

Refugee Sabbath Sermon

Possible titles:

Hospitality: A Reminder of Grace and Blessing

Do Not Forget Hospitality (Philoxenia)

Xenophobia or Philoxenia

It was a radical decision, but the urgency implied in the angelic command required the sudden departure of Joseph and his family. The safety of their child was of paramount importance for him as for any other parent. Hence, without any delay the same night that he receives the instruction, Joseph leaves their home and moves his family to a foreign country (Mat. 2:13-15). They have stop from being native residents of Judea and now they have become Israelite refugees in Egypt. Yes, Jesus was a child refugee.

But Jesus's story is not the only one dealing with children forced to move from their native land to a foreign place because their parents felted that their security, wellbeing, and opportunities were either limited or absent. As any good parent, parents in the Bible wanted to secure a better future for his children even if requires the sacrifice of moving from their homeland and expose themselves to the dangers of travel and the challenges to settle in a new place without any hostility towards them.

Lot had to move with his grandparent and uncles out of Ur after the premature dead of Haran see (Ge. 11:28). The Bible mentions that the first movement from Ur of the Chaldeans to the Land of Canaan was made by Terah (Ge. 11:31) although planning to go to Canaan, they end up residing in Haran. Jacob, who first was a refugee himself running from his life out of his home, is now taking his wives and sons and escaping from a hostile work environment and tense Father-in-law relationship (Ge. 31). Later in life Jacob and his family found refuge in Egypt by the assistance of Joseph a well settled immigrant, about 70 people (Exod. 1:7) among them were many children (Ge. 50:8).

Egypt save Israel by saving their refugee Children, Egypt also contribute to the plan of Salvation by receiving in their midst another refugee Child, Jesús. As Egypt provided relief from famine for Jacob and his sons, so it provides now protection for Joseph and his family. There Herod had no jurisdiction and many Jews lived there.

What would have been receiving this family at your home at their arrival, provide shelter for them, sharing your food? Perhaps, they would look like a simple Jewish family but unwittingly the ones who offer them hospitality had hosted the King of kings. What a blessing!

Hospitality to strangers was ranked as a high virtue in ancient civilizations and even considered to be a religious obligation. Among the Greeks, for example; the strangers were under the special protection of Zeus and would be identified as *Zeus Xenios*, "Zeus the patron of strangers." The Greeks, divided nations into savages who despised law and those who were hospitable and feared God. Then, one of the distinguishing marks between barbarians and Greeks is that the later are kind to strangers. Furthermore, the Greeks mention, apart from religion, as motives for hospitality their natural sympathy and philanthropy. Hospitality was to

be extended out of fear of the gods and love of men but not for personal gain. Severe punishments were expected to fall on those whom manifested a lack of hospitality not only in this world but in the world to come.

Interestingly, the famous Greek story *The Odyssey* offers some instances of hospitality considered as theoxenies, with the unknown guest later revealed as a god in disguise. In such cases this divine visit constitutes a test of character, with the virtuous receiving reward for their hospitality and the unworthy deserving punishment because of their lack of it. As we can see, hospitality is a universal experience, practiced to variable degrees by all world cultures since ancient times.

But the Bible offers a unique perspective among ancient cultures. Biblical scholars for example have recognized that the concern and attention that the Scriptures give to the strangers within their laws shows an enlightened attitude towards non-Israelites for which there is no parallel in the surrounding cultures. Even in connection with other legislations of the Bible it is possible to see that the warnings made to Israel regarding their behavior towards a stranger are more abundant than the commandments concerning love of God, keeping the Sabbath, circumcision, uttering falsehood, and theft.

From a simple overview of the Biblical material concerning strangers it is easy to conclude among other things that the Israelites have the moral responsibility before God to treat the strangers with kindness and equality because of their previous experience as strangers and that of their ancestors in different lands among different people and where they had suffered or enjoyed diverse treatment from their host. This seems to point to some form of *Golden Rule approach*, do unto the strangers as you would want anyone to do with you if you were in a similar circumstance.

Additionally, God had always cared for them while they were in that state (as strangers) and would continue to do so for others in the same circumstances. “He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore, love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:18,19) Israel was to act with an impartial justice and with a love that welcomes and provides for them. Not only do for strangers as you would want someone to do for you but do as God does for the strangers. I call this the *Imitate God approach*. What would God do. (WWGD)

Like in the Greek sagas, the biblical stories commend hospitality through many fine examples and characters. Abraham, Lot, Rebekah, and Job are some examples. Their stories show that true hospitality should be extended without commandment or reward, it is a self-evident duty but perhaps even a blessing.

It seems that the Old Testament perspective for dealing with strangers is far from being defined as some form of Xenophobia (fear of strangers) but more of an expression of Philoxenia (love for strangers).

Interestingly, the New Testament takes hospitality to a new level. Jesus manifests that love and care for the stranger is a special instance of love for the neighbor. The stranger, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, can be my neighbor. Even more radical, Mt. 25 seems to suggest that

hospitality will be a criterion in the judgment and for eternal destiny. Hospitality would be a reminder of Grace and Blessings not only for the stranger but for the host.

In the Old Testament God loves the stranger, hence the Israelites are to love him too. But in the New Testament Jesus presents himself as the Stranger; therefore, Christians demonstrate their love for Him in their treatment of the stranger. See Mt. 25:35, 43 and compare with Mt. 25:38, 44. This is the reason why as the Gospel teaches, namely, that the personal relationship to Jesus decides in the judgment. However, Matthew 25 proposes that this relation is now mediated through the needy, which includes the stranger. Jesus makes hospitality to strangers a commandment of utmost importance.

The apostolic writings also will assert the important role that hospitality would play in the Church and the community of believers. In the New Testament hospitality is incumbent on all Christians (Matt. 25:35f.; Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9) and Christians leaders in particular are required to be hospitable (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1.8)

It seems clear that hospitality has been and still is an important practice for believers. However, not only today but continually, hospitality offers a complex challenge in its practice. How are we as Christians to put it to work properly in the midst of immense and tense debate concerning the negative effects, dangers and security risks of mass immigration and refugee crisis? Are we to take a side with Xenophobia (fear of the stranger) or Philoxenia (love for the stranger)? Philoxenia is the Greek word for hospitality.

New Zealand's tragic event on March 16, is a clear example of both sides, on one hand the rising Xenophobic sentiments and violence and on the other hand the hospitable attitude and concern for refugees from the citizens and the government through their actions and policies.

Today, according to UNICEF, across the globe, nearly 50 million children have been uprooted, with 28 million fleeing brutal conflict and millions more escaping extreme poverty. This figure includes millions of children caught in wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the South Sudan — in more than a dozen countries. This figure also includes children driven from their homes by violence or deprivation and forced to make difficult and dangerous journeys abroad, and children who are out of school and don't know when they might return.

The Biblical advice found in Hebrews 13 seems pertinent today, Heb. 13:1,2 "Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so *doing* some have unwittingly entertained angels."

Let us keep and hospitable attitude and support conscious efforts made to attend the needs of strangers, especially children, who are put in our social proximity and those who address the immigration crisis in foreign countries. Hospitality is a reminder of Grace and Blessings to both the receiver and the giver.

"There are no citizens of the city of God who didn't first arrive at its gates as refugees." James K. A. Smith