**Hospitality as Mission – 2**

**“Whose Face is on that Coin”?**

**Welcoming Refugees as God’s Mission:**

**Scripture:**

Leviticus 19:33-34

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Luke 20:20-26; Acts 3:1-10; 4:1-22

**Leviticus 19:33-34**

***33****When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.****34****The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

**Deuteronomy 10:12-22**

***2****So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,****13****and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God[*[*c*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+10&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-5200c)*] and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.****14****Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it,****15****yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.*

***16****Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.****17****For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,****18****who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.****19****You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.****20****You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.****21****He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.****22****Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.*

**Luke 20:20-26**

***20****So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor.****21****So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth.****22****Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”****23****But he perceived their craftiness and said to them,****24****“Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?” They said, “The emperor’s.”****25****He said to them, “Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”****26****And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.*

**Acts 3:1-10**

***3****One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon.****2****And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple.****3****When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms.****4****Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.”****5****And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.****6****But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+3&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26992a)*] stand up and walk.”****7****And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.****8****Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.****9****All the people saw him walking and praising God,****10****and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

**Acts 4:1-22**

***4****While Peter and John[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27013a)*] were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them,****2****much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.****3****So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.****4****But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.*

***5****The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem,****6****with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John,[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27018b)*] and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.****7****When they had made the prisoners[*[*c*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27019c)*] stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”****8****Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders,****9****if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed,****10****let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,[*[*d*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27022d)*] whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.*

***11****This Jesus[*[*e*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27023e)*] is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
    it has become the cornerstone.’[*[*f*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27023f)*]*

***12****There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”*

***13****Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.****14****When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.****15****So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another.****16****They said, “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it.****17****But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.”*

***18****So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.****19****But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge;****20****for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”****21****After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened.****22****For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.*

***“Whose face is on that coin*?” Questions for self-giving Christian communities in self-serving states.**

**Culture and Religion:** Some observations on the discrepancy between evangelical support for Trump policies on race and migration and their Bible’s teaching on welcoming the stranger, rendering unto Caesar, and the only thing that really counts in their Lord’s portrayal of the final judgment.

**Question.** How does one branch of American Christianity whose members pride themselves on being “born again” and, accordingly, on being almost genetically infused with the compassion of Jesus for those on the wrong side of the margins of belonging, support U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s dreaded Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in its brutal crackdown on families whose parents are undocumented but whose children are American citizens? Given the religious demography of the United States, it is safe to assume that a significant proportion of the men and women who carry out these arrests and deportations self-define as “Christian,” patriots who are doing what is needful in “rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.”

**Just how far does Caesar’s jurisdiction extend for evangelicals?** Apparently, for many Christians, it extends to wrecking families, imprisoning refuge seekers, manufacturing, selling and deploying lethal bombs, guns and the machinery of war, torturing enemies, and whatever else national self-interest might demand. The nation or the tribe becomes “god.”

Religion has long been a byword for hypocrisy—a distinction earned by the gulf between human moral claims and their actual performance. The more conspicuous the religious devotee the more inevitable the sordid realities hidden beneath the cloak of hypocrisy. It was Jesus’s unblinking observation of this that elicited his angry denunciation of the religious leaders of his day—whose hypocrisy was so blatant that “Pharisee” became a synonym for *hypocrite*.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrestled with this in the early days after the Great War—referred to by Philip Jenkins as a *Christian* civil war, since all of the major protagonists professed to be “Christian” and each used Biblical texts to justify their homicide and to condemn the homicidal actions of their Christian opponents. Niebuhr wondered how personally moral humans—ordinary Americans, French, Germans, or Russians—could engage in such immoral carnage in which property and human beings were destroyed on such a scale. He raised the question but could never really answer the question.

He observed that when we humans act in political or nationalist concert, we engage in actions against other human beings that we would never in our wildest dreams think of initiating or tolerating in our own homes and among our own people. Individual human beings behave morally in a healthy society, Niebuhr concluded, but society itself is always at root immoral. It is self-seeking, self-preserving, self-promoting, self-justifying no matter how terrible the cost. The religion called Christianity—but not One after whom the religion is named—flourished in Hitler’s Germany. 99% of the population was Christian. This means that Christians willingly participated in all aspects of the war, including the Holocaust.

