

Refugees in Search of Home
Hebrews 11, selected verses
Mark 8:27-38

“He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.’”

Because this is a Sunday of high celebration, we will eventually arrive and rejoice together in the home that is God’s love. We begin, however, with the fact that there are over four million homeless Syrians seeking refuge and a few million more who would if they could. Homecoming Sunday, at least this year, seems to me to be a theological and biblical misnomer. Just as the Israelites deceived themselves when they mistook real estate and secure national borders for the place God had promised Abraham when he set out, not knowing where he was going, so we deceive ourselves when we mistake this church, this congregation, even our great good fortune of being together after a summer apart, for coming home.

Jesus’ words in Mark and the preacher’s litany in Hebrews remind us that home is antithetical to the lot of those claimed for God’s service. So whether you left a four-bedroom two-car garage in the suburbs or a 900 square foot apartment in a retirement community to be here today; whether you have wandered through these doors as a stranger in search of a place to belong or you are celebrating over fifty years as a member of this church, what we know from our text is that all of us share the human condition being played out on the high seas and at the borders of nations in the lives of men and women and children whose luck-of-the-draw has found them in search of refuge. “We don’t know where we belong,” Annie Dillard writes, “but in times of sorrow it doesn’t seem to be here... here where space is curved, the earth is round, we’re all going to die, and it seems as wise to stay in bed as budge.” We are homeless, you and I, children of God who live in a far country.

Three very different words are used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe the homeless lot of human beings. The words are migrant, refugee, and pilgrim.

Consider, in the first place, the migrant. Synonyms for migrant include traveling, wandering, drifting, roving. When nation-states identify people as migrants, often the law assumes that the migrant has chosen to leave one home for another; has set out in some degree of freedom for a new life; is seeking something better; is longing for a new beginning. I suspect the vast majority of us, especially the WASPS among us, have a story to tell about ancestors who set out for these shores from some other country.

Using the same synonyms, you could say that the summer made migrants of most of us. We travelled, we drifted, we roved, we wandered. If you want to know where and how, begin in Widener after the service of worship and see the places we have gone, the sights we have seen, the drifting we have done over the past three months. But in most every case, we *chose* to set out, *decided* the itinerary, *picked* the people who would travel by our side. Once on the road, we lingered in some places and left others that did not strike our fancy.

Using the same synonyms one more time, some of us are spiritual migrants as well: drifting, roving, wandering all of our lives from one set of beliefs and practices to another, leaving a community when our needs were not met, trying out this god or that philosophy, then moving on. “Tell me, where is the road I can call my own,” the choir soon will sing, “that I lost so long ago? All these years I have wandered...” As it was with summer vacation, so it is with our search for God: we are migrants led by an elusive longing that propels us to hit the road again. “What is that feeling,” Jack Kerouac asks in *On the Road*, “when you’re driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? – it’s the too-huge world vaulting us, and it’s good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies.” Migrants, drifters,

wanderers, seekers with no inkling of a destination.

Consider, in the second place, the refugee. The synonyms for refugee? Fugitive, exile, displaced person, asylum seeker, boat people. A refugee is one who has been forced to leave home in order to escape war or persecution or natural disaster. Why, then, on the front page of Thursday's New York Times, did the headline read, "E.U. Nations Urged to Accept 160,000 *Migrants*"? Notice, in the week ahead, how the words migrant and refugee are used interchangeably when the media or politicians speak about the men and women and children who are being smuggled onto boats, herded behind barbed wire, and finally, maybe finally, being taken in by a handful of nations. Synonyms cannot contain the reality, which is why I turned to poet Warsan Shire, child of Somali parents, in search of the meaning of refugee. She writes:

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.
no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
make it clear that you wouldn't be going back.
you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of

a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied
no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where
your body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough
the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry...
messed up their country and now they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks

roll off your backs
maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off
or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child's body
in pieces.
i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you

to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hungry
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important
no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice
in your ear
saying-
leave,
run away from me now
i don't know what i've become
but i know that anywhere is safer than here.

One way or another, the refugee is one who seeks refuge in the world from death dealers, from the deathly powers and principalities, from deadly systems that stalk the politically and economically and physically vulnerable more immediately, more obviously, more ruthlessly than the privileged. I imagine that, once you have been a refugee, an indelible awareness of vulnerability must be written into your psyche, keeping you ready, at a moment's notice, to flee. And while gratitude for the offer of asylum may open the hearts of those taken in, trust in the outward trappings of safety and belonging must be hard to come by. Ask the descendants of slaves, the great grandchildren of Holocaust victims, the families of the disappeared in Central America. If longing characterizes the homelessness of the migrant, then fear is personified in the life of the refugee because death has not been conquered, only kept at bay.

What, then, of the pilgrim? Here synonyms do not avail. Suffice it to say that the homelessness of a pilgrim is not the result of a pilgrim's choice to wander in search of she knows not what or the consequence of a despot's murderous threats against her life and the lives of those she loves, causing her to run. A pilgrim, in fact, may have been wandering aimlessly in life for

decades, or may even be on the run for her life from disaster when she is simply stopped in her tracks by the call, the claim, the voice of one who has come to lead her to the home that is God's love. The voice says, in so many words, "If you would become my follower, deny yourself (give up the life you were living without God) and take up your cross (live as though death had no power over you) and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lost their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The pilgrim is no less homeless because he has heard these words as God's Word to him. But now, because he has heard and has begun to follow the voice of the one who had no place to lay his head, he travels not alone but accompanied, in life and in death, by the God who is his home. Moreover, he is accompanied by the one who is on his way to conquer death by dying. Therefore death no longer has dominion over the pilgrim.

I spent Thursday and Friday representing our denomination at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of Lebanese American University. The majority of the board was from Lebanon, a country of three and a half million citizens that has taken in one and a half million Syrian refugees, refugees the world has already forgotten. I have asked Fadi Dagher, General Secretary of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, to help us hear, in the voices of a refugee family, the voice of God calling us to set out, not knowing where we are going. I talked with him about how, together, we might become the Protestant pope, organizing congregations throughout this land to advocate for and sponsor the settlement of refugees. I imagine the voices of the homeless, across the sea and down the avenue, to be the voice of Christ saying to us: lose your life and you will be given your life; leave your home, for only if you leave your home will you find the home that is God's love.

The pilgrimage begins with one step. "The first step cuts the disciple (the pilgrim) off from

his previous existence. The first step places the disciple in the situation where faith is possible,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer says. The first step “is not the first stage of a career. Its sole justification is that it brings the disciple into fellowship with Jesus.” Sometimes the first step is as ordinary as stepping through the door of a church and hearing a voice who says to you as the choir sings, “Rise up, follow me. I will lead you home.” Welcome home!