and she looked at the picture and she said, 'No, I haven't seen that woman.' And he said, 'We're not here for that woman, we're here to arrest your wife, [for] deportation.' They never showed me a warrant; I should have never opened the door."

Mr. Love's wife was handcuffed, crying, in front of her children. She was allowed to kiss her kids goodbye and then shoved into a van with

eight other people. She was denied bail and a deportation hearing was quickly scheduled.

Says Tino: Because she was married to a US citizen, and because her husband immediately hired a lawyer and began making phone calls inquiring about her, Mrs. Love was eventually released with an ankle bracelet and placed under house arrest, still unable to work to provide income for her family or the health insurance that her job provided—health insurance her family needed. [She may still, or maybe she already has been, deported.]

That knock on the door comes too often to our neighbors...., and often their only hope is that someone knows that they've been taken. Immigration officials count on the fact that to many in our community, our immigrant neighbors are not human beings with inherent worth and dignity but disposable laborers, soon to be replaced by others.

Tino continues: We get angry because, after all, there are supposed to be legal ways to come into this country, are there not? But Mrs. Love applied for legal entry into the US before leaving Guatemala. Despite the fact that she had run afoul of local gangs and feared for her life, her entry was denied.

...The truth is that for most poor people around our world, the legal immigration system is impossible to penetrate. In rushing to make these hard workers into criminals, we lose sight of the fact that it was not so long ago that millions of Irish and Italian immigrants got off of boats without paperwork and became a part of American society.

That people are able to come into this country legally is only one of the many myths surrounding immigrants and immigration, including who they are and how they contribute to our economy.

The only possible solution is comprehensive immigration reform. And not any old kind of immigration reform, either—immigration reform that provides a path to legalization for millions of undocumented workers, and immigration reform that prioritizes keeping families whole. No family should be torn apart by a knock on the door in the middle of the night.

I am indebted to another colleague, my friend Erika Hewitt, for the balance of this message.

Says Hewitt, For many reasons, people depart (as we've just heard). They leave home—and seek refuge from a thousand dangers and uncertainties.

For many reasons—many of them inconceivable to us, who live in relative peace and prosperity—people can't stay where they are, in the places they know; so for themselves and for their children, they trade the hell they know for the unknown, and the foreign.

For so many reasons people give up their sense of belonging; they surrender the climate and food and sounds and smells that their bodies have always known for the new, the unfamiliar, the harsh and unlearnable.

What deep respect these refugees, asylees, and immigrants deserve for their courage; for their capacity to keep moving forward, toward hope.

Some members of our human family are throwing their arms [open] wide to welcome those seeking mercy and seeking home; others are nearly taking up arms to drive them away.

It's a painful territory that stretches between The Merciful and The Damned.

As a minister, continues Hewitt, I'm in the business of holding up important truths, as I see [them], and naming how those truths intersect with the news on our screens. As the Syrian refugee crisis unfolds I've had to remind myself of two things:

1. Those of us who call ourselves Americans are all, to some degree, complicit in the unstable geopolitical disasters that result in such vast human suffering; and
2. To adjudicate and assess which refugees are “deserving” of mercy, and which ones aren't, is to exhibit an arrogance so dehumanizing that it borders on dangerous.

When human suffering comes spilling over our borders, there is no clear division between “them” and “us.” Our country's own policies are culpable, and by extension, us: we have protected our American lifestyle of consumption and corporate rule. We play a role in inequality, and ecological

disasters, and wars over dwindling resources, and the popularity of Donald Trump every time we lose sight of the fact that we're powerful players in a fragile but wildly interconnected global community.

Which is often, says Hewitt. We've lost a bit of our soul. That's what fear does. Fear is a voice that says: *nothing matters more than self-preservation and self-importance*. Fear drains the antifreeze out [of] your heart so your compassion center runs cold; it cuts off the feeding tubes that keep[s] our souls supple and our morality intact.

And fear is what's at the heart of the stingy fool's game of deciding which immigrants are "deserving" of asylum. Fear says: *from my comfortable position of privilege, I will decide whose hell is raw and terrifying enough to merit compassion*.

What would it be like, I wonder, to choose another path? How much would it cost us to invoke the Principles of our faith, and the beating heart of our ethical lives, by saying:

! "We're a single, interconnected human family."

! "We make one another stronger and braver by sharing what we have."

! "All people have the same worth and the same inherent dignity; but no human being is illegal."

! "The suffering of people beyond our borders asks us to examine how we've created the conditions for its existence."

Some of you, undoubtedly and admirably, are wondering what you can do to help bring relief to this refugee crisis. I hope you're hearing that "doing" something starts small.

You're "doing" something when you allow your heart to tear over the scope of human suffering; you're "doing" something when you step beyond your experience to acknowledge that we cannot know—and, God willing, will never know—what it's like to make the harrowing decisions [of refugees.] You're "doing" something when you interrupt a conversation to say, "No human being is illegal; it's not kind or civil to talk about people that way;" and you're "doing" when you use the language of reverence and interdependence to describe the global community. And, my words now, in this community and this state of immigrants, both documented and

undocumented, there may be more that we can do. This should be part of our conversation in our current process of reimagining our social action.

Says Hewitt: For so many reasons, people depart. They leave home and seek refuge from a thousand dangers and uncertainties.

She concludes with these the words by Rev. Eric Cherry:

Let us hold the refugee and the immigrant in prayer:

May God be with you.

May your grief and loss be assuaged.

May the hard road you travel include spaces of rest and security.

*May you know your inherent worth and dignity
every day of the journey.*

Let us pray for the people who are met along the way:

May they remember how they were strangers too.

May they embrace the pathways of compassion.

May they recall the teachings of the prophets.

May they make room in their hearts and their homes.

May it be so. Amen and Blessed Be

i²⁰Accessed 10/20/2017. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/06/20/482762237/refugees-displaced-people-surpass-60-million-for-first-time-unhcr-says>

ii²¹ibid.