

Jumping the Queue?

What do we do about refugees who ‘Jump the Line?’

Sermon Four in a Four Part Series on Patriotism

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Romans 12:9-17

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A few weeks ago, a member of our congregation asked me to preach a sermon that touched on the issue of immigration “queue jumpers.”

This member pointed out that on the one hand, here at LPCC, we’re sponsoring a Syrian refugee family, the Houranis. She loves that. But she is also frustrated. We responded to the government’s plea for sponsors. We did so in a timely fashion. We raised money to support that project. Using social media, we are getting to know the Hourani family.

But nearly two years later, the family has not arrived. Why? The reasons are complex, but a key factor is that once the promised 35,000 refugees arrived, the government withdrew its extra immigration workers from the front lines in the Middle East.

Now there are not enough immigration officers to process the thousands more Syrian refugees Canadians have lined up to sponsor in a fit of patriotic pride and True North compassion, strong and free.

So, we wait. It’s a bureaucratic mess, and all of our amazing Cecelia’s phone calls and letters and emails and meetings with Rob Oliphant, our MP, couldn’t put that mess together again.

Still, there is a critical need for Canada to accept more refugees. There are now nearly 60 million refugees in the world, doubling the number from only five years ago. Meanwhile, Syria burns, as do half-a-dozen other Middle Eastern and African nations, the source of most of these new refugees. Tens of millions of people are on the move trying to escape the violence, climate change, droughts, starvation, and repression. Europe has already taken millions in, which puts Canada’s 45,000 Syrians, so far, into perspective.

In the meantime, some of these millions of refugees—a few thousand, last year--crossed over the USA border to claim asylum here in Canada. These refugees somehow escaped fields in their home countries that no longer grew crops, skies that do not turn dark with rain, terrorists who run their nations; these refugees avoided boarding boats that sank in the Mediterranean, prison-like refugee camps along the way, and American immigration police. Finally, they braved people smugglers and cold and ice. And when they finally stepped into Canada they gladly turned themselves over to Canadian police.

Sometimes these refugees are called queue jumpers. Sometimes they are called undocumented refugees. And sometimes they are called illegals. Unlike our Syrian family, these people have not filled out the paper work before arrival in Canada. But now, they're here anyway.

What should we think of such people and their situation? Well, two things, one rooted in scripture and one in Canadian and international law.

First, scripturally, we need to keep in mind that these people are not illegals. "Illegal," is a word used to dehumanize people. They are not "illegals," but humans, people who have as much right to life, liberty and happiness as anyone else in the world, and as much right to seek such life, liberty and happiness as we have. Borders do not change who refugees fundamentally are. Each of the world's fifty million refugees is a neighbour of ours. And each of them is exactly the sort of person Jesus would die for.

What is more, in Jewish and Christian teaching, refugees hold a place of honour as the moral test case for whether we really know how to embrace the least and the last. How we treat them is a measure not of the refugee, but of our own humanity. So, says Paul, in one of the many lists of rules Christians are supposed to follow that we find in all of Paul's letters—they are called "house rules" by Biblical scholars—so, says Paul, to poor Christians in another era: "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." He adds, "rejoice with those who rejoice," but also, "weep with those who weep." He says, "do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly."

But there is a second reason why refugees who show up at our doorstep are not illegals. You see, in fact, they *are* here legally. Refugees are permitted to cross into Canada in order to seek safety. The Canadian Council for Refugees puts it this way: "International and Canadian law protect the right of refugees to flee to safety, even if that means those refugees enter the country in violation of immigration laws." What *is illegal* according to Canadian and international law is *penalizing people* for technically breaking immigration laws in order to enter Canada to find safety.

I should add that here I am not primarily speaking of the estimated 400,000 people who are living as undocumented immigrants in Canada. The fact that those people, too, are in Canada is worth another sermon, I suppose. The principles that should guide our treatment of these undocumented Canadians are not that different than what I will be laying out here, though they are a special case with its own difficulties. But what I'm really speaking about here are those refugees who cross into Canada and claim asylum, the ones who have been in the news of late.

