

Agents of Hope for Syrian Refugees

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People of spirit and good will, what is the appropriate response for victims of war, persecution, violence? How about shelter, sanctuary, a path to freedom? It is certainly not closing our doors, building bigger walls, opening family detention centers and punishing people who flee for their lives. Whether it is Central American children, South Sudanese youth or Syrian adults, they belong in a United States of America, whose brand is known by the words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your teeming masses, yearning to breathe free....” Our nation’s values of welcoming refugees – think of our welcoming Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam War – today are confronting the zealotry of a fear-driven, national security blanket.

How is it that a terror attack, whether in Paris, Lebanon, Nigeria or Mali, and the resulting destruction of human life should lead to a clampdown against a Syrian population that is fleeing from terror itself? How can countries with limited resources, Turkey and Jordan, extend hospitality to a million Syrians each, where in the U.S., people may have to wait months or longer for Congress to permit 10,000 Syrians to enter, let alone the 100,000 we should be welcoming. How can we hold that we are a nation of enduring religious and sacred values, yet fail to recognize the dignity of God’s creatures who want a sufficient, sustainable livelihood just like the rest of us?

Just as the root of war is fear, so too it is fear that drives the anti-refugee sentiment. As the Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America said:

We Christians and all others of good will cannot let fear rule the day. Fear paralyzes, divides people, fosters distrust and clouds judgments. We also stand shoulder to shoulder with people of faith who are firmly opposed to vengeful reprisals and prejudice. In particular, we are concerned for and committed to standing with our Muslim neighbors who are facing threats and acts of discrimination and hate from those who conflate Islam with terrorism.

For we who look into a refugee’s face – a Syrian face – we see the mirror of ourselves – “them” is us. For those who can only look at Syrian refugees as “other”, people may think “immigrant”, “Muslim”, “person of color”, and seek to exclude them. Yet, each of these human beings brings essential gifts and contributions to our nation’s fabric. Immigrants are critical to our economy, hard-working and family-oriented. Muslims (noting that Syrians are Christians too) believe in dignity, equality and liberty and justice for all no less than we do. People of color – including groups like Black Lives Matter – teach us that anti-racist work starts at home, and we can learn

from these communities of color to defang the social construct of race that erodes away our common humanity.

Indeed, the words of the Holy Qur'an as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, can humanize us, teach us peace, and guide us to right relationship with the Creator, each other and planet Earth (for example): "Human beings were created for a noble purpose." (2:30-31:6:165) "Respect all human life." (5:32) "Work for social justice and equality." (5:8) "And what will explain to you what the steep path is? It is the freeing of a (slave) from bondage; or the giving of food in a day of famine to an orphan relative, or to a needy in distress. Then will he be of those who believe, enjoin fortitude and encourage kindness and compassion." (90:12-17) (Source: Ithna-Asheri Association of the Northwest)

These religious teachings speak to our universal values and are consistent with the best hopes and expressions of our nation's aspirations: the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

President George Washington himself wrote in 1790 to the Hebrew Congregations of Newport, Rhode Island: "May the children of the stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." (Jon Meacham, American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation, p. 101). As our Muslim brothers and sisters are children of Abraham, this applies to them as well. Free exercise of religion, without imposition of one; sanctuary for those in fear who seek refuge; pursuing pathways of peace where all not just tolerate one another, but honor one another for the good will we bring to each other.

With regard to our Syrian brothers and sisters who are refugees, the Church Council of Greater Seattle stands on three principles:

1. *Refugees who flee persecution and violence deserve welcome and hospitality consistent with their dignity as human beings.*
2. *Peace with justice is built on the foundation that our security rests in God. Our tradition proclaims in the face of fear a message of peace that can transform situations of violence into ones where truth, accountability and reconciliation are possible.*
3. *Love is the ground and compass for our actions, a love without exclusions. Love is the vehicle to a healing and liberating wholeness whereby the "other" becomes part of a "we" together.*

We stand with Governor Inslee in his statement of commitment to welcome Syrian refugees to our state, as well as the Seattle members of Congress, the County Executive and the Mayor. The truth of our convictions brought together with our hearts of compassion foreshadow God's reign where freedom will ring, justice will ring and a song will ring where swords will be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and nations will not make war on nation any more.