

**A Sermon by the Rev. Claudia C. Schmitt, Pastor
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Journey for a Just Peace

Matthew 25:31-40

The refugee crisis in Africa and the Middle East and, in particular, in Syria, has been heavy on my heart and mind, as I am sure it has been for many of you. The images of thousands of people walking across vast, desolate landscapes, the films of desperate, dirty, exhausted, hungry human beings as they clash with heavily armed soldiers along a Hungarian bobbed wired fence, and the photograph of Aylan, the three year old child who lay face down on a Turkish beach have brought me to tears—wanting to help but feeling helpless and overwhelmed with the human suffering.

Then a friend recommended that I watch a video of refugees getting off trains in Munich, Germany. In this video the German people are cheering these refugees, welcoming them and offering them gifts of food and clothing and little toys for the children. That, too, brought me to tears; but in contrast with feeling overwhelmed, the scene from Munich gave me hope for humanity, a sense of gratitude for Germany, and an aspiration to make a contribution myself. In Europe we see both sides of humanity: people who fear and push away the needy, and those who embrace and receive others.

Father Papa Stratis, a Greek Orthodox priest who died two weeks ago, had been working with volunteers since 2007 with the non-profit group called Agkalia. He said that in all these years he estimates that he has helped some ten thousand people, including a few locals fallen on hard times. But never before has he seen so many refugees looking for help. In an interview with the United Nations refugee agency he said “I have seen small children with blisters on their feet and pregnant women holding their bellies and crying in pain. These people are not migrants; they do not choose to come here. They are children of war, fleeing bullets. They are life-seekers, they search for life, hope, and the chance to live another day.”

Now, the plight of people who become refugees because of civil war, religious conflicts, cultural clashings, environmental disaster and all the other myriad reasons, is not a new thing. People being forced to leave their homes has gone on since the beginning of human existence. Today however, with our social media, television, internet and all the other communication media, the images, the sounds, and the descriptions of the struggle and suffering remind us daily of horrors that we don't want to see and or even acknowledge. This is understandable.

The World Council of Churches reports, “Faith communities worldwide have noted that the world is seeing the largest number of displaced people since World War II. Erol Kekic, executive director of the Immigration and Refugee Program for Church World Services, reports that, ‘More than 60 million people have been displaced from their homes. . . . Syria is the largest crisis we are facing but let's not forget Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.’” According to a 2015 report from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, more than 13 million people worldwide have fled conflicts and crises in which religion has been a key factor. The numbers are staggering.

In my former role as a chaplain at Children's Hospital one of the difficulties facing staff was the potential to develop “Compassion Fatigue” or “Secondary Traumatic Stress.” The staff who work at the hospital were typically daily witnesses to the sickness, suffering, and even death of children. Constant exposure to painful, stressful, tragic events, even if it isn't your own experience, can lead one to feel hopeless and develop an inability to enjoy life. Sometimes an individual can have constant anxiety. One can't sleep or will have nightmares. People who suffer from compassion fatigue become brittle and negative in their

demeanor and outlook. To address this concern the hospital offered a wide array of classes for staff related to developing resilience and preventing compassion fatigue.

I personally remember well the impact of compassion fatigue. I had worked for Children's Hospital for about three years when I had a wake-up moment. It had already been a very difficult week and I remember walking through the Neonatal ICU when a nurse came to me and said, "Have you met the family in bed 8? You probably should." I knew what she meant. I burst into tears and I thought, "I can't do it, I can't do it," and I left the unit weeping. I then took a deep breath, sucked it up, and prepared myself to meet the family in bed 8. I would go on to work there for ten more years, but that day was a turning point in my chaplaincy. I knew that if I was going to stay human and alive and connected and compassionate I would have to do something.

I developed some creative interests and engaged in pursuits that filled my soul. Probably the most important aspect of restoring my compassion was to deepen my relationship with God through prayer, meditation, and psychotherapy, and I developed an outlook of trust in God. God was present, reconciling, and comforting, and the God I believe in could transform suffering, even if sometimes years down the road. I reminded myself that their story was not my story. I was entering their story and perhaps offering a hand of hope and compassion, but their story was not my story and their pain was not mine to take home. My faith and my sense that God was with me, guiding me, working through me, helped me to be present with strength, peace, and compassion, and equipped to face whatever situation I might encounter.

