***The Good Migrant***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, June 3, 2018

Luke 10:25-37

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“Who is my neighbour,” the lawyer wanted to know. “Who?” So Jesus told this story, more or less:

Once upon a time, there was a young woman who went for a walk along New York’s Great Crazy River, just south of Roxham Rd., near Quebec’s Lacolle border crossing.

While on her walk, some thugs who were running drugs across the border accosted her, dragged her behind a bush, assaulted her, and stole her purse. They left her bloody and unconcious.

Well, as it happened, soon after, a CEO on her way to the airport saw this woman out of the corner of her eye as she drove by. The CEO slowed her car to get a better look. The lady seemed dead, or maybe she was taking a nap. Yes, thought the CEO, she must be taking a nap! And, since she was on a tight schedule—she needed to catch her plane to go to a meeting to persuade dissident shareholders to not disrupt a shareholders’ meeting—the CEO drove on by “the sleeping woman.”

Soon after, a young man playing hookie from work—he had called in sick—came upon the woman while driving his SUV. He was on his way to the Zoo Park Safari, just over the border. He planned to meet his Quebecois girlfriend there, see the animals, have lunch, and go home. He slowed down too, but not much. After all, if he stopped and it got to be a thing, in the news or something, he’d probably be fired. This wasn’t his first extra sick day. His girlfriend would be left high and dry waiting for him, too. So he kept on going.

Finally, minutes later, two Haitian migrants—a man and a woman—came walking along the river bank. They were in the USA illegally, and planned to cross into Canada to claim asylum. They saw the young woman too. They rushed to her side and ascertained that she was alive.

The Haitian lady opened her suitcase and made a tourquinet out of some socks, and applied it to a large gash on her arm. He forced some water down her lips. Then the Haitian man told his wife to cross the border without him. Next, he picked the injured girl up, walked to the road, and carried her 250 meters to Thibideau’s Repair shop on Perry Road. The mechanics called an ambulance and the police. The Haitian tried to slip away, but a trailing police unit noticed him, stopped him, and arrested him. He was incarcerated at the ICE detention centre in Plattsburgh, New York, from where he was eventually deported back to Haiti.

Now, remember how the parable began. The lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbour?” And when Jesus had finished his unsettling story, the audience expected that the answer to this question was, “Well, that poor assaulted girl. She’s the neighbour. People in trouble are our neighbours. We have to help them.”

But, Jesus unexpectedly flips the lawyer’s question. He doesn’t ask “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus asks “who was a neighbour to the assaulted girl?”

This was a big “aha” moment for the audience. Could it be that the strange Haitians on the run were their “good” neighbours? Migrants? Really?

It's nearly impossible for us, today, to fathom how much the Jews in Jesus’ day were oppressed by the reality of foreigners in their land. Roman soldiers and barbarian mercenaries kept order through violence. Greek-speaking athletes exercised, naked, in a Jerusalem gym, causing an uproar in the local population. Ethiopian and Syrian merchants were camped out around the temple. Landless refugees, driven from their properties by Roman taxes and expropriation in Galilee, were turning Jerusalem into one large ghetto. And Samaritans—Ironically not true migrants, since they had never left Juday for exile in Bablyon, but despised nonetheless for marrying non-Jews--Samaritans were absolutely loathed.

But in his parable, Jesus turned these very same migrants into potential heros, who for all their uninvited tramping around in their land, were nevertheless fully human, totally neighours. He healed exiled lepers and kept excommunicated prostitutes as company, ate with tax collectors in the pay of the Romans, and according to one story, even raised a migrant girl, Talitha, from the dead. Along the way, Jesus didn’t explore whether or not any of these people should be in the land, or whether they had the same customs as most Jews or argue that they should be assimilated. No. Jesus focused on everyone’s essential humanity.

Like it or not, Jesus was saying, “foreigners are your neighbours”—no, they are your “good” neighbours. And you know what God said about love and neighbours in our today’s passage. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; *and* your neighbor as yourself.”

