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LOVING REFUGEES AND
IMMIGRANTS BECAUSE
GOD FIRST LOVED US

ARE WE FOR OR AGAINST?

*The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place
where we can go as we are and not be questioned.*

MAYA ANGELOU,
ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES

*D*o you remember what it means when people are refugees or immigrants?" I ask my eight-year-old son. "Yes, Dad. We talked about that last week. Remember?" "I'm going to write my next book about this." "Okay. But wait, are we *for* them or *against* them?" "*For them.* Remember. Being a refugee means someone had to run away from something bad, like war. They had to leave home, leave everything behind. Can you imagine if we had to leave our house and your school and move somewhere far away, where they speak another language, because we weren't safe? And an immigrant is coming to somewhere new, which is usually hard too. We want to be people who help people in hard situations, right?"

“Sure. But some people are *against*, right? Why?”

“I think people are nervous or scared about a few things. Safety is one. They don’t want any bad people to get in who could hurt them. They also think people might take their jobs. And new people can bring change with them—like a different language, culture, or religion that they don’t want.”

“Okay, watch this move. You stand right there. I’m going to jump off the couch and kick you. You try to block my kick, but you won’t be able to because the crane kick cannot be defended.”

We’d watched the old *Karate Kid* as our family movie the night before, so 95 percent of the conversation then turned to punches, kicks, “not that hard!” and laughter. I knew the movie might put the rest of our family in danger for a few days as my son works out his new Karate Kid techniques. But as we keep talking, in between indefensible crane kicks—and in the future as he keeps getting older—I want him to recognize what is at stake:

- Love versus fear
- Who we want to be
- What home is
- How we deal with real concerns
- How we make difficult decisions about responding to other people’s suffering when there isn’t enough for everyone to meet their own wants and needs—in this world that gives lots to some and crushes others
- Wisdom versus naiveté versus ideals
- The future of our nation
- The way ethnicity and race affect lives and relationships

How can we see those pictures of Syrian children—a boy’s limp body lying face-down on a beach, a boy sitting in the back of an ambulance

stunned after an explosion with his face caked in dust and blood; boys just a little younger than my son—and not forfeit some essential part of being human if we don't help? There may be some risk to helping, but there is certainly risk to not helping:

- Making *security* such a high value that *fear* gains godlike power over our lives—instead of seeing security as one important consideration among others.
- Discovering that our faith is a resounding gong, a clanging cymbal, not worth much more than empty words when it comes to the rubber of love meeting the road of suffering and sacrifice.

Yes, so much is at stake in how we respond to refugees and immigrants. Working through such complexities requires open hearts, clear thinking, and practical acts. It also requires finding ways to disagree that help us all get better together rather than just making others and ourselves worse. Above all, it requires getting to know other people who we think are different—and then finding that yes, they're different, but not so much.

I love being a dad. Besides spontaneous karate battles with my son, I keep finding that my kids expose my generosity and my hypocrisy, my love and my selfishness. They reflect myself back to me. What we model is more important than what we say.

How we answer my son's question, "Are we *for* or *against* them?" reveals a lot about what kind of family, community, and country we want to be. After the answer comes the work to understand the nuances and navigate the complexity. As adults, we know there is usually a cost to being our best selves—and that it's ultimately worth the price.

How can we live into a vision that chooses love over fear?

THAT COULD BE ME

After college I moved to England and then France to work with a refugee ministry for two years. A few years later, during the war in

Kosovo, I moved for six months to Albania and Kosovo to help respond to the refugee crisis there. I'd seen heart-wrenching refugee photos on the front page of the newspaper. I needed to help if I could.

Friendships and working with refugees changed my life's direction. I had Turkish coffee with Kosovar families who had fled, leaving behind their dead husbands and sons as well as the charred remains of their homes that had been burned to the ground. Later I pushed a wheelbarrow filled with a family's only possessions as they boarded a bus to Kosovo to restart from nothing.

