

Our Adventurous Task
Acts 11:1-18
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
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I am so honored to be your pastor. You are such a fine and excellent people.

Last autumn refugees suddenly became political punching bags. I have rarely been as angry as I was those few weeks. Every major religious group in the United States spoke out in support of refugees. Jewish and Christian denominations pointed out that this is one of the issues where we can confidently state what is the biblical view—we are to welcome the stranger and the exile with hospitality, kindness, and support.

Our Outreach Ministry had already been discussing the idea of sponsoring a refugee family. This congregation had done so in the past, but as with most outreach efforts, there is a lifespan of interest. We were trying to decide if it was time again to take on this effort.

When the topic of welcoming or excluding refugees became the top item in the news, this congregation loudly and adamantly answered “Yes.” This was the time.

Pat Lamberty stepped forward to provide key leadership and organizational skills. She has worked diligently over many months, first making contacts and planning educational opportunities. The Sunday she announced a meeting for all who were interested, the room she was in was overwhelmed with people ready to assist. She called, excited, the next day to say that twenty-five people had volunteered to be on the organizing team and many more said they’d help in some way.

Serendipitously our staff had picked a Lenten worship theme of Graceful Hospitality. Pat and I decided that organizing for the refugee family during Lent would give us a way to live out that theme. So, this winter and spring a congregation-wide effort developed as dozens of you donated furniture, collected paper products, shopped for groceries, or cleaned and decorated the apartment. The Phase One class of 4th-8th graders helped by shopping in the Thrift Shop for some of the items on the list. And last Tuesday my husband Michael was supposed to do the grocery shopping and I couldn’t stay home to watch Sebastian, as I had other commitments, so Melanie Naughtin babysat while Michael shopped.

Wednesday night a group of us gathered at Eppley Airfield at 10 p.m. ready to welcome Shee LWEH and Gar MOO and their three children Manay Kaw Shee MOO, Has Shee MOO, and Ywar Hay BLUT. Anna Dinslage held a sign bearing the words welcome in both English and Burmese. Sherry Smith brought a lovely bouquet of flowers.

As the plane disembarked, Jim Harmon ran ahead of our group to be the first to meet this new American family. Gar Moo looked exhausted from their long travels. Shee Lweh knows a little English and was able to chat with us some. The children seemed excited by all the activity and the new place, though four year old Ywar Hay eventually rested in mom’s arms. Seven year old Has Shee ended up taking the flowers from her mom and held them tight the rest of the evening, smiling a big, happy smile.

Our contact from Lutheran Family Services informed us that the family had been in the refugee camp in Thailand just the day before. And, in fact, all three of the children had been born in the camp. The oldest child is nine. Their entire lives were lived as refugees and now suddenly they had flown on planes around the world arriving in a strange new city in the night. The translator said, "It's really overwhelming."

Luckily other Karen were with us to welcome them and deliver them to their apartment that we had decorated and stocked. The home will hopefully be warm and comfortable.

Now, our task over the coming weeks and months and years is to help them adjust to their new home and a radically different life.

Wednesday as I drove away from the airport, filled with joy, I was never more grateful or honored to be your pastor.

Peter's vision called him out of comfortable territory into a strange, unexplored world of fellowship and brotherhood with a Roman soldier.

The theologian N. T. Wright has argued that central to the message of salvation proclaimed in the New Testament is the question "how am I declared to be a member of God's people?" Central to the gospel is the coming together of once separated people into the family of God.

Theologian Patrick Cheng writes that two of the sins plaguing the contemporary world are isolation and singularity. Isolation is the illusion of our own self-sufficiency, neglecting the reality of our interconnectedness with all people and with all of creation. "The sin of singularity is a refusal to acknowledge the complex interplay of identity categories. Singularity is our desire to simplify . . . into either/or thinking."

Jesus offers us the grace to overcome these sins. We are offered grace as interdependence. Cheng writes,

Interdependence is a recognition that we are all different, yet we are all part of one cosmic body, and thus we cannot afford to say to any other part of that body that "I have no need of you."

And Jesus offers us grace as hybridity. Cheng describes this concept:

Grace [as hybridity] is found in the simultaneous holding together of two or more intersecting worlds. . . . Hybrid thinking delights in multiplicities, intersections, and interstitial spaces.

To leave the familiar and embrace the different, the diverse, the new is to take a risk. But as Hadewijch reminds us in the passage read earlier, risking the adventure is part of what we mean by love. And if we take that risk, if we adventure forth, what transformations await us?

Catherine Keller writes "Can we hear the voice of the beloved, the divine lure, promiscuously inviting us *all*, even now, to come, to 'come away'? To become who we did not know we could be?"

Listening to the voice of God calling us outside our comfort zone might just be what we

need in order to become our best selves.

My friend Rosemary McCombs Maxey, a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation and a UCC minister and theologian, wrote a powerful essay some decades ago about indigenous people and the United Church of Christ entitled "Who Can Sit at the Lord's Table?" Listen to this moving passage from that essay:

If this church can relinquish its defensive power posture and assume a listening posture, then we can sit at the Lord's Table as I believe God intends us to do. Let the United Church of Christ forthrightly say, We don't see one strand of commonality on which to base our unity, but let's be our unique selves at the Lord's Table. At the Lord's Table there is room to be, to be included, to be fed, to be forgiven, to be acknowledged, and to be at home in God's world. At the Lord's Table, there is a theology of listening toward mutual hearing.

And, so, I thank you for listening. For being a people who open doors and invite others to the table. People who risk the adventure for the love of God.

Now, onward and upward!