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UN World Refugee Day  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
June 22, 2025  
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 days are almost here. We just need to get through today together - which is a celebration of the United Nations World Refugee Day. Well that should be painless. I mean, refugees are just poor people "over there, somewhere else", right? Surely we can discuss refugees without it affecting our lives. Sorry - I forgot my sarcasm flag. I must need a break.

[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: red cross ukraine]

Think back to when Russia invaded the Ukraine in 2022. Many Canadians provided direct and indirect supports to Ukrainians who came to Canada. That was a very natural response.

Chapel in the Park United Church has members from across Southern Ontario. But if you live near the church building, you know the topic of refugees is very present here. Thorncliffe Park is a "landing zone" for new immigrants and refugees to Canada. So of course we want to help refugees, right?

[image: sarcasm warning]

I mean, within limits, naturally. We do not want refugees to take our jobs, or

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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: coin]

It's good to talk about how to help refugees. But we cannot stop the conversation there. Because just helping refugees is like looking at only one side of a coin. And to find the other side of the coin, we must engage with Christian principles.

[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 a bit.

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

[image: how to help refugees]

Because I believe there are actually two important questions we need to ask about refugees. Again, the first question - how can we help refugees - is a great question. The second question we also need to ask is:

[image: how to stop creating refugees]

How can we stop creating so many new refugees in the first place.

As a society - and as a church - we are pretty 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. The second question invites us to change our own lifestyle.

In my mind, our current refugees crisis should not be seen as a problem. Our current refugee crisis should be seen as a symptom of other problems. And that gospel to which Romero refers requires that we deal with problems, and not just put bandages on

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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.” Sadly, the church has often aligned itself with the people who perpetuate the misery. But we can do better.

[image: deep, bold, daring]

As you likely know, the newest slogan of the United Church of Canada is, “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 faith 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 45 years ago - while leading mass during a worship service. My favourite Romero quote is, [image: when I feed people they call me a saint]

“When I feed poor people they call me a saint. But when I ask why are these people poor, they call me a communist”.

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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”. In 2024, globally, there were over 122 million displaced people. That is over 1% of the global population. One displaced person for every 67 people. Would we not call that a crisis?

[image: UN refugee agency]

10 days ago, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) released it’s annual

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

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“Global Trends Report”. “The report found that, contrary to widespread perceptions in wealthier regions, 67 per cent of refugees stay in neighbouring countries, with low and middle-income countries hosting 73 per cent of the world’s refugees. Indeed, 60 per cent of people forced to flee never leave their own country.

While the number of forcibly displaced people has almost doubled in the last decade, funding for UNHCR now stands at roughly the same level as in 2015 amid brutal and ongoing cuts to humanitarian aid. This situation is untenable, leaving refugees and others fleeing danger even more vulnerable.”<sup>2</sup>

[image: list of causes below]

So why are people displaced anyway? The number one reason is conflict and war. For example in Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine. Another reason is persecution based on race, religion, nationality, politics, sexuality and gender, or some other identity. Another reason is violence and insecurity. That includes organized crime, gender-based violence, systemic government oppression. Another reason is human rights violations. Including torture, forced conscription, sexual violence, and other abuses. Another reason is climate change and environmental disasters. That reason is not yet recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention, but it is becoming increasingly relevant. That includes rising sea levels, droughts, wildfires, desertification, and other negative outcomes caused by climate change.

But war and conflict remain the number one creator of refugees.

One complication is that wars happen in different ways. The obvious way to wage war is with guns and tanks, as we see with the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, and with the Israeli occupation of Palestine. But there are other ways to wage war that are just as destructive but far less obvious. 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 and Israel because of their

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/number-people-uprooted-war-shocking-decade-high-levels-unhcr>

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military invasions. And rightly so. But we should be just as upset by the many people that have suffered due to the weapon called debt. Our economic systems have contributed to conditions that displace and sometimes destroy lives, even when no weapons are fired.

