

**Rev. Alexia Salvatierra**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
**Refugee and Migrant Sunday March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

For the past two years, our Synod has been organizing first Refugee and Migrant Sunday as a Lenten observance. This year, the plight of refugees and migrants is even more drastic and their fate more uncertain.

Are people in your congregation concerned -- and confused -- about the refugee crisis and the immigration crisis? Are they struggling with how best to welcome the strangers in our midst in the name of Christ? As Lutherans, we have always been at the forefront of understanding the refugee experience and welcoming refugees; we have always related to the immigrant experience. On March 11th, the fourth Sunday in Lent, the Synod Justice Team and Global Missions Team of the Synod are calling on all our congregations to join us in a time of prayer and reflection on our call to welcome the stranger, with a particular focus on our companion synod of El Salvador.

We have placed various resources on the synod website for you, including a sample sermon and mission talk as well as a prayer (for liturgical and private use). We can also connect you with a variety of follow up activities. If you prefer to highlight this issue on a different Sunday, please let us know.

We look forward to your participation in this critically important effort.

Blessings,

Synod Justice and Global Missions Teams

**Prayer for Refugee and Migrant Sunday**

Dear loving and merciful Father,

As your own Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own, please look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger, homeless and hungry.

Bless those who work to bring them relief; inspire generosity and compassion in all of our hearts; and guide the nations of the world toward that day when all will rejoice in your kingdom of justice and peace.

We pray, Lord, specifically for your children who are struggling to stay alive in Syria and for those who are looking for shelter in other countries. Send your earthly angels to help them find safety, food and shelter.

We also pray, Lord, for our brothers and sisters in El Salvador, who are suffering physically and emotionally at the hands of hateful gangs who are running rampant in this country. We pray for your strength, guidance and hope to reign in their hearts as they cling to You as their rock. We also pray for mothers who have had to say good-bye to their children for the last time, in an effort to save their lives by sending them out of the country. We pray for the leader of the Lutheran church in El Salvador, Bishop Gomez, as he works hard every day to guide and protect his people. We also pray for his efforts to bring rival gangs to the table to talk about reconciliation and restoring peace in El Salvador.

We thank you, Lord, for your promise to never leave nor forsake us. This gives us all the strength and courage to follow your call to help our refugee brothers and sisters who need us desperately.

Send us, Lord, wherever you would have us serve you.

We pray this all in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ,

Amen.

### **Sample Temple Talk for Refugee and Immigrant Sunday March 11th**

Jesus said, "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you? Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" (Matthew 25:42-45)

Good Morning! Today is Refugee and Immigrant Sunday, a day when we remember the words of Jesus that when we welcome the stranger, we are actually welcoming Jesus himself and when we fail to welcome the stranger, we are rejecting him. What does that mean at this moment in history?

Much of the public debate focuses on how to limit immigration and deport those who come here without proper documents. However, if we come to these issues from a faith perspective, we are called to compassion. Compassion moves us to ask deeper questions. Is our system for dealing with refugees and migrants effective, logical, fair and humane? If not, how does it need to be changed?

The Lutheran Church of El Salvador is one of our companion synods; they have shared horror stories with us about the gangs in El Salvador. One of the Council members of one of our churches in this synod tells the story of her sister in El Salvador who owned a little store in her village, and whose nephew was killed when she could not pay the extortion fee to the gangs. This is a common occurrence in a country where the murder toll is one of the highest in the

world. Whether asylum seekers are children and youth running from Central America or families from Syria, they are often fleeing unspeakable violence. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1 out of every 122 human beings on earth is either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum as a result of violence. The US has had a commitment since 1948 along with most other countries in the world to receive those who are fleeing violent persecution in their own countries. However, we do not supply free lawyers to asylum seekers. If a teenager from El Salvador has a lawyer, about 80% are judged to qualify for asylum. If they are not able to pay for a lawyer, only 7% receive asylum; imagine having to represent yourself in court in a language you don't speak, facing a system you don't understand. Our companion Synod tells us that children and youth who are deported are regularly killed. Recent policies instituted by this federal administration make it even more difficult to obtain asylum.

What can we do to help? First of all we can pray. We can educate ourselves by studying the LIRS website, which also offers several Bible Study resources as well as advocacy opportunities ([lirs.org](http://lirs.org).) Our Synod also operates a program called "Guardian Angels" which sends volunteers into immigration court to accompany children, youth and their families from Central America to try to help them obtain trustworthy legal support and social services. You can donate to or volunteer for the Guardian Angels program. You could also donate to the Synod Justice Team or Global Missions Team for the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. Next Summer the Global Missions Team is sponsoring a trip to El Salvador from July 31<sup>st</sup> to August 7th, so you can see for yourself what is going on there. Lastly, the Justice Team receives regular information on ecumenical opportunities to advocate for an immigration system that is truly effective, logical, fair and humane. Thank you for your time.

