

STATIONARY OR MOVING

[written in oral form]

Deuteronomy 10:17-22; Matthew 25:331-46  
Peace Sunday

November 11, 2018  
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This peace Sunday, we are focussing on welcoming strangers, with an emphasis on migrations and refugees.

From our staid position, we affirm and are sympathetic to assisting refugees. Migration, including under duress, is part of our Mennonite narrative. So, of course, we are going to be receptive to helping refugees. However, we are now stationary.

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There is a big difference between moving and stationary, and I'm suggesting that this is broader than just physical mobility.

Moving means change....change in location, situation and conditions. When people are moving, they have fewer positions and greatly reduced claims of ownership. Moreover, movement demands awareness, flexibility and tolerance.

Moving affects all aspects of being.

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In contrast, to be stationary requires claiming space which reinforces and expands ownership,....which leads to entrenchment and defending, even building walls. I think fixed attitudes also contributes to racism and bigotry.

Our nation is not talking about building walls, yet we feel more secure with our ocean walls and our fortress to the south.

Being stationary affects all aspects of being, including our attitudes and our theology.

Yes, we affirm and engage in benevolence to refugees. This is great and noble, but is it on our own terms,....at our convenience.....and when we choose to afford it.

The problem is the flood is rising.

There will be far more people migrating because of war, violence, economic injustice and the expanding consequences of climate change.

Climate change, according the Guardian, is the primary reason for the desperate and helpless people heading to the US. [5/11/18].

They were recently kicked off what land they had, and large companies own the best land, and it's not producing as well anymore.

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Migration/refugees, like those, will greatly increase. People are on the move. Is it a threat.....or..... a gift?

How do we perceive strangers? Are we suspicious?

The Trump administration is teaching people that migrating strangers are nasty invaders, and that a strong defence is needed.

How do we regard strangers? What are we teaching?

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Today's passages give us some necessary directions.

The Matthew text presents the judgment litmus test.

It reveals what believing in Jesus looks like.

Believing is more than just claiming something.

Paul wrote that "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord, will be saved."

I think THE Calling out is a constant, and not a one time declaration.

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Matthew was writing during a time of persecution and tribulation. During such experiences, people tend to entrench and defend.

How we respond to the poor, the needy, the strangers to us...matters a lot.

In this passage we are presented the image of Jesus **with** the poor and desperate strangers. It is **that** significant.

Matthew raises up this mysterious presence of Jesus amongst the strangers, those who are rejected and marginalized, who are put in prison, whose children are taken from them, who have no clothes, food or water. Jesus is one of them.

Remember that. Remember that God loves the weak and needy.

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Old Testament passages also declare God passion for the powerless and marginalized.

Deuteronomy points out that God loves strangers, and cares for them.

Then in verse 19 it states, "You shall also Love the stranger"....with the reminder, don't forget you were once a stranger.

It's good to remember the past, and it is very prudent to heed God's commands.

Yet, how do we embrace that? How do we do that?

How can we relate to strangers on the move, when we are stationary?

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I'll leave that thought there for now, and make a big leap.

Last Spring, I reported on my distain for squirrels because they ate my tulip flowers and dug in the flower beds.

Moreover, I was aware, that my birdfeeder was also keeping them satisfied.

One day, I noticed a rat at the base of the feeder eating seeds that fell out when a squirrel jumped on the feeder.

Rats! I knew mice lived under my deck, but rats too?  
Not good. I thought I'd better stop feeding the birds.

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A little while after that, at the foot of the tree in our front yard, was a squirrel. Beside her were three dead baby squirrels. I have no idea what happened. But, she would gently hold each still body, one at a time. This went on all day. She was a grieving mother, like all mothers in such a situation. The scene was deeply moving.

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We are learning more and more about how intelligent and emotional animals are, even plants are more complex than once thought. Tests have shown that insects can solve unnatural puzzles; puzzles they won't face in nature.

I read that squirrels are smarter than most dogs, and ..that irks me, and..... they often make my dog look silly.

My perception of squirrels has changed, as has my regard for rats.

I caught one in a live trap. I sat next to it and watched it. It was just a frightened / terrified little animal trying to get by. I drove it to a nice park, and released it. I then put the trap away,.....I was changing.

In June, a young rabbit decided that my front flower bed was a lovely restaurant. Instead of trapping it or chasing it away, I put up a fence around the tender and struggling plants. I then set out a bowl of water, and I would periodically bring it strawberries and raspberries. It loved strawberries. It still lives there, and feels safe with us.

I would not have behaved that way a few years ago.

I confess, I shot magpies in Saskatchewan, until Leslie and Katherine found out.

Even I am capable of changing.....moving.

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To be sure, I don't want mice and rats in the house.  
Yet, at present, they too are being respectful. They are not invaders, but simply members in God's wonderful creation, finding shelter near me.

Subsequently, I have concluded that having the lure of a bird feeder is a good idea. That way, the rodents wouldn't have to go looking for food elsewhere.

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At this point, it may seem that my analogy falls apart, but I don't think so.

Leslie begged me not to compare rats or squirrels to desperate, human refugees. She's my censor who keeps me employed.

And, she may be right,.....Yet.... and please hear that I know there is a huge difference between rodents and humans,..... YET...  
the issue is bigger than biology.

There is more in common.

Human refugees are Not invaders either.....they are just moving to us.

They are in need. They are trying to live, and most are extremely grateful when lovingly received.

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We did Not read verse 14 of Deut. 10, but it says that heaven and earth, and All that is in it.....All creatures and plants....are cherished by God. Let that sink in,.....and the implications.

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Perhaps we should take on the characteristics of movement... of what it means to be changing.....and open to change.

Perhaps, we need to let go of so much ownership of things.... including old thoughts, attitudes, theology and habits.

Perhaps, moving--being open, vulnerable and gracious is life giving.

Maybe there is a correlation between Jesus as a stranger....and the rabbit. Life, all life is precious. I know my life is enriched by watching those animals live in relative safety.

Perhaps, how we regard the least, even insects...greatly affects how we live,.....and how we regard human strangers.

May we assume good in others, and not bad things.

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If predictions are correct, there will be far more people migrating. There will be millions and millions in search of life / of salvation.

The great tragedy of the Titanic, was they didn't have enough life boats. They weren't prepared.

I can imagine how agonizing it would have been to be in an overflowing lifeboat, pushing the desperate away from climbing in.

I can't imagine being in the freezing water.

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Helping refugees with what we readily have Is Not enough.

We must be prepared..... We need Lots of life boats.

And, we must remember **and** change too.

I know that I'm preaching to the choir, but we need to imprint today's passages in our minds, hearts and very being.

The roar of resistance / the cry of self defence will only increase, so we must know our lesson well.

We must remember that Strangers do not come to take what we hold onto.

Strangers are invitations, ..Invitations to see Jesus / to know Jesus.

When we release our hold on life, sensing God is holding all things close to God's heart,.....then we will be in the process of salvation.  
We will be with Christ.....

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I'll end with an ancient Hassidic story.

One day an old rabbi asked his students how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had returned.

One student responded, "It's when you can see an animal at a certain distance and be able to tell whether it is a lamb or a dog."

"NO" responded the rabbi.

Another said: "It's when you can see a tree at a certain distance and be able to tell whether it is a fig tree or a palm tree."

"NO" replied the rabbi.

The students were perplexed and had no other answer to propose. So, they asked, "When is it?"

"It is when you can look at the face of a stranger and see a friend. Because if you don't see that, it is still night.

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All life is precious. All people are precious.

We can't Own that,.....but we can live it.....in our journey.