What makes their cases a bit more complicated is that the USA and Canada have a "Safe Third Country Treaty," which means that refugees cannot claim that status in Canada if they have passed through immigration in the USA, first. They must make their claim in the USA. Unfortunately, given the temporary ban on all refugee claims in the US from six Muslim nations,

the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Trump, the large increase of summary deportations without due process in the US, the increased use of detention centres, and the criminalization of refugees—given all these measures, nearly all refugees prefer to remain undocumented in the USA and slip into Canada.

The thing is, according to Canadian law, these refugees who claim asylum after slipping into Canada are actually not jumping the queue. They are, rather, joining a different queue in Canada, one that has its own lawful regulations, timelines, advantages and disadvantages apart from the queue our Syrian family is stuck in. Like a person who applies income tax laws, legally, to minimize his or her tax liabilities, these refugees are applying Canadian and international refugee law to minimize the danger of being sent back to the USA or their country of origin. And, while they have not waited for two years in Ankara for the Canadian embassy to approve their claim, they may have spent twice that long on a dangerous sea and road journey to get here—and they face a long process to regularize their status once they are in this country.

Still, it irks us. We are tempted to be legalistic and harsh on account of our love of order and predictability. It just doesn't feel fair. We do as we're told, and our refugee family still isn't here. The recent Manitoba and Quebec refugees who just show up in the woods don't have to wait. How do we handle our disappointment?

Well, here's a parable to help us keep the whole matter in perspective.

Joey was 15. His parents had to go away for the weekend. They agreed to let Joey stay home alone for the first time. But they also set down some house rules. No parties. No drinking. Take phone messages. And clean up after yourself. No one said that Joey couldn't take out his dad's 12,500 dollar Bianchi Oltre XR4 bicycle for a spin—but Joey knew the score. Dad's bike was off limits.

So, Joey didn't party. He put his pizza boxes in the recycle bin. But the temptation to ride his dad's bike was too much. Joey took it for a spin.

While doing so, on the edge of a Walmart parking lot, Joey saw a little girl who seemed lost. She was sobbing. Worse, she was wandering out from between parked cars into the traffic lanes. She was so short that drivers might run over her without even seeing she was there. So, Joey stopped. He told her everything would be okay. When she couldn't say what her name was or where her parents were, Joey called 911 and stayed with her till the police arrived. Unknown to Joey, an Amber alert had gone out a half hour before. Her parents, shopping, had each thought she was with the other. When they couldn't find her, they feared she had been kidnapped.

The police reunited the parents with the little girl. The parents thanked Joey profusely. The police officers shook his hand and commended him for being a good citizen. Someone snapped a picture of the happy scene, and posted it on Facebook. Naturally, it went viral.

Joey's parents saw the picture. And in it, they saw dad's Bianchi Oltre XR4 racing bike lying on the ground. They confronted Joey about breaking the house rules. They were sort of angry. He had let them down.

Or had he? Joey was also a hero. He had broken the house rules. But Joey might very well have also saved a little girl's life when he could have just ridden by and assumed all was well.

Fortunately, Joey's parents were wise and kept the whole matter in perspective. They knew that their focus had to stay on the main issue, the safety of a little girl and the way Joey took that safety into his own hands. Joey's parents were proud. Joey helped the little girl, and it had been the kind and honourable thing to do.

And that is how it is with refugees. Of course, they shouldn't be loose in the forest in sub-zero temperatures. Their evasions, like Joey's actions, by which they cross the United States illegally in order to enter Canada legally, might be worthy of a bit of ire, even when those evasions are technically legal.

But these are not the main issues. The main issue is their safety. They are at great risk. They are lost and alone in the world. They are, by Canadian and international law, refugees. They are, in Christian teaching, our neighbours. And we can help. Like Joey helped. It is the kind and honourable thing to do.

Making Canada a good neighbour in the world community is the patriotic thing to do. And extending hospitality to strangers is the Christian thing to do. In his own parable, the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus said first, what Paul said later, that we should be kind to strangers, and then Jesus added, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me."

And when it comes to queues full of nameless strangers, that is good enough for me.