There is now research suggesting that overexposure to tragic media images has contributed to widespread public compassion fatigue and that, as a result, the public has become cynical and even resistant to helping people who are suffering. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma writes, "Reports about international crises; war, famine, disease, brutality and other major conflicts abroad can have mixed effects at home." Journalist, photographer and scholar Susan Moeller has written extensively about the subject of compassion fatigue. She has found a phenomenon in which news stories about particularly egregious events abroad elicit less compassion from readers

and viewers because they do not perceive that there is anything that can be done about the situation, and they find it difficult to understand the complexity of factors that result in unspeakable crimes against humanity—and so they tune out. [See more at: <http://dartcenter.org/content/self-study-unit-3-photography-trauma-3#.Vf4CuBFViko>]

And so here we are, Wheat Ridge Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ: almost 7,000 miles away from Syria, with the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea between us. How do we not tune out? How do we as a people of faith keep caring without becoming callous, get informed without becoming overloaded, and stay motivated to dig deep in order to understand a complex international crisis? How do we stay passionate and energized when the problems are omnipresent? It is natural and even needed to turn away and shut it off at times, but as Christians we are called to respond. This raises the question of what a Christian response is in the face of humanitarian crisis that involves Christians and non-Christians who are so far away. What does it mean to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The Bible is replete with stories, commands, proclamations, and parables about the mandate to treat the other, the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, the alien, and even the enemy with justice, love and compassion. In an excellent paper written by the World Council of Churches called "The other Is My Neighbor," we read, "The challenge of prophecy and of Jesus' teaching is to liberate and equip Christians to have the courage to work for alternative community, to work for peace and justice, *which is to address the causes that uproot people*. . . . Christians are called to be with the oppressed, the marginalized, and the excluded in their suffering, their struggles and their hopes. A ministry of accompaniment and advocacy with uprooted people upholds the principles of prophetic witness and service—we cannot desert the 'needy,' nor set boundaries to compassion. The realm of God is a vision of a just and united world" (citing Hebrews 13:2, Luke 10:25-37, and Jeremiah 5-7).

Jesus pretty much sets it out for us in the scripture that Deb read. He says, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you

clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' He answers, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" There is simply no way for us to avoid the fact that Jesus was always advocating for the disenfranchised, the rejected, and the poor, and that his message was not one of just alleviating suffering but of transforming the political, economic, and social systems that lead to inequality, injustice, hunger, poverty and war.

In his book *Call to Conversion*, Jim Wallace says, "The spiritual fact that all of us—rich and poor and in-between—are one humanity. The absolute value of every human being must be regained if we are to have any future." He recounts a lesson he learned from a wise old man who taught him the difference between concern and compassion. "Being concerned is seeing something awful happening to somebody and feeling, 'Hey that's really too bad.' Having compassion is seeing the same thing and saying 'I just can't let that happen to my brother or sister.'"

In other words, concern comes from the recognition of a problem, but compassion comes out of a *feeling of relationship*. When we feel connected to the other, we feel that they matter. When we have a relationship with God, we are empowered to face the needs of the world. When we have a relationship with the example and Spirit of Christ we get our strength and our hope and our compassion from this transcendent source of our life.

In 1985 a movement called the Just Peace movement began in the United Church of Christ. During a General Synod meeting, President Robert Moss stated, "We now need to put as much effort into defining a just peace as we have done in the past in defining a just war." This concept and movement evolved to mean "*the interrelation of friendship, justice, and common security from violence.*" It has been thirty years since the movement began, but I propose to you that "Just Peace" is needed now more than ever. Our National UCC website says, "Just Peace focuses attention on transforming systemic injustice of all types using

non-violence, and calls us to offer a message, grounded in the hope of reconciliation in Jesus, that 'Peace is possible.'" The journey toward a just peace is slow and its impact is sometime imperceptible, but it is a journey that calls us to be both inwardly transformed and renewed so we can do the outward work of Justice and Peace with clarity, perspective and power. The woes of the world can be overwhelming but we can make a difference.

Loren Eisely, an American anthropologist and educator, provides a wonderful parable for us to keep in mind. "Once upon a time there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work. One day as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to the day, and so he walked faster to catch up. As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean. The observer came closer still and called out 'Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?' The young man paused, looked up, and replied 'Throwing starfish into the ocean.' The somewhat startled wise man asked, 'Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?'

To this, the young man replied, 'The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die.' Upon hearing this, the wise man answered, 'But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!' At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, 'It made a difference for that one.'"

I'll be honest. I don't know what the best thing is that we can do for Syria. We will take a offering, we will make contributions, and our money will be used wisely and it will make a difference. What we can do is do what we *can* do. We aren't going to save the world, but we can make a difference as we treat ourselves and others with respect. Whether it is taking a cart of groceries to the Jeffco Action Center or making up cots and creating an atmosphere of hospitality and welcome for the Women's

Homelessness Initiative, each act of treating the stranger as a neighbor reminds us of our humanity and theirs.

Even as world communities continue to clash, our simple prayers make a difference. As we study to understand the causes of injustice, we make a difference. We make a difference because it is God

who supports us and who goes with us. The journey of a just peace is slow, but each act of peace in our homes, each act of humanity toward each one another, each prayer offered, is a step in the journey. May we continue to be a community of peace together. Amen.