One vehicle for this is the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Both are shaped heavily by US and other Western interests, often promoting economic prescriptions that align with the priorities of wealthy donor countries. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank lend money to poorer countries, often in the Global South. These funds are intended to help build the local economies. Perhaps through the construction of electrical generation plants or other infrastructure. But often, things go wrong. Monies go missing. Global trade changes direction. And the intended benefits from the loan are never realized by the local community.

[image: child 1]

The loan itself - however - does exist - and must be paid back. The debt must be paid by the country that needed the financial help in the first place, even when the predicted financial benefits from the loan did not materialize. When countries struggle to pay their debts, the lenders implement “Structural Adjustments” to force the local economy to be more in line with the demands of wealthy countries.

Structural adjustments in theory are designed to help countries in debt “stabilize” their economies. But too often, the cure hurts more than the disease - especially for the poor. 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. How is that, you ask?

Structural adjustments often demand deep cuts to public spending - meaning fewer doctors, fewer teachers, and fewer safety nets. Food and fuel subsidies are sometimes removed, making daily life more expensive for people already struggling. Public services are often privatized, putting basic needs like clean water and electricity behind a paywall. And local industries are often destroyed by competition from heavily subsidized foreign corporations.

[image: child 2]

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And while these measures are meant to attract foreign investment, the immediate impact is usually the opposite: rising poverty, shrinking wages, and increased pressure to migrate - whether across a city, or across an ocean. Structural adjustments can and have created many refugees.

Refugees do not always flee from bombs. Sometimes they flee from abandoned hospitals, unaffordable food, and governments forced to choose between paying the debt or taking care of their own people.

Refugees do not usually 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.

[image: child 3]

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 are all over 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. And not only refugees that are Christian, and White. 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. All people matter.

[image: child 4]

And as today's sabre-rattling with Iran grows louder, it's worth remembering: Western interference has long sown the seeds of instability. In 1953, the US and UK orchestrated a coup to overthrow Iran's elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. He was overthrown by Western powers because he nationalized Iran's oil. The US did not want Iran to control their own oil. And so the Shah was reinstated, and Iran's fledgling democracy was dismantled. Repression followed. That coup did not bring peace - it brought decades of trauma, revolution, and mistrust. And of course, the coup brought financial advantages to the US and UK elite. Donald Trump speaks about Iran completely

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forgetting how much the US helped shape the situation we are in today.

[image: 2 questions about refugees]

And this all feeds into how we might be able to answer our second question about refugees. Which is ... how can we stop creating so many refugees every day. And part of the answer is yes, to push back against Russia and Israel 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.

In James, we are told that faith without works is dead. In Matthew, we are told that when we welcome the stranger, we welcome Christ. Here in Thorncliffe Park, those strangers are not distant - they are our neighbours. Our classrooms, apartment buildings, sidewalks, and our mall are filled with people who have fled war, disaster, or persecution.  
[image: both sides of a coin]

Canada plays a role in helping - and in harming. We welcome many with open arms. But we also export weapons, invest in extractive industries, and support global systems that create the very refugees we later “help.”

So the question is not just, Do we welcome refugees here? The other question is, were we part of why they had to flee in the first place? We’ve seen both sides of the coin: the help we offer, and the harm we help cause. A living faith needs to engage with both sides of that coin. We are called to a living faith - one that welcomes, yes. But also one that works for justice. Because that is where we find Christ in our midst.

[image: indigenous map of canada]

I want to bring this home a bit. As far as I know, nobody in this congregation is the CEO of a large multi-national corporation. But all of us here in Southern Ontario live in places where refugees are all around us. Perhaps not as densely as Thorncliffe Park. But refugees make up an important part of the fabric of Canadian society. If you don’t want to tackle a corporation, perhaps just reach out in love to a refugee near you. Befriend them. Love them. Help them. Get to know them and their story. That at least is a simple thing we can all do. You might call it your homework for the summer.

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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.

Have a wonderful summer.

*Amen.*