

Why Sponsor Refugees: A Sermon Starter

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Why Should Christians Sponsor Refugees?

All refugees are made in God's image, regardless of their place of origin, ethnicity, religious tradition or any other human demarcation. All are loved by a compassionate God. God's desire for them and every other human is that they would flourish. Every man, woman and child is known by, called and beloved of God. These simple but profound theological truths compel us to spend time, money, energy and any other resource available to help those who have been marginalized, abused, denied human rights and deprived of home and citizenship, to help them establish themselves in a place of safety and security where a flourishing future is possible. We who have been given much are called to bless those who need our resources and, for a time, need us.

Jesus was a refugee. As a high priest who was "made like them, fully human in every way," He stands in solidarity with refugees throughout time and space. Shortly after His birth, Jesus and His parents fled an abusive and tyrannical government prepared to practice genocide to preserve power (Matthew 2:13-15). Jesus, especially as we encounter Him in the Gospel of Matthew, represents the experience of Israel, and His exile to Egypt is part of that journey.

Jesus reminds us that much of the experience of the Old Testament people of God was as a people marginalized, alienated, vulnerable and subject to the tyrannical powers of their age. Abraham was called to leave his homeland; Jacob left home in fear of Esau's revenge; Israel sojourned in Egypt, wandered in the wilderness, and then underwent a horrendous deportation and exile. King David lived much of his life on the run, as did the prophets.

God's people have a history of being forced to live on the move, forsaking the comforts and securities of home, regularly denied a settled life, forced to rely on the mercies of God. Those mercies are very often expressed through the compassion of others.

Jesus consistently expresses solidarity with poor and marginalized people throughout the Gospels. Jesus not only shares in the experience of refugees and others who suffer on the margins, but He defines His ministry and priorities in relation to their release. Jesus wants the captive set free, the hungry fed, the prisoner visited. In Luke's Gospel (4:16-19), Jesus begins His ministry with a riveting interpretation of Isaiah 61, where He states that the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him, anointing Him to proclaim liberty to the captives and good news to the poor. Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus fulfills the prophetic words of Mary in Luke 1, namely that He would raise up the downtrodden and fill up the lives of those deprived.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a parable about the judgment of the nations and reveals that the criteria for judgment is compassionate service to those in need: "Whatsoever has been done to the least of these brothers and sisters, you have done to me" – whether it be the provision of food and water, clothing, a visit, an intervention, a home and shelter, an identity card or a new beginning. More ominously, whatever has not been done for the least of these, has not been done for Jesus. Whether Jesus has in mind His followers specifically, or anyone else in need, He makes clear He is hidden among the poor and disenfranchised. His identification with them could not be clearer, nor could His summons to loving, compassionate action be any more straightforward. Why would we resist?

Why sponsor refugees? There are so many reasons. We are called, as individuals and as church communities, to be compassionate as God is compassionate. We are summoned to treat others as we would have them treat us. We are told the perfect sacrifice God desires is simply that we "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8).

We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves. And if we ever stumble over the definition of neighbour, wondering if there is some exemption clause for a neighbor we may not like or who makes us uncomfortable, we need only remind ourselves of the parable of the Good Samaritan. That traveler was commended precisely because he gave no thought to whether the miserable wretch on the side of the road was desirable or undesirable, worthy or unworthy, like him or unlike him. He simply responded in compassion. The Church is called to do the same.

Scripture repeatedly exhorts God's people to "love the stranger, for we were once strangers ourselves" (Deuteronomy 10:12). Loving our neighbour, whether they are near or far, Jesus says and shows, is the fulfillment of the law.

Any real encounter with the gospel quickly becomes a summons to a life of radical love of God and neighbour. Although these two loves are distinct, they are in the end not so different after all, for no one can love God while despising a neighbour. Churches cannot open the door to God but fail to open the door to the refugee. To ask, "Why should I love a refugee?" is like asking, "Why should I love God?"

World Renew, as one of the partners in the Sponsorship Agreement Holders Working Group (facilitated by The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada with members across Canada from various denominations and organizations) believe that sponsoring refugees is a tangible and immediate way of expressing love for God and love for neighbours. Individually as Christians and collectively as Christian communities, we put our faith into actions that can change lives, of both refugees and those who sponsor them. I myself have experienced the joy of welcoming refugees into our faith family – it is a both a joy and a gift for which I am immensely grateful.

Why should we sponsor refugees? Why, in heaven's name, would we not?