1. **Some general observations about cultural and religious groups.** By “culture” I mean those groups who s**elf-**define as *“we”* in distinction to *“them”* on the basis of religion, language, social organization, politics, or nationality.
2. **It is difficult for human societies to expand the category of *“we”.*** To be human is to successfully imitate other human beings among whom we are nursed, nurtured and acculturated. We are imitators … from infancy through life imitating those around us so that there is congruence between their expectations and our capacity to live according to what they recognize. This applies to language, gender-specific behaviors, statuses and their concomitant behavioral and role expectations, and so on. We belong. Those who speak and behave differently are outsiders, and do not belong. They are strangers. Strangers are not merely a curiosity, they pose a potential threat. This is no idle threat. Human history is strewn with the wreckage of cultures that were overwhelmed by strangers, who wreaked destruction and havoc on peoples and systems of behavior.
3. but it is absolutely essential that Christians within those societies do so, so that “we” encompasses not only family, tribe, and nation, but stranger, alien, and even enemy. This is a recurring emphasis in Jesus’ teaching as recalled in the Gospels, and it culminates in his teaching about the great judgment at the end of time (Matthew 25:31-46) where distinguishing between true followers and bogus believers boils down to their treatment of society’s most marginalized: hungry, thirsty, destitute, ill, imprisoned strangers ignored, abandoned, and harassed by conventional society.
4. **Immigrants and refugees are not to be seen as mere fodder for statistics and impressive compilations of numbers.** Each one has a name and a keen sense of personal identity; each one occupies a place in a family and network of relatives; each one has hopes that are both unique to the individual and common among humankind; each one is so valuable that Jesus gave his life to reconcile them to God and neighbor; each one is worthy of our personal interest and investment of time and resources;
5. **Many who self-identify as Christians in nations commonly held to be “Christian” in pedigree and institutions do not welcome strangers** and are active in political parties that actively promote xenophobia and dread of strangers. Their primary loyalty appears to be to the self-serving state rather than the self-giving Christ;
6. **When churches passively ignore or actively resist the presence of so-called “illegal” immigrants and refugees, they effectively leave Christ outside, standing at the door, knocking.** Christ enters our congregations and our lives through strangers and the marginalized in our world.
7. **While all societies promote some level of xenophobia, there are some societies that are so linguistically and culturally homogeneous that members, even Christian members, cannot imagine how outsiders could ever be at home legally, socially, or culturally.** That is possibly why countries like Korea and Japan have such a sorry record of welcoming refugees. Incumbent groups have created outsider-proof systems of kinship and social organization.
8. **The fact that *Xenophopia* is almost always supported by laws and sustained by social custom can give Christians the false impression that their compliance is required as religious duty.** But the story told in our Scriptures—a story in which we now play our part—reminds us that the heart is deceitful above all things, and that we often mask, perpetuate and protect gross injustice with our laws. These Scriptures also remind us that God can easily distinguish between legality and justice, and that his followers must learn to distinguish between them as well. Compliance with or support of evil in the guise of law will not exempt us from God’s insistence that his followers practice justice.
9. It seems clear that **it seems easier for us to serve refugees outside of our countries than making room for them inside our countries.** Serving the marginalized far away is good, of course, but it is not the same as welcoming strangers, since these men and women and their families remain firmly excluded from our own homelands. How can and should followers of Jesus in those countries respond?
10. ***“Whose head it this, and whose title?”*** (Matthew 22:15-22).A theology of migration, human dislocation, and Christian accountability, in support of Christopher Wright’s Bible studies.

With the disintegration of civil society throughout the middle east—a disintegration to which the ignorant, self-serving, violently exploitative policies and actions of western nations have for the past 100 years contributed mightily—we have also seen a reversion to brutal racism and the exclusion of minorities at the highest level of American, British and some European nations—manifesting the spirit of the antichrist in their militant, adamant objection to strangers. In recent years we have witnessed, and our nations have participated in the displacement of more than 65 million men, women, and adults. That is more than the entire population of South Korea. More than 40 million of these are refugees in their own lands. The other 25 million are on the move internationally, crossing borders, undergoing perilous journeys and often greeted by hostility or suspicion wherever they go.[[1]](#footnote-1) The case studies presented during this forum have been replete with similarly mind-boggling numbers.

**What do such numbers mean, *practically*?** For most people, not much. A life oriented to genuine hospitality (welcoming of strangers, *philoxenia—*Romans 12:9-21; Hebrews 13:1-*3*) requires more than being overwhelmed by numbers. Each of “*us”*, and each of *“them”,* is more than simply a cipher buried in a statistic! The American with a broken leg derives little consolation from the fact that in a given year some 6.8 million of her fellow countrymen suffer from fractures or broken bones. Such information does not fix *my* or anyone else’sbone; nor does such knowledge animate the physician who tends to my personal plight. Only in the person-to-person encounter between patient and physician can healing be facilitated.

Similarly, each refugee, each immigrant, each dislocated person is in and of himself or herself a special case, worthy of our close, practical and sustained attention. It is telling that God incarnate chose to live life as an utterly parochial person, at the beck and call of insignificant people, in an occupied back eddy of the Roman empire—as despotic and militaristic a regime as can be imagined. Jesus the Christ did not come as an influential wielder of political or economic influence, but as a dusty-footed itinerant carpenter-teacher—a “*three-mile-an-hour* *God,*” as the late Kosuke Koyama put it.[[2]](#footnote-2) Today, an itinerant healer trudging by foot from village to village in an occupied, violence-ridden country—say Afghanistan—might serve as Jesus’s contemporary analogue. Would you listen to such a person, let along be persuaded to follow him?

