**Setting the Lonely in Families:**

**Scripture Reading**

*33“‘When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. 34The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God* (Leviticus 19:33-34).

 *17For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. 18He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. 19And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt* (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

“*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing”* (Psalm 68:5-6).

I thank Rev. Daniel Baeq and the elders of this congregation for the privilege of speaking to you today.

I am going to talk about “*hospitality*” – the English translation of a much more powerful Greek word, ***Philoxenia* – love of strangers**. If we want to do God’s work in God’s way in God’s world, the place to begin is much closer than we sometimes think.

Followers of Jesus are told to ***love strangers* –**to show them hospitality and care for them (Romans 12:13/ Matthew 25:31-46).

The Greek word for ***stranger*** is *xenos (*ξένος). The Greek word for ***dread*** is φόβος (*phobos)*. We combine those two words to get the word ξενοφοβία (x*enophobia*) meaning ***dread of strangers***.

All human groups practice ***xenophobia*** to varying degrees. Strangers are *potentially* and sometimes *actually* dangerous. Protecting oneself is the most natural thing in the world.

**In modern countries *xenophobia* is highly formalized,** employing thousands of civil servants who devote themselves entirely to the **creation and enforcement of** **obstructions**—borders, laws, passports, immigration quotas, propaganda, arrests, prisons, and even state-sanctioned murder—to control or prevent the arrival of strangers.

Today you live in a country that is very conflicted about immigrants and refugees. Although 100% of the people in power in Washington descended from immigrant families that brutally occupied this continent and either destroyed or removed the indigenous people who were already here, they are filled with dread and loathing of families who wish to come to this country, and they will stop at nothing to get rid of them, even if it means separating small children from their parents.

T**his is a profoundly anti-Christ-ian respons!** This is an area where obedience to God will require disobedience to the state. Such policies reflect the spirit of the anti-Christ, since Jesus taught us that he comes to us through the needy strangers around us.

This is *xenophobia* at its worst. It is fortunate that when Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with the baby Jesus that this did not happen to them, so that Jesus would end up in a dormitory while the officials looked for a foster home as Mary and Joseph would go to jail and then be deported back to Judea. That is why a follower of Jesus will disobey this law.

Jesus never tells his followers to just be natural and do whatever the powerful people in your country tell them to do. We are told that we should ***love strangers***—*philoxenia*. This is the Greek word that is translated as ***hospitality*** in our English Bibles. Romans 12:13 tells us to ***practice hospitality***—to ***practice love of strangers***. Hebrews 13:2 reminds us not to forget to entertain strangers – to take care of strangers by loving them and welcoming them into our homes and communities and churches.

**This is the kind of local action that makes a global impact.** This is God's way for God's people to do God's will in God's world. How, practically speaking, can we do this? This morning I will share from personal experience, although I know that many of you could share similar stories.

**Our journey with refugees.** My wife and I have not really done very much, but we have lived a long time! We were married in 1968, and two years after that we began to welcome what would become a stream of strangers into our home to live with us for a while, to journey with us during difficult times of their lives.

Over the years our small home has been blessed and sometimes challenged by the presence of boys and girls and men and women from 16 countries: the United States, Ethiopia, Canada, Zambia, Kirgizstan, Korea, Zimbabwe, China, Hong Kong, the Ukraine, Russia, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Bangladesh and Syria.

Because they lived in our home they were soon no longer strangers! Our “family” today is quite large and very international. We now have four grandchildren from Ethiopia; four grandchildren from Myanmar—they come over to our house every week and we spend time taking them to their sports and school events and family camp; three grandchildren from the United States; and four grandchildren from Canada.

**This morning I will only mention our present involvement with several “strangers” who are part of our family in Winnipeg.**

1. **Myanmar.** I begin with **three children from Myanmar—**their Canadian names are Emily, Rose, and Joseph—who arrived inWinnipeg with their mother in November 2013. They were the victims of the war that has been waged since 1962 by the Burmese army against its minority groups. Their mother Cing is a 32-year-old Chin woman whose husband—the father of her children—died of HIV/AIDS. Cing is also HIV positive.

They had been in Winnipeg for only a year when the girls—only 9 and 11 years old—were sexually molested by their step grandfather and one of his friends. Canadian authorities took the children from their mother, thinking that she could not adequately protect them. We asked the authorities to let them live with us, and they were in our home for most of 2016.

