
World Refugee Day
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
June 19, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 2:14-26 and Matthew 25:31-40

I don't know about you, but I'm just about ready for a change of pace over the summer. I'm looking forward to a bit of a break. And I'm sure that some of you are ready for a break ... from me! No worries. Summer is just two weeks away. Next week our theme will be "who is my neighbour?", a theme that does not sound too challenging. We just need to get through this week together - which is a celebration of the United Nations World Refugee Day. Well that should be painless too. I mean, refugees are just poor people "over there, somewhere else", right? Surely we can discuss refugees without it affecting our lives.

[image: how can we best help refugees]

If you read any traditional media you might think there is only one important question about refugees. Which is, "how can we best help refugees." And that is a good question. Because in our society - and in our churches - of course we want to provide support for refugees. In our society - and in our churches - we want to extend a helping hand to many people who are disadvantaged by a wide variety of situations. And so naturally, that desire to extend a helping hand to disadvantaged people extends to refugees.

[image: sarcasm warning]

I mean, within limits, naturally. We do not want refugees to take our jobs, or increase our demand for housing, or put extra demands on our health care system or add to traffic congestion on our roads or put extra demands on our social welfare system. But as long as none of those things happen - we want to help. In other words, we want to help refugees if it has no impact on our own lives.

[image: red cross ukraine]

Consider the situation in the Ukraine right now. Many people are making contributions to help refugees that have been created by the Russian invasion of the

Ukraine. I see many Ukrainian flags all over the city, on cars, etc. There are many visible and invisible signs that we - as a society and as a church - are supporting Ukrainian refugees these days. And that is good.

But that is not enough. We cannot stop the conversation there. Because just helping refugees is like looking at only one side of a coin.

[image: romero with quote]

Oscar Romero, who was the Archbishop of San Salvador said, “A church that does not provoke any crisis, a gospel that does not unsettle, a word of God that does not get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed - what gospel is that?” And you came here expecting to hear the gospel, right? So obviously I have to unsettle you and get under your skin.

Fortunately, that fits in perfectly with the theme of refugees. We just need to look at both sides of the coin.

[image: 1 question about refugees]

Because I believe there are actually two important questions we need to ask about refugees. The second question we also need to ask is

[image: 2 questions about refugees]

how can we stop creating so many new refugees every single day.

As a society - and as a church - we are comfortable with the first question. But as a society - and a church - we avoid the second question like the plague. Because the second question invites us to actually reflect on what causes refugees to exist in the first place. And some of it - spoiler alert - is our fault as Canadians.

Here is how I look at it. Our current refugees crisis is not a problem. Our current refugee crisis is actually a symptom of other problems. And that gospel to which Romero refers requires that we deal with problems, and not just put bandages on symptoms.

[image: romero with quote]

To quote Oscar Romero again, “When the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.” But I disagree with Romero on this point. Because the church has often aligned itself with the people who perpetuate the misery. I share Romero’s vision.

Just not his reality. As Yvonne mentioned a couple of weeks ago, the General Council of the United Church of Canada is pushing a new motto, “deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice”. Discussing the real causes of global refugees qualifies for at least 2 if not all 3 of those aspirations. And it is supported by our scripture readings today. James tells us that faith requires both thought and action. And Matthew tells us that those who are blessed by God are those who feed, clothe, and take care of disadvantaged people. Those two texts speak to both sides of the coin around the refugee crisis.

Oscar Romero spoke to that in very concrete terms. And he was murdered more than 40 years ago - while leading mass during a worship service. There are a variety of translations but today I will go with “When I feed poor people they call me a saint. But when I ask why are these people poor, they call me a communist”.