**Conclusion.** **There can be no meaningful mission without costly incarnation**. This means that unless we become intimately and personally involved in the complex challenges faced by actual dislocated *persons*, all of our fine talk about migration and human dislocation in the tens of thousands or the millions remains nothing but pious platitudes. As followers of Jesus, we cannot not be content to cite impressively marshalled and organized statistics, and then stride virtuously away as though we had actually done something for “the least of these”! When we get involved in the real world of dislocated persons, we quickly discover both *what* we *can* do and *how little* we can do. Incarnational engagement is ever that way.

I do not have the time or thee space to tell stories about my family’s personal engagement with refugees for most of our 50 years of marriage. Let it be sufficient to say that living with refugees from Ethiopia, Iraq, Sierra Leone, China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Syria, Myanmar has often been hard, inconvenient, intrusive, and expensive—but deeply rewarding. We are blessed with a large, international family, and with grand children in abundance!

I conclude by returning to a consideration of Jesus’s words, **“*Whose head is this, and whose title?”***, when he was quizzed about what Caesar could legitimately claim as his due (Matthew 22:15-22).

We understand from our scriptures that men and women are stamped with God’s imprint, carry God’s DNA, reveal God’s face. No “Caesar”—whether national or tribal—can legitimately make such a claim, although many come perilously close when they declare outsiders as *“illegal.”* To depict any human being as “illegal” pits Caesar against God. Rendering to Caesar what can belong only to God is idolatry.

To be a Christ-one entails recognizing and resisting the terrible reductionisms of all self-serving nationalisms, tribalisms, and racisms—and their ever-attendant legalisms—that undervalue or even dismiss the stranger, the refugee, or the immigrant, or the enemy. When we cooperate in such systemic reductionism subvert our own identities as men and women created in the image of God, since we yield to Caesar something to which Caesar has no ultimate claim—human beings, including ourselves. *Legality*, for Christians, can never be an acceptable substitute for *justice*.

The challenge for Christians has always been *how* to follow their Lord faithfully while necessarily participating in human systems so evidently and unapologetically habituated to self-interest. Put another way, one might say that in applying a Biblical plumline to our theology—which is inseparable from *praxis*—we Christians must work back from the questions set for the final judgment as described by Jesus in Matthew 25. From these we deduce what the outcome of any God-honoring faith—explicitly “Christian” or *directionally* *salvific* (even if called by another name or by no name at all)—must be.

The end of the age will not see ideologues of various stripes, between the poles of “socialism” and “capitalism”, divvying up the new creation among themselves, but Jesus as sole Judge separating sheep from goats on the basis of *how the socially disenfranchised, politically marginalized, and economically destitute figured in their priorities*. There will be no questions about doctrines, or about the legalities employed to rationalize complicity in injustice. Religious and non-religious alike will be surprised to learn that ordinary human decency, kindness and justice turn out to have been more important than tidy proprietary religious systems that insinuate or even claim a monopoly on goodness, and that support the self-serving and self-preserving agendas of some political entity.

Both family resemblance and proof of affinity lie in one’s concrete relationship to the socially marginalized neighbor: the destitute, the imprisoned, the orphaned, the homeless, the alien, and the enemy. If compassion is not the outcome of one’s faith, that faith is ultimately useless both now and in the life to come. The margins are the center for all authentically *Christian* mission.

I conclude with a reading from the Torah, echoing the Bible studies that have so admirably anchored this forum.

*You shall not oppress a resident alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be a resident alien, for you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt* (Exodus 23:9).

*You shall not oppress a resident alien, for you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt* (Exodus 22:21).

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. The alien who resides with you shall be [treated] as the native among you; you shall love him as yourself, for you were resident aliens in the Land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God* (Leviticus 19:33-34).

*There shall be one law for you, [and] it shall apply to both the resident alien and the native-born. I am the Lord your God* (Leviticus 24:22).

*You shall not pervert the justice [due to] a resident alien or orphan; and you shall not take a widow’s garment as a pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; that is why I am commanding you to do this* (Deuteronomy 24:17-18).

*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who does not show partiality and does not accept a bribe. He sees justice done for orphans and widows; and loves resident aliens, giving them food and clothing. You also shall love resident aliens, for you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt* (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

What possible role can be played by churches or by similarly-minded individuals and mission societies when it comes to the plight of “the world’s refugees”? More importantly, what is the responsibility of each believer to the refugee next door? How pro-active *are* we, and how pro-active *should* we be, in seeking their wellbeing? How many of our churches, seminaries or missiological training centers explicitly identify kindness to refugees as *the* paramount sacred calling for those who call “Lord” one who was never satisfied with passive detachment from the plight of neighbors and strangers? What role should churches play in pressuring their governments at all levels—local, regional and national—to welcome refugees? How can we learn to be decidedly and constructively disobedient to our beloved Caesar’s when they deny the legality of the strangers in our midst and demand of us what belongs to God alone?

Our answers to these and related questions, wherever we are in the world, must in some measure be influenced by our understanding the difference between Caesar’s imprint on a coin and God’s imprint on human beings.

*20Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ 21They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’* (Matthew 22:15-22).

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1. Jennifer Welsh, *The Return of History: Conflict, Migration, and Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century* [The Massey Lectures for 2016]. Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press, 2016, pp. 113-169 *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God: Biblical Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)