

United Church of Christ

Refugee Justice Sunday Sermon Notes

June 16, 2019

Hebrews 13:1-2

Also read on: Year C – Season after Pentecost – Proper 12 (22)

13 Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:1-2 considers the importance of hospitality, specifically to those who are strangers. This text invites us into radical hospitality: caring for others we do not know, without being certain that we will get some kind of “reward” in return. It calls us to radical hospitality simply because we are all human beings on a journey.

The book of Hebrews was written to cheer on the Christian community in Jerusalem, inspiring them to persevere in the midst of persecution and to convince them that Jesus was truly the Messiah. The writing focuses heavily on the person of Christ and his role between God and humans. In the beginning of the writing, the author discusses God’s tradition of speaking to humans through prophets, and says that the most recent prophet, Jesus Christ, is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being,” (Hebrews 1:3).

The book builds on this theme of Christ’s vital role in God’s world by encouraging the community to pay attention and stay true to their faith, telling the reader that, in Christ, God has made a new covenant and way of being in the world. Toward the end of the book, in Chapter 11, the author summarizes other stories of faithful people from the Old Testament in order to encourage the community to live into their faith as their Matriarchs and Patriarchs did. Building on this theme and alluding to the story of Abraham and Sarah, the author then begins the final chapter, Hebrews 13, in the following way: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” This scripture harkens back to the story of Abraham and Sarah, who hosted angels disguised as strangers who ended up blessing Sarah – thus leading to their multitude of descendants and the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham.

The last chapter of Hebrews tells readers how best to serve God, and the very first instruction is to show hospitality to strangers. Hospitality in and of itself is an act of faith – that we can bear the expense of sharing food and drink, that those we are hosting will not take advantage of our kindness, and that the time we spend getting to know strangers will be worth our while, just to name a few. Hospitality is also one of the most underrated forms of service, where the best experiences of hospitality are the ones in which you don’t even have to ask for your needs to be met. Around the world, different cultures show hospitality in different ways. The best hospitality is a combination of providing practical needs (such as food, drink, and a relaxing place to sit) as well as a space for the fulfillment of deeper needs (a sense of security and safety, comfort in the surroundings, and space to breathe).

This passage calls us as readers to live into God’s vision for radical hospitality and meet the strangers among us with open arms, hearts, communities, and even homes.

The world today is experiencing the highest level of human migration in history. Refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, along with individuals filled with hopes and dreams who migrant by choice, are moving throughout the world in larger numbers than ever before. For refugees and asylum-seekers, the choice to flee is always one of last resort. No family or

individual chooses to make such a harrowing journey if they do not believe it to ultimately be safer than staying in their home country.

Refugees around the world are often forced to rely on the hospitality of strangers on their journey to safety. With [more forcibly displaced people in the world today than ever before](#), the need for individuals to practice radical hospitality only grows.

Every time a family is forced to flee their home, the need grows.

Every time a smuggler raises the price of reaching safety, the need grows.

Every time a person steps onto a flimsy raft, unable to swim and terrified for their life, hoping to reach safety on the other side, the need grows.

Every time a group of people crosses the desert in search of an oasis, not knowing where their next drink of water will come from, the need grows.

Every time a country builds higher walls, the need grows.

The global church is working to meet these ever-growing needs. The World Communion of Reformed Churches' Europe Committee created a Task Force on Migration and Refugees to reflect on scripture, theology, and practical on-the-ground know-how. Many [Global Ministries partner churches](#) contributed to [their report](#).

Faith communities across the United States have taken a stand against the current Administration's cruel "Remain in Mexico" policy that puts persons fleeing violence back in harms way. You can read their joint letter [here](#).

The current Administration is actively working to [dismantle and destroy the refugee resettlement process](#), cutting aid and the opportunity for safety from tens of thousands of people. The US's southern border is becoming more militarized, the "Muslim Ban" still stands, and only a trickle of refugees are being let into the country. Non-profits who work with the US government to be the practical face of hospitality in the midst of resettlement are forced to cut programs and staff, making them less able to handle refugee arrivals when people are allowed to enter the country.

And yet, through all this, the church is called to practice radical hospitality – even in the middle of an inhospitable empire that wants to break us down. This scripture reminds us of God's long history of sending prophets and angels to Her people, if only they will receive them. In today's world, it is part of our calling as people of God to respond with radical hospitality to those who seek safety and sanctuary. The UCC has a long history of reaching out to refugees – you can learn more [here](#).

**Sermon notes written by Ms. Kearstin Bailey, former [Global Mission Intern](#) working with refugee communities around the world. Ms. Bailey will begin studies at Brite Divinity School in the fall of 2019.*