### **Refugee and Migrant Sunday Sermon – March 11th**

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...This famous verse reminds us of the depth and power of the amazing love of God. God loves the world so much that he gave the best he had, all that he had. Who did he love so much? The worthy and righteous ones? No, we all know that he came to save sinners, to reach out in compassion to save the least, the lost and the lonely. We have all received his generous compassion and when we realize that, we are moved to be compassionate as he was, to share the compassionate love of Jesus with our world. Except of course, when we are not. When we see someone else as a lawbreaker, as undeserving of our compassion, we can turn cold and judgmental in an instant. If you don't believe me, notice the current reaction of many American Christians to immigrants and refugees. I am not saying that our current immigration system works well. Most of us know that it is ineffective. If you get a step closer, you learn that it is illogical – it makes the DMV and the IRS look positively sane in comparison. And if you come a step closer, you will learn that it is profoundly inhumane. However, to even take a closer look at what is wrong and needs fixing, we need first to be moved by the love of Jesus.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells the world that wherever one of the little ones is rejected – whether the hungry is left unfed or the prisoner unvisited or the stranger unwelcomed, he takes it personally. Whenever we ignore or turn away those in need, we hurt Jesus – and in the end, that hurts us all. We often pass by the hungry, forget the prisoner and reject the stranger, hurting ourselves and others in the process.

Today is Refugee and Migrant Sunday, a time set aside to remember and respond to the strangers in our midst. What is a Refugee? Our government defines refugees as people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm. To be granted asylum, you have to demonstrate a “well-founded fear of persecution” in your home country. There are roughly 50 million refugees in the world. The largest single source of refugees at this moment is Syria with 4 million of its residents desperately seeking a safe place to stay. Over 220,000 Syrians have been killed, including 110,000 civilians.

The next most dangerous area in the world is the Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) where there is a murder an hour as a result of increasingly powerful international mafia who are controlling large territories. These criminal organizations make their money from the extortion of small businesses (over \$650 million dollars a year), drug trafficking, guns trafficking and human trafficking. They forcibly conscript teenage boys and force girls to become sex slaves on the threat of murdering family members. Approximately 80,000 children, youth and their mothers arrived in the United States over the past two years seeking asylum. The Wilbur Wilburforce Anti-trafficking legislation of 2008 mandates that unaccompanied migrant children and youth from these countries receive a full asylum assessment. However, this requires legal assistance. When these children and youth are able to obtain lawyers, over 77% are granted refugee status. However, our government does not automatically grant lawyers to asylum seekers. When they don't have access to a lawyer, only 7% of them are recognized as refugees. Under the current federal administration, our government is actively prioritizing the detention and deportation of these children and youth, and their mothers.

It can be overwhelming to even think about all these suffering people; after all, we have enough suffering in our country alone, right? The natural impulse in a broken and fallen world is to “circle the wagons”, to protect ourselves and those we love and to only share with them. We are understandably concerned about our security when we consider opening our arms to those who come from violent places. Even though statistically immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born residents, it is a natural impulse to be cautious. However, there are noble moments when we go beyond those impulses. After World War II, in the midst of the worldwide horror caused by the Holocaust and a truly enormous number of refugees, almost all of the countries in the world signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations which included the “right to seek asylum from persecution”. This other impulse, the impulse to hospitality, is supported by over 92 passages in the Old and New Testament. The great Christian author Henri Nouen spoke of the Christian life as a journey

from hostility to hospitality. The scriptures which call us to hospitality often remind us that it is also in our benefit to do so; Hebrews 13:2 reminds us that when we welcome strangers that we may be welcoming angels in disguise. The word for angel in Koine Greek refers to more than just celestial beings. Angels are any messenger of God sent to bring a blessing. Any stranger could be an angel. Our impulse is to see the other as a threat – and that can always be true! -- but there are also intimate enemies – and the other can be an angel, bringing a blessing.

The Lutheran church has a long proud history of welcoming migrants and refugees. Our theology of grace calls us to share the grace that we have received from God with others in need of mercy and rescue. We have many opportunities through our national organization Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to help – from donations to advocacy. We also have local opportunities in our Synod. The Guardian Angels is a project of the Synod Justice and Global Missions teams. The Angels accompany children and youth from Central America in court, observing the process to ensure that their rights are respected, referring them to services and caring for them. Let me share a story. Sandra came to the United States from a very poor area in El Salvador to work and send the money home to her sister to care for her son Christian so that he could go to school. When Christian was 12 years old, the neighborhood where his school is located was taken over by the Marasalvatrucha. When his aunt tried to take him to school, she was told that he couldn't enter that area because he lived outside the territory. When she defied the order, she was stabbed in front of Christian. Traumatized, Christian fled to the United States to run to his mother and was picked up at the border by the Border Patrol; he was released into the custody of this mother while his immigration case was in process. However, he did not have a lawyer. The judge ordered his mother to find him a lawyer, but as a fast food worker she did not have the capacity to pay for a lawyer. At the next court date, the judge said that Christian would be deported if she did not find a lawyer for him. When Sandra and Christian were crying in the corridor outside the courtroom, a Guardian Angel volunteer tapped her on the shoulder and helped them to find a lawyer. Christian now has been granted political asylum and can stay in this country legally. He is studying hard in school so that he too can be a lawyer when he grows up, and his faith is strong. Sandra says that they now believe in Guardian Angels. If you would like to be trained to volunteer as a Guardian Angel, please contact Pastor Alexia Salvatierra at [alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com](mailto:alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com). Of course, the Guardian Angels also always need donations! You can donate through our Synod. If you want to see for yourself, the Global Missions Team sponsors an annual trip to our companion Synod, the Lutheran Church of El Salvador, from July 31-August 7<sup>th</sup>. The information about costs and how to sign up is on the synod website.

Whether you are moved to direct support or not, please do keep refugees and migrants in your prayers. This is a dark moment around the world for those feeling violence; The love of Christ coming through you can make all the difference for someone else.