In France I lived in a hostel with refugees from Sierra Leone and Sarajevo, both places that experienced violent conflicts. We became friends and ate dinners together. Once I got lucky and beat the guy from Sarajevo in chess. He said he'd fought in the war there before escaping. The other fifty times he beat me.

One morning near Christmas, snow started falling. It was the first time the guys from Sierra Leone had ever seen snow. We all ran outside. We slid up and down the road, laughing and falling like kindergartners. The guy from Sarajevo also asked me to help him buy a bottle of rum because he needed help to sleep at night. There was laughter, but the shadow of loss they'd each endured always lurked nearby.

These guys were around my age. My experience with them transformed me because the distance between us/them, between you/me collapsed. I could have been the one who had to leave everything and everyone and hope for mercy along the way.

I want my son to see that we're *for* them. I want my son to see *we could be them*. I want my son to hear that Jesus said to love our neighbors as ourselves. Inspiring, demanding words to live by. These words invite us to embrace our common humanity and risk love.

"*That could be me*" at face value can be a selfish formulation. But it can also lead our imaginations down the path toward deeper empathy and love—because it recognizes the stranger as ourselves and helps us choose to be *for*.

That could be me unable to find work, so my child can't go to school and his hair is turning rust-colored because of malnutrition. I've walked along dirt paths and talked with dads and moms in Haiti who give all they can to provide for their children, and it's not nearly enough. I saw them move to the Dominican Republic to work awful jobs cutting sugar cane, never seeing their families so they could support their families.

That could be me having to leave my family behind, crossing a border and a desert to work grueling days picking tomatoes or strawberries in the Florida sun, hunched over doing work nobody local would do, so I can send money back to my children who I don't get to see for months on end.

That could be me without a home, without a place that isn't haunted by fear and uncertainty.

That could be me, one of the Syrian refugees in whose home I sat drinking tea in Mafraq, Jordan. They lost their home, left all they had behind. They also talked, four years into being refugees, about how hard it was without full rights to work or start a business in their host country when they had lost everything. Though they longed to return, they had no idea if or when they'd go back to Syria—and meanwhile weren't really even able to start over. On average, refugees are away from their home country for more than ten years.

That could be me loving my neighbor as myself—and discovering that in the deepest sense we're all exiles trying to find home. Following Jesus means to some extent confessing that we don't have a permanent home here. We want to belong most of all to God's kingdom coming. We're also to live with an eye to helping widows and orphans out on the margins. This isn't liberal wishy-washiness or conservative literalism. This is the rigorous life of love worth living, love that opens the world to us, that leads us toward discovery and transformation. It leads toward the discomfort of growth. We carry the weight of caring and then find our hearts grow stronger.

THE CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

We're in a crisis—nationally, globally, and existentially—because 66 million people have been forced from their homes:

- 44 million of them are displaced within their own countries.
- 22 million had to flee their country as refugees because of persecution, war, or violence.

This crisis is a large-scale version of times when a friend or neighbor has an emergency. The victim is in crisis, and a crisis is also forced on people to decide whether and how to help. Over half of these refugees are children less than eighteen years old. Their lives ask us: *Will you welcome me?* We're also in a crisis because of how immigrants and asylum seekers are being treated at and within our borders—including around three thousand children who were separated from their parents.

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.

The United States has been granting legal residency to about 1 million immigrants a year, which includes welcoming about 75,000 refugees. Now the US is slated to receive fewer than 22,000 refugees, the lowest number in decades. The countries that currently welcome the largest number of refugees are places with conflict near their borders: Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, and Jordan, who each have welcomed between 650,000 and 2.5 million refugees. In other words, these much-smaller countries are receiving between 30 and 113 times *more* refugees than we are.

Statistics can numb us. Compassion fatigue can drain us because we don't know what to do in the face of these numbers and complexities for people so far away. So the spiritual/existential crisis for

us is this: How can we *not* ignore the people behind these numbers and not let our tribal instincts (take care of our own!) or our fear (terrorists or gang members are hiding among them!) keep us from loving well and wisely?