We have committed ourselves to this family and will spend time, energy and money on them for as long as we live. While the children lived with us, we helped the mother create a more secure situation for them so that they can now live together again as a family.

Since they are still children, we are involved in their education and recreational activities, and in supporting the mother while she learns English and prepares herself as best she can to get a job when the youngest child is able to go to school.

For the past several years I have spent quite a bit of time and money on the ongoing legal dimensions of their tragic situation. We love them very much, and we pray that God will give us enough years so that we can see them begin to thrive as adults.

This is how God has richly blessed us with an enlarged family! They call us “grandma and grandpa” and love to come to our house on weekends to be spoiled and loved!

This is what it means for us to *practice hospitality*—to *love strangers* so much that they are no longer strangers! This is what the Psalmist means when he writes: “*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing”* (Psalm 68:5-6).

1. **Syria.** I do not have time to tell you very much about the Syrian family of 5—a father, a mother, two daughters, and a son whose home in Idlib Province was destroyed by Assad’s rockets and bombs while they took shelter in the basement. They lost everything. We met them at the airport when they arrived in Winnipeg at midnight on December 28, 2016, traumatized, in shock, and bewildered by their changed circumstances.

In Syria they had secure professions as a teacher and school principal, but in Winnipeg they are rebuilding their lives, developing new skills, and learning a new language. Our church purchased a house especially for refugees, close to schools, shopping and transportation, and provided them with income for fourteen months while they got on their feet—an allowance of $4,000 per month.

In April of 2017, the father—who was a school principal in Syria—began ten weeks of training as a sewing machine operator, and then after a ten-week period of trial, was given work with Canada Goose company making winter clothes. The mother—who was a teacher in Syria—works half time as a teacher’s assistant, helping especially with traumatized Syrian school children whose families escaped to Canada. The three children are going to school

They no longer need financial support from our church, although the church is continuing to pay their dental bills and medical expenses for treatment of the mother’s serious medical condition. We are now very close friends and we see them often. I give a driving lesson to the eldest son every Saturday. He is 27 years old and has never driven before, so it can be quite exciting at times!

This is what it means for us to *practice hospitality*—to *love strangers* so much that they are no longer strangers! This is what the Psalmist means when he writes: “*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing”* (Psalm 68:5-6).

1. **Sierra Leone.** My final story is about an African young man whom I met when he was nearing the end of his 5.5-year prison sentence nearly three years ago. His name is **Alhaji Conteh, and he has become like a son to us as he comes to our home every week.**

He came from a town called Tintafor in Sierra Leone. He was his mother’s first-born child, and the fifth child of his polygamous father whom he seldom saw. He was named after his grandfather who was called “Al Haji” because he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. He never met his grandfather. He has two brothers through his mother but has never seen and does not know his other siblings born to his father’s other wives.

Sierra Leone suffered eleven years of devastating civil war beginning when he was only six years old, from March 23, 1991 until 2002. He was 14 years old when he was kidnapped by the rebels who destroyed his town and forced all the young men who were caught to become child soldiers. He was with them for two years as they fought and killed and pillaged, but he managed to escape when he was sixteen years old. He wanted to try to find his mother.

He was unable to find her, but located his aunt, who is now his “Mom” in Canada. She was just about to fill out applications to leave the country, and she added his name to the list. Several months later, they were informed that they had been accepted by Canada as refugees and would be leaving in a few weeks. The government of Canada would be taking care of them. They were overjoyed to hear this good news, and arrived in Canada on Nov. 21, 2001. Seven family members came: cousins, nieces and one of my aunt’s sons. Al Haji was seventeen years old.

The family was amazed at how cold it was, and at how beautiful the snow looked! Al Haji enrolled in a high school, where he completed his grade 11. But then he dropped out because the family needed money, and he found out that his mother was still alive. Things were very hard for her and she needed help as well.

Al Haji had several low paying jobs—one at a Casino and one at McDonalds’s. He had several other jobs working on construction and welding. During the recession, he was laid off from his welding job, which he had thought he would pursue as a career.

Then he met a man who told him about an easy way to make money. All he needed was a phone. When someone called, he would simply deliver a package to them. He soon found out that what he was delivering was cocaine.

