



Northeastern Minnesota Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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A Pastoral Letter

February 1, 2017

Dear Pastors, Deacons, and members of congregations in this Synod,

At a breakfast table in the home of one of our congregation's family members, a mother texted me this week to tell me about how her family discussed the recent orders to close down immigration and refugee resettlement in this country. They read Scripture and discussed what it means to follow Jesus. They used this Bible passage for their conversation around the table: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as you native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

Leviticus 19: 33-34

I speak to you as your Bishop in strong, encouraging, and gospel terms. Jesus Christ, crucified and raised for the life of the whole world, has claimed you. Be bold in following him. Fear, racism, degradation of others, half-truths and hate are disseminated today with increasing fervor. The number of suffering refugees seeking help today is greater than ever before. What's needed is the good news of God's love, as shown to us in Jesus: **Matthew 25:35-40** "...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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Jesus knew, didn't he, the ancient words from Zechariah, "Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."

- Zechariah 7:10

In times like we are experiencing today Christians do what we are always called to do;

- +Hear the gospel and proclaim it in word and deed
- +Love our neighbor (as defined by our Lord, this means anyone who needs our help)
- +Welcome the stranger, give them food and drink, clothing and shelter
- +Be courageous, stand up against oppression and injustice, Christ lives in you!
- +Take care of the widow and orphan, stranger and alien
- +Bear witness to the incredible depth of God's love for all people - no exceptions!

Our church, I'm proud to say, along with scores of other Denominations and hundreds of congregations in this country have welcomed refugees fleeing from bloodshed, war, rape, the separation of families, the fear of death and impossible living conditions for years. Today more than five million Syrian refugees alone are fleeing death and persecution. 51% are children. 65 million people are displaced worldwide. In our ELCA Social Message on Immigration (<http://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Message>) we read, "We in the ELCA minister with the most vulnerable of the newcomers through congregations and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service" (google LIRS) We work ecumenically. Our ministry resettles refugees who have lost everything, assists unaccompanied children, offers pastoral care, and aids persons with citizenship. Learn about the USA rigorous refugee screening process here: <http://tinyurl.com/hux8fe3>. LIRS provides foster care and related child welfare services, facilitates family reunification and advocates on policy issues affecting unaccompanied children, just as our AMPARO program does, which we enthusiastically endorsed as a church in August, 2016. (<http://tinyurl.com/glx4hys>) Jesus said; "Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself." **(Matthew 22:37-40)** Luther got it. His great legacy is all about the gospel that transforms us and then sets us free to serve our neighbor.

Martin Luther: "The gospel sets us free to serve our neighbor. We are to be Christ to our neighbor since we have been granted life and salvation. God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true.....I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ. Behold from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. For believers do not serve that they may put others under obligations..... "

- Treatise on "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520) LW 31, 367

I commend to you, two Bible study resources from Luther Seminary and LSS: 1) "My Neighbor is Muslim" 2) "And Who is my Neighbor?" These are downloadable on the LSS Website and our synod Website. If you would like to know who your elected representatives are and voice your concern about US executive actions on refugees, go to <https://www.whitehouse.gov/contact>

You belong to Jesus. That's your ultimate status. Jesus doesn't simply ask you to follow him, he empowers you to do it. And you are not alone. The writer of Hebrews says, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." -**Hebrews 12:1-2**

You are precious to God and to God's work in the world. Step faithfully into it!



+Bishop Thomas M. Aitken

(This letter may be read in your congregations)