In early 2017, in the weeks after the new presidential administration put a travel ban on immigrants and refugees from seven countries in the Middle East, statistics and policies became freshly personal. Whether and how to welcome strangers across our borders briefly became the biggest topic of national conversation. At the time, the *Washington Post* told the story of refugees in Nebraska, which leans politically conservative and has taken more refugees per capita than any other state.

“I hated Muslims,” said sixty-one-year-old John Dutcher about his post-9/11 mindset. His mind changed after Muslim refugee families moved into his apartment complex.

“The Muslims here were all about family and they just loved everyone,” he said. “I remember the people who lived here before; they took for granted everything this country gave them. These people, they really changed my heart.”

He had learned their stories of fleeing war in Syria and losing everything. They shared meals with him. He felt safer around them than around the previous tenants.

An immigrant is someone who has moved to another country for reasons that could include fleeing violence, natural disaster, or extreme poverty. They could be reuniting with family or looking for education or opportunity for themselves and their families. Refugees are a category of immigrants who have fled under specific circumstances.

Dutcher didn’t initially welcome them, but together they eventually found their way to welcoming each other. Where fear and hate close possibilities, love opens new opportunities. Where darkness takes hold, light has opportunity to shine more brightly.

Where violence tears apart, connection can heal. Our lives can overflow with precisely this light, generosity, and healing—when instead of ignoring suffering, we open ourselves to love. Then life gets so much better: their lives and our lives. (As an economic example of new opportunities, about 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were started by immigrants or their children.)

Ali Al Sudani's story was told in *Texas Monthly* around this same time. He's the exact same age as I am; *we could have been each other*. But he grew up in Iraq as part of "the War Children" generation through the Iran-Iraq war. In 2003 he became a translator for British soldiers, a connection that eventually made him unsafe. He became a refugee in Jordan. In 2009 he arrived in Houston, alone.

Since then he has become director of refugee services for Interfaith Ministries, helping others who have to restart in Houston. Based on the total number (not per capita), Texas resettles more refugees than any other state. As he helps, Sudani knows firsthand how hard it is to start over from scratch in a strange land. He likes to quote Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). Sudani was welcomed, and now he welcomes.

Jesus taught us how to see each other. God's love welcomes us, so we want to welcome others. In a way that is gritty and practical but also kind of mystical, welcoming the stranger is also welcoming God—in our tender frailty and shared sorrow, in our courageous resiliency and remarkable generosity, in our fierce commitment to finding ways forward. In the deepest sense, we have an opportunity to do nothing less than to find a way—even when it isn't easy—to welcome each other and God into our lives.

We welcome, knowing it's not simple, aware that things big and small can go wrong, grappling with complex issues to navigate. We welcome a better version of ourselves. We welcome a new story, new life. We find beauty and hope in welcoming each other.

TESTIFYING TO GOD'S KINGDOM

In this book, I hope to inspire you with stories of refugees and immigrants and those who are involved with them. I hope to inform you with research, sacred text, and experiences. I hope for nothing less than seeing our—and other people's—lives changed along the way.

We all struggle, one way or another, with dislocation, loss, and anxiety over what faces us. We're people of faith, however, seekers, children of Abraham's faith. By faith we've joined into the story that we're in a sense foreigners ourselves, and so we should be especially sensitive to those who are displaced and seeking a way home. In our deepest hope, we're sojourners ourselves, which should lead us into a special tenderness for the plight of foreigners.

Hebrews 11 tells us that the forebears of our faith “confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. . . . They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Yes, we desire that homeland, that kingdom of God—and also that this kingdom of God would, as Jesus prayed, come on earth as in heaven. So in the next chapter we look at why we should be *for* refugees and immigrants: they're fellow children of God, whom we recognize as ourselves and who are in need. This leads us to empathy and love (chapter 2).

Once we see the need and start to recognize them as ourselves, we'll reflect on fears, complexities, and barriers that can keep us from being as welcoming as possible. We'll name these concerns honestly so that we can seek truth and follow where God's love leads (chapter 3).

