

“Letting Go, Opening Up”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

As we gather together, may we remember...

When you share with me what is most important to you,
When I show you that I hear you,
When I say your life matters,
When I open the door to greet you,
When I venture out to bring you to shelter,
When I risk my comfort to ease your suffering,
When I act against hatred, violence, and injustice,
When we experience the full presence of each other,
That is where holy gratitude begins.

Words written by Andre Mol, one of my classmates from Meadville Lombard. Written for a particularly trying time in the United States, especially when families should have been gathering around tables of thanksgiving and gratitude. And yet these words speak to so many different contexts around our world today. Such as the ones we have already touched on this morning.

This congregation has been able to sponsor and welcome more than 20 refugees into Canada. You were able to open the door for them, to share hospitality with people when they have been at their most vulnerable. This congregation has been able to show that these peoples' lives matter. You have listened to them, and you have shared your compassion with them. And I am sure that they have offered so much gratitude in return. I too, was able to welcome refugees into Canada with my congregation in Calgary, but still I have wondered, have we done enough?

As Priya was mentioning in our conversation – getting to Canada is only half of the challenge for Displaced People coming here, perhaps it is even less than that. After having arrived here there are several different things that will cause mental health burdens, and in fact most of the challenges that refugees struggle with currently are not their past, but their present.

I can speak for myself in saying that moving away from a home where people know who you are, and people care about you is really hard. To move from a place where you know where to go to get the groceries that you need, and your hairstylist won't get your cut wrong, a place where understanding public transit is easy and convenient to navigate – moving to a place where these simple tasks become obstacles is just one aspect of the challenge that refugees have to wade through. I was lucky enough to move to Toronto with a secure job, and a place to stay until I found a place to live. A lot of the displaced people coming to Canada are not provided with adequate housing, or their housing is in the poorest, and potentially most dangerous neighbourhoods. They struggle to communicate with people here, because they are still learning English. Perhaps they don't

have jobs, or they are likely underemployed. The health system confuses them, and they have to manage filling out mountains of paperwork in order to see a doctor about their cough. The stress that I have overcome to travel across the country and live here in Toronto is miniscule compared to what some refugees are having to manage.

I can imagine that there are times when moving back home – even if it is a war torn home – could feel a lot more manageable than overcoming all of the challenges put on you now. At least when you were at home you knew where to buy fresh eggs and people smiled at you when walking down the street.

I believe that one of the most important aspects lifted up in Priya's presentation and in the Thanksgiving blessing that I have shared with you is about managing our own discomfort to ease the challenges of another person. That is to put someone else's needs ahead of your own, to put their survival, their health, their wellbeing ahead of the needs that we have of the relationship. And I believe that we struggle with this, people with privilege, whether it be Caucasian people, Males, Cis gendered or heterosexual people, or able bodied people – we struggle with stepping out of our comfort zones, because the world has been created for us to be able to stay in our comfort zones. The privilege and power that many of our ancestors had made it possible for us to ignore our discomfort and live life inside of these comfort zones – that end up causing harm to so many of our neighbours. These comfort zones, of having privilege over other people because of your identity, need to be let go.

When we are willing to let go of our own needs to sit in discomfort for the sake of another person “that is where courage begins.” And I know that letting go is hard work, we have witnessed it in the Journey Groups this month, and in many of the sermons already preached. And stepping outside of our comfort zone is often the most difficult thing that can be asked of us. But if stepping outside of your comfort zone allows someone else to take a step closer to theirs, if welcoming strangers in, or changing our point of view, hearing a different reality helps us move towards a fuller, more diverse, and beautifully beloved community, would you be willing to do it?

If being in relationship with displaced people meant answering their questions, about currency, bus fare, or doctors' appointments, and it also meant not asking them questions about before they moved here, about whether they miss home, or to tell us their stories – could we hold that space for them? I know that this might feel simplistic compared to combatting white pride, misogyny, homophobia, and ableism but remember what is being asked of us.

Priya suggests that to be a good ally for Displaced People we need to ensure that we are supporting their needs and not fulfilling our own. How do we overcome the urge to discover what these people have been through? How do we manage our interest and curiosity for other peoples' stories? When we manage to put ourselves in the passenger seat, and let the other person steer the conversation, we will learn from them what they need, and how we can work things out together. When we manage to step out of our comfort to make room for someone else's suffering, to help hold space for, and maybe try to ease their suffering – this is where courage begins.

This request, a conversation with people – to work alongside people, instead of insisting one group or the other knows best has been asked many, many times before. Aboriginal leaders across Canada and the United States have asked to be included in decision making, especially when decisions have an effect on them.

All over the continent conversations are being had, and protesters are gathering – many in North Dakota, but also in Northern BC and Alberta and in East Quebec – arguing about the pipelines being built through sacred lands. And pipeline protests are but one of the many conversations happening between Aboriginal People and those with power. The aboriginal people are asking the governments, the pipeline companies, the oil and gas companies to move outside of their comfort zones, in order to ease the suffering of their people. The aboriginal people ask those in power to move back from their places of privilege, and to put other people’s needs first in order to lift the burdens off of their shoulders. What possibilities could happen, what could we welcome to our world view, our understanding if we made room for these conversations, if governments truly listened to Aboriginal Peoples? If sponsors truly listened to the needs of refugees?

Many of you have read by now that Lynn, Shawn and I will be leaving this week to head to North Dakota to the Standing Rock Reservation, to answer the call of Chief Arvol Looking Horse for an interfaith day of prayer. The details of the protest can be found linked in the letter Shawn wrote in last night’s First Light, but I believe that I speak for both Lynn and Shawn when I say that we are going in order to be in solidarity with those who have been ignored. We go to pray beside them, to listen to what they need to say, to let go of our own needs in the moment, and to hold their needs, their suffering, and their truths ahead of our own. On December the 4th we will be letting go of our own needs to make room for the suffering, and needs of the Lakota, Nakota and Dakota peoples. I would ask, in what other ways can we let go, and open up to the world around us?