He completed his grade 12 at JobWorks Adult Education in Winnipeg, graduating in 2009. He had relationships with several different women at that time and became a father to three children from three different women.

In 2012, his girlfriend (who was a drug addict) reported him to the police when he refused to give her drugs one evening. She told the police that Al Haji had beaten her up. He was arrested that night when the policemen found cocaine in the house and was sentenced to three and half years in federal prison.

This was really a result of the grace of God in this young man’s life. I met him while he on parole from prison and became interested in helping him. He broke the conditions of his parole and was returned to prison where I tried to visit him every week for the next six months until he was transferred to a prison in another province more than 500 miles away. He asked me if it was possible for him to become a Christian and of course I said yes! He got out of prison on December 21, 2016.

Alhaji was publicly baptized and joined our church on Sunday, May 28, 2017. We were able to help him pay for a five-month carpentry course at Manitoba Institute of Trade and Technology. Our eldest daughter, who is a business woman, and whom we adopted in Ethiopia when she was only three months old, provided him (anonymously) with a generous weekly allowance while he was taking his training so that he was not tempted to go back into dealing drugs.

For the past two years, he has been happily employed by a construction company that tries to give those with prison records a second chance, and he is presently enrolled in a project management certificate course at the University of Winnipeg. He comes with us to church, and then to our house for lunch every Sunday. His 8-year-old son Javanti often comes with him, and sometimes Reena, his 9 year old daughter from another mother. We are committed to him and are also making sure that his poor mother back in Sierra Leone is able to live and be proud of her first-born son. And this is how our family has grown! Aren’t we blessed?

We continue to be very involved in his life at the legal level as well—accompanying him to court, writing letters on his behalf, and paying his legal bills which are beyond what he could possibly manage as the Canadian Government Department of Immigration explores ways of deporting him back to Sierra Leone. God has led us to lawyers—Sharif Khan and David Matas—who have so far successfully won the case for him to stay. His final deportation hearing was last week on October 16. Seventy three members of our church contributed money to pay his legal expenses, and many of them came and stood in solidarity with him at his deportation hearing last Tuesday. We are committed to continuing to journey with him as long as God gives us life.

This is what it means for us to *practice hospitality*—to *love strangers* so much that they are no longer strangers! This is what the Psalmist means when he writes: “*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing”* (Psalm 68:5-6).

**Conclusion. Is something missing at the core of the theory and practice of your Christian faith? B**eautiful worship—music, choirs, instruments, testimonies, preaching, offerings—means nothing if we do not love God. And the one sure way to love God is to love your neighbor as yourself, especially the stranger!

**How then shall we love strangers?** Let me suggest five simple principles to follow, based on scripture and on my personal experience:

1. **Make it a priority** – the Bible teaches us many things, but at judgment day, according to Jesus’ words in Matthew 25, it will be the *outcome of our faith* that matters! All of our fancy theologies, our creeds, our doctrines, our worship will be set to one side as Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. He will ask us nothing about doctrine, theology, ecclesiology, our prayer and devotional lives, or our understanding of the Trinity. He will ask us only whether we welcomed him when he came to us as the prisoner, the destitute, the social pariah, the needy stranger.
2. **Be personal** – don’t wait for a program to begin or for someone else to take action if God brings a needy stranger to your attention. Take action yourself. “*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing”* (Psalm 68:5-6).
3. **Be practical** – thinking kind thoughts is not the same as doing kind deeds. Learn what the person needs, and then look at the resources that God has given you to invest in others … your time, your money, your resources, your acquaintances, your church, and even your home. Support those in your circle who have a special calling and gift to love strangers.
4. **Be proactive** – don’t wait for a needy person to beg, and don’t make the person feel humiliated by constantly reminding them of how fortunate they are to meet you! In fact, **you are blessed to meet them,** because in them you meet Jesus! What a privilege and what a blessing!
5. **Be persistent/patient** – make long term commitments if possible. Be willing to journey with them as they face the challenges of living and thriving in the new environment.
6. **Practice** – any worthwhile accomplishment takes practice … to become an excellent violin player, piano player or engineer, or tennis player, or anything else, one must practice. Hospitality—loving strangers--is no exception.

“*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing”* (Psalm 68:5-6).

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.* ***10****Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.* ***11****Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.* ***12****Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.* ***13****Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality* (Romans 12:9-13).