[image: when I feed people they call me a saint]

Or in today’s language. “When I provide aid to refugees, they call me a saint. But when I ask, why are these people refugees, they call me a”

[image: UN refugee agency]

I suppose we need to be clear about what a refugee is. According to the UN Refugee Agency, “Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.”¹ By that definition, there are approximately 27 million refugees today. But many of the struggles faced by refugees apply to people who have been forcibly displaced but have not traveled out of their home country. These people are called “Internally Displaced People”. The total number of displaced people was over 89 million in 2021. That is over 1% of the global population.

So what forces people to be displaced? War is the number one factor. Of course, if the war is caused by the West, it is called a conflict, but it comes to the same thing for the victims. Climate Change is starting to become a more common cause of refugees. But many countries - including Canada - do not yet list that as a legitimate criteria for refugee status. Other factors that creates refugees include persecution for many reasons (religion, ethnicity, sexuality, etc), poverty, and hunger. But war is the number one generator of

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-in/what-is-a-refugee.html>

refugees.

One complication is that wars happen in different ways. The obvious way to wage war is with guns and tanks, and we see with the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. But there are other ways to wage war that are just as destructive but far less visible. This has long been known. In 1826 John Adams famously said

[image: john adams]

“There are two ways to conquer and enslave a country. One is by the sword. The other is by debt.” Right now people are very upset with Russia because of their military invasion. And rightly so. But we should be just as upset by the many people that the West kills and displaces using economic warfare, and in particular the weapon called debt. The main vehicle for this is the International Monetary Fund, which is essentially an extension of American and British banks.

Consider this report by John Pilger from 1991.

[image: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYCH1Ylnxc>]

[image: child 4]

The death toll to date in the Ukraine is something like 4,5000 civilians. The International Monetary Fund kills that many people every single week using a financial weapon called “structural adjustments”. Structural adjustments are restrictions that the International Monetary Fund imposes on poor countries. These restrictions take power away from poor people - mainly in the Global South - in order to increase profits of corporations which are in the Global North. This has been going on for decades and has hugely contributed to the displacement, murder, and suicide of many people.

Refugees do not care whether they are refugees for military reasons or for economic reasons. They have been displaced, often separated from their families, their lives ruined. We - as Christians - need to care about all people displaced by war - including both military wars and economic wars.

I realize that some of you expect me to criticize Russia more. And I am critical of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. But you don't need to hear about that from me. Anti-Russian sentiments dominate our media today. Which is why today I am lifting up how the economic wars of the Western world - which includes Canada - is just as evil as what

Russia is doing. If we want to care about refugees, we should care about all of them, not just the refugees created by countries that we do not like. Our media turns a blind eye to injustices that are performed by western nations while they criticize Russia. We need to do better than that.

In fact, global surveys say that the US is the main barrier to peace in the world today. Here is a clip from Noam Chomsky:

[image: Noam Chomsky (2 mins) <https://youtu.be/P2lsEVLqts0?t=527>]

[image: child 5]

One of the strangest accusations in our media is that Russia has manipulated our elections. But consider this:

[image: Democracy Now (2 mins) US interferes in foreign elections <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9Q19QJpJ4s>]

[image: 2]

The US has interfered with MANY democratic elections around the world. They even go so far as to stage coups against leaders who are not pro-US enough. Consider this:

[image: Democracy now (2 mins) US overthrows democracies <https://youtu.be/f9Q19QJpJ4s?t=194>]

[image: child 3]

And this all feeds into how we might be able to answer our second question about refugees. Which is ... how do we stop creating so many refugees every day. And part of the answer is yes, to push back against Russia and other countries that use military muscle to displace people. But the other part of the answer is to push back against Western powers and corporations that use financial muscle to displace people. We need to stop subsidizing the corporations that create refugees as simply part of their operations.

I will finish this sermon next week. And we will discuss “who is our neighbour”. But during the coming week I would love to hear from all of you. I would love to know what you think about all this? Do we actually want to help refugees today? And do we actually want to fight against the forces that create more refugees every day? If you think my ideas are out of date or misguided, please tell me that too. I want to know what you

think about refugees.

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Amen.