That prepares us to listen deeply to experiences of refugees and immigrants who invite us to be part of their stories and to live a better story ourselves (chapter 4).

Recognizing the need, understanding our connection, addressing our concerns, and being inspired by their stories all leads, of course, to action. There are good, practical ways we can help locally, nationally, and internationally—as an individual, family, school, or church (chapter 5).

We'll then see what commitments will help us keep on loving and learning together (chapter 6). Finally, we'll conclude with a vision for how life is deeper, better, and more faithful together (chapter 7).

Think about what the following two phrases would say about your life:

To have to flee your home and your homeland. These words testify to trauma none of us ever wants to face.

You welcomed me. These words testify to doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God—words that could go on the tombstone of a life well lived. In helping to give the homeless a new home, we bring ourselves closer to Home. We become part of the kingdom, coming.

PRACTICE

Responding Within God's Love for Us

At the end of each chapter I suggest one or two practices to help you reflect on and put the chapter's ideas into action. Each of these practices is rooted in grace and empathy, in relationship and hope.

The two practices for this chapter are ways to affirm that we want love to guide us not the agenda of politicians, newscasters, or clickbait headlines. Instead we want to be guided by God's agenda, which includes unfailing love for us.

These practices are inspired by a traditional form of prayer called the *examen*, in which we look back over the day and see where love flowed through us and where it was blocked. We approach this not judging ourselves or others but listening with honesty, grace, and faith so the Spirit can move in and through us. For each of these, I suggest taking about ten minutes to sit quietly and go through the steps.

Practice one: How we react to refugees and immigrants.

- First, become aware of God's presence. God loves you and welcomes you in your wonderfulness, brokenness, selfishness, fear, and beauty. You are welcome in God's presence.
- Review the experience of what it would be like if you became a refugee. You can move through being grateful that you aren't facing this, and then imagine having to leave everything behind and move away. You lose your home, your kids' school, and your job and have to move to Mexico with only what you can carry. You start over in a new land, unable to speak the language, without connections to help you. What might it be like for you to become a refugee?
- Pay attention to your emotions. Don't judge yourself. The Spirit is with you. See what you feel. *That could be me*, and we're slowing down to consider that reality. What would the experience be like? What would be hardest to lose? We don't presume to understand what it is like, but we can listen to their lives and let our imaginations be guided along the way of love and empathy.
- Choose one aspect of the experience—what you thought or imagined—that rose to the top for you. Was it losing your house, not being able to communicate, the way all security (financial, physical) disappeared, the uncertainty, the stress of caring for loved ones, or something else? Now pray for people who are in those situations. You don't know their names or the specifics of what they find hardest, but God does.
- Look toward tomorrow, guided by the reality that you are beloved and you are called to love. Amen.

Practice two: How to understand your own reaction.

- First, become aware of God's presence. God loves you and welcomes you in your wonderfulness, brokenness, selfishness, fear, and beauty. You are welcome in God's presence.

- As you came into this book, or when the issue of refugees or immigrants comes up in the media or in conversation, where do you find your spirit responding *for* refugees and immigrants, and where does it respond *against*? This is private. There are legitimate concerns. There are also fears that might surprise you as a bit ugly. You don't have to post any of this on Facebook. You're invited to be honest with God and yourself. What reaction do you find in yourself toward refugees and immigrants? Where does love flow freely? What makes you feel resistance?
- Now spend time thinking about where your love for immigrants and refugees flows freely, and feel grateful for that flow. Then consider areas where love feels blocked by some sort of fear or objection and take time with God to pay attention to the emotion or argument and understand why. We pay attention by asking the Spirit to help us to see the reasons. They might be valid reasons or they might not be. Ultimately we want God's love guiding us.
- Choose one aspect of the uncomfortable or love-blocking feelings or thoughts that rose to the top and pray that God would guide you in the way of welcoming. This doesn't mean agreeing with someone else's agenda or winning or losing a debate. You're simply welcoming God to show you where you might be guided in the way of God's welcoming love.
- Look toward tomorrow, guided by the reality that you are beloved and you are called to love. Amen.

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