The migrant, whether sinner or saint; the migrant, whether a trafficked woman or temporary farm worker; the migrant, whether heretic or Haitian; the migrant, whether a so-called illegal or mercenary, all these interlopers running around Israel were Jesus’ neighbors.

Okay. So that is the parable, and I am sure that it leaves many of you with questions. For example, “well, they may not be illegals, but even neighbours have to obey the laws!” And, while it is actually not against the law to show up at the border and claim asylum, I get that migrants showing up in Canada are an irritation. We feel we are being taken advantage of. We feel like they should have chosen the regular border crossing and waited in line with all other refugees applying from overseas. A country has to police its borders, control population movement from abroad for the sake of social order, for the sake of those waiting in line, as our Syrian refugees have been waiting for years.

At the same time, perhaps as a spillover on account of the anti-immigrant hysteria down south, some of the language and proposed solutions I’m hearing about the flow of migrants into Canada is not sounding very neighbourly. “Deport them without a hearing! Canada needs to build a wall! Stuff them into detention centres.” This kind of rhetoric can be found in any of Canada’s newspapers, op ed pages, all over Facebook, and around water coolers at work.

The thing about Jesus’ parable is this—we don’t get to choose who counts as a neighbour. They just are. Like Jesus, who spent his last years with nowhere to lay his head or call home, everyone, regardless of where they were born or their legal status, is our neighbour. And, according to another parable told in Matthew, to the degree we feed, visit, clothe and care for these our neighbours, even the ones in jail, even the ones we don’t much like, we do it to Jesus. At least, that is Jesus’ point, radical proposal.

So, what do we do about our neighbour migrants? Well, while I would never advocate just swinging the doors open and letting everyone come, I do want to treat the ones who arrive with kindness and grace.

Mind you, I love due process. I do not advocate letting anyone come, at any time, without consequence. But, in truth, Canada is trying to handle the flood of immigrants in mostly reasonable, thoughtful ways that deserve our support when we discuss such matters on the internet or at work. This is a process. Migrants get immigration hearings. Those who have reason to fear for their lives or well-being—about 60%, right now—are allowed to stay, as international law requires. The other 40% will be sent home after due process. The Canadian government works with the Haitian and Nigerian governments and informal social networks to inform potential migrants of their chances, about the risks they take, and the likely outcome if they do not face threats in their home countries. That’s all good.

But we must treat them as guests until due process is followed. They should be provided adequate living arrangements, medical care, and a swift resolution to their claims. They do not deserve to be vilified for trying to grasp a better life. They do not, as in some countries, deserve being separated from their children, and then have the children locked up. If we faced the same dire straits as many migrants do, we would try for a better life too—that’s where loving our neighbours *as ourselves* comes into play.

Think about it. The New Testament message is that Jesus has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that separated Jews from gentiles like us. Paul wrote, "once you were exluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise and without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near." We are all migrant neighbours to each other.

Over two years ago, LPCC signed up to welcome duly processed, card-carrying Syrian refugees—people who followed all the rules—to Toronto. We hope, this week perhaps, to welcome them home. The work of the committee that pulled this all together, the generosity of so many of you to raising funds, the unconditional willingness to do this—I love that about this congregation.

In fact, Lawrence Park Community Church has a long, long history of doing what it can to welcome and support refugees searching for a better life. Some of our refugee families have done well, others not. They are, in this, just like us.

On the other hand, migrants who show up at the border, unannounced, challenge our settled ideas and preconceptions about how to react. Their unexpected arrival is a political, practical, even irritating problem for non-profits and our government. We can’t ignore these problems. We must face up to them. I’m a minister, mind you, so I will not presume to tell you how, exactly, we should handle these political and legal issues.

But Jesus has provided us with the moral benchmark that we should use as individuals to guide how we engage the legalities and politics, and how we should treat these guests until such time we resolve their cases. The moral benchmark is that these migrants, like the Haitians migrants in his parable, are our neighbours. And, as the old camp song goes, they will know us by our love.