

“A mighty woman with a torch... and her name is Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome... Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” Surely you all know where that poem is written. (1883 poem by Emma Lazarus, on the Statue of Liberty.)

Our World is now flooded with refugees, from war, natural disasters, pestilence, more than ever now with the Ukrainians fleeing their homeland that is under attack. And we have Afghan families right in Newburyport due to the take over by the Taliban and the extremists there.

How do we respond as followers of Jesus? Jesus followed exhortations in the Jewish scriptures to welcome the stranger, to treat strangers as if they were citizens. (Leviticus 19:34) Jesus was also clear in Matthew 25 that even as we clothed any naked or fed any hungry we were actually doing it to himself! And of course his famous sermon on the mount: “Blessed are the poor, and the poor in spirit, and those who mourn.” Jesus surely had a priority for ministry to and with any who were marginalized or oppressed in any way!

In this morning’s gospel reading, we hear a second version of the story of Jesus helping the fishermen find fish, and then finding so many fish that it seemed the nets might break. In this version of the story, it is interesting that someone bothered to count the number of fish caught, and came up with 153. There are many theories as to why that number might be symbolic, but one often spoken of is that in that day, many believed there were 153 different species of fish. Accordingly, the 153 fish caught would represent all the varieties of people in the world.

Both stories of the amazing catch have the challenge by Jesus to go out into the world and spread good news: in the one, he said to go fish for people, and in today’s reading, Peter is told to go out and

care for his sheep, sheep of course being a metaphor for those Jesus cared for, essentially all “God’s children.” We know that Jesus said in another place that he had sheep in other folds, so feeding and caring for his sheep would naturally include people of other lands and other cultures. Thus we do have a mandate from our Lord himself to feed and care for those who need it most, like refugees.

One thing we can do, and perhaps the easiest, is to send money to people who are welcoming refugees first hand, giving money to trusted mission workers. We are forwarding moneys from the Medema concert to our local churches, the UU church, St. Paul’s and Central church, for working directly with Afghan refugees. The Pastor of Marlborough UCC, Kaz Bem, is working for refugees. He was born in Poland and has first hand knowledge of where money is currently being spent in Poland. His work and that of his church can be seen on our SNEUCC web page under justice news. There are now more than 2.6 million Ukrainian refugees in Poland, about 8% of Polish population. 31 UCC churches have raised about \$50,000 for refugee aid being sent through the Marlborough UCC church.

It is one thing to send money, a good thing for sure. But it is another thing to get a first hand look and have hands-on experience with mission with the most needy of God’s children. Jesus asked Peter 3 times if Peter loved him. There are several words for Love used, and one of them was Agape. Jesus asked Peter, Do you “Agape” me? And the key meaning here is about Love in Action, Love that can involve sacrifice. It’s as if Jesus were saying “If you *really* love me, you will take action, you will care for my sheep, tend to them and feed them... it may take some real effort, even sacrificial effort.” Remember that Peter was the one who asked Jesus to stop talking about suffering and sacrifice, and Jesus set him straight, saying the Son of man *must* suffer, and that Peter was talking from a human perspective, not from a Godly perspective. So Peter denied Jesus 3 times in Jesus’ last days, and Jesus then asked him 3 times

about his love. The love that Jesus taught had to be very intentional, involving effort, even sacrifice for others. Mature Love brings responsibilities, tasks, even sometimes particular crosses to bear. Jesus was clear with Peter at the end of this story that when we are older we will be led to places we would rather not go.

We don't want to look closely at the suffering of this world, and surely do need a break from it! But we do have to acknowledge its reality and be honest about it. Ken Medema named his company Briar Patch Music, because he loved the stories of Brer Rabbit, who spent time in uncomfortable places, and Ken said that as a blind guy, he has always been in uncomfortable places in his life, so he has natural empathy for people going through uncomfortable and painful times. It seems like most of his songs move from some manner of suffering through a transformative time into more comfort and healing.

We are fortunate to have Dorothy still here to interpret for us one of Ken's songs called *Song of the Refugee*, which we heard in one of the concerts. Through Ken's poetry, we get a first-hand look at the plight of a refugee. People are then no longer statistics and political problems to be solved. When we think of the real day to day needs, and the loss of home and family, our hearts open to want to help as we are able.

Song of the Refugee, by Ken Medema

*I am a stranger here in a strange land. I have left behind me my home and kin. I am an alien, I am unwanted, and there is no one to take me in. Who will be friend me? Who will defend me? Who will extend me an open hand? Who will stand beside me? Who'll walk before me, for I am a stranger here in this land. Down in my homeland while you are sleeping, the voice of weeping is never still. Down in my village, place of my childhood, the soldier enters to maim and kill. And in my dreaming, I hear the screaming, while blood is streaming across the land. Who will stand beside me? Who will walk before me, for I am a*

*stranger here in this land. Here in your city, I seek my people, who know my sorrow, who know my pain, who speak my language, who love my homeland, and from the ashes we'll build again. My heart is burning, my soul is yearning for my returning to my own land. Who will stand beside me? Who will go before me, for I am a stranger here in your land.*

Over all the ages, Jesus' call is clear, to care like a shepherd, for all those in any kind of need... to "feed" his sheep, which means both physically with food, and spiritually with words of truth and grace and guidance. Next week we have a guest speaker, Rev. James Ross, our UCC minister for diversity equity and inclusion. He says there is no Easter without Good Friday. He wonders about a desire to skip ahead to Easter in our racial justice work, to say racism is over, without spending time in the hard space of deep repentance and meaningful reparation. He says we must engage the pieces that frighten us, and we must embrace the discomfort. He is called by the UCC to help us work for justice, to right wrongs, and become a more inclusive society. We are continually being asked, in Ken's words, Who will befriend me, who will defend me? Who will stand beside me? Who will go before me?

Let's keep those questions at the forefront of our thinking, as we find new ways to follow our Risen Lord.