



Seafarers and Sojourners A Lenten Reflection

Scripture

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”¹

Meditation

Last February 2nd, Cirillo, an Indian asylum seeker was released from the Elizabeth Detention Center pending an adjudication of his claim for asylum. Amid the strife between the Hindi and Moslem communities in India, Cirillo was persecuted for being Christian. His pre-adjudication release appears to be part of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) initiative to reform its non-criminal detention policies. Without an adjudication, however, Cirillo was not issued the requisite work permit to get a job and sustain himself. He was just released outside the gates.

So, Seafarers & International House will provide Cirillo with accommodations for a few months and, together with two relief organizations with which it is collaborating, will endeavor to secure him an adequate food allowance until he receives his refugee documents.

While we can all rejoice that Cirillo is no longer imprisoned, it is disconcerting to realize the extent to which immigrants, much less refugees and asylum seekers, are regarded as an anathema and threat by a significant segment of our society. Are we stoning those who are sent to us?

Of course, we can debate whether we sent for them or they just came uninvited. We can also debate whether immigrants reduce employment for our citizens or whether capitalism ignores national identities, seeking the cheapest labor markets and the most abundant product markets around the world.

The case of the refugee or asylum seeker is particularly poignant. These are people trying to escape persecution in their homelands. They are forced to leave their



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The case of the refugee or asylum seeker is particularly poignant. These are people trying to escape persecution in their homelands. They are forced to leave their

homes and families, to abandon their possessions and belongings and move to a strange and very often unwelcoming land. It's hardly a casual move.

In his essay, *Immigration and the Kingdom of the Left Hand*, Peter Meilander argues that Christians need not "find themselves tongue-tied trying to defend immigration regulations against charges of sheer self-interest ... Because we have obligations towards our fellow citizens and the life we share, we cannot be required to offer "a refuge to everyone in the world who could plausibly say that he needed it... But when the truly desperate actually show up in our towns, on our streets, before our doors...there is little left to do but turn the other cheek, offering not only our coats but our cloaks also."² A tepid welcome, at best.

In the forward to the book *THEY ARE US—LUTHERANS AND IMMIGRATION*, Martin Marty reminds us that in the Old Testament "anyone who was blocking the stranger or mistreating the alien — ancestors to today's immigrants — was committing one of the chief sins in the book: 'Remember, Israel, you were once aliens.'³ One might add, "Remember, America, you were once immigrants, and one hundred years from now, if Florida disappears under a rising sea level or Arizona's aquifers are exhausted, many of us may again become immigrants. Dare we hope for a warmer welcome?

Prayer

How far can we wander, Lord, without you? In our lives, we will encounter many children of God, from lands faraway, of different nationalities and with different customs. And they will encounter us. Guide us then, Lord, to receive each other with sacred hospitality. For blessed is that person who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.

1. [Luke 13:34-35](#)
2. Peter Meilander, *Immigration and the Kingdom of the Left Hand*, JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN ETHICS, December 2008, www.elca.org
3. Stephen Bouman and Ralston Deffenbaugh, *THEY ARE US—LUTHERANS AND IMMIGRATION*, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 2009

Seafarers & International House is ELCA mission to seafarers and sojourners in maritime ports from Philadelphia to Providence and in an 84-room guesthouse at 123 East 15th Street, New York, NY 10003.

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