

# A BETTER HOME

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*HEBREWS 11:1-16; 12:1-2*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

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*SEPTEMBER 6, 2015/15<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST*

I had this Sunday's sermon perfectly mapped out earlier this week. I was going to talk about the nature of faith as kind of an end-of-summer topic that could propel us into the fall schedule.

I was going to use some material from a sermon I preached years ago, so it was going to be a bit of an easier week. It all seemed good.

I was going to talk about faith using the contrasting images of a box and a compass...

I was going to talk about how many people I encounter who have an understanding of faith that is like a box symbolizing a fixed view of faith where we put all the answers...

I was going to talk about the heroes of faith from Hebrews 11...

I was going to talk about how they were not perfect people, about how they had doubts, how they made mistakes, but about how they were determined to follow where God led...

I was going to transition into a discussion of faith that was more like a compass than a box....

A compass symbolizing something to locate us and to orient us toward a fixed point...

I was going to talk about how for us, Jesus is that fixed point, that true north toward which our faith is located...

I was going to look at how Jesus is the “author” and “perfecter” of our faith... The source of all that we are, the consummation of all that we long for...

I was going to critique the popular notion of spirituality as a “journey” largely of our choosing.

I was going to talk about how it’s important that we get our compass right on our faith journey...

I was going to talk about how *none* of the heroes of faith ever saw the fulfillment of their hope, how they could only welcome the “distant country” that they longed for from afar...

I was going to remind us that our guide on the journey is also our destination.

I was going to encourage us that even when the way ahead seems unclear, even when hope seems to be lost, we are part of a long story of saints who have kept walking, kept believing, kept “faith-ing” on the journey...

I was going to conclude with a rousing exhortation for those who saw faith like a box, to see it more like a compass, and those who already saw faith as a compass, to make sure that the compass was pointed in the right direction...

It was going to be great. Probably the best sermon ever preached. 😊

(I can say that, now that you won’t be hearing it.)

But I have discovered that it can be a dangerous thing to read the news with an already-finished sermon. 😊

And as the week progressed, and as the news about the refugee crisis in Europe intensified, and as the image of little Alan Kurdi’s body washed up on a Turkish beach began to go viral...

The world’s attention has been fixed on this single issue in a way that I can’t recall for quite some time.

So, it felt a bit inappropriate to just preach a “business-as-usual” sermon this morning. I believe that one of the tasks of preaching is to interpret the news of the day with the story of Scripture.

We bring our concerns about what’s going on in the world with us to church, don’t we? And especially given our church’s efforts in refugee sponsorship, I know that many among us are deeply concerned about the news this week.

So I decided not to preach the sermon I raced through above

My attention was drawn instead to a few lines from Hebrews 11.

**8** By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

**9** By faith he **made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country**

And then...

**13** All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting **that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.**

It’s impossible to hear verses like this and not think about the present refugee crisis, with millions of Syrians not knowing where they are going and feeling like “foreigners and strangers on earth.”

This passage from Hebrews was not written to address the refugee crisis, but along with other passages in Scripture, it reminds us that as people of faith, we are not unacquainted with this feeling of being “foreigners.”

In the big picture, this is true of our time on earth. We are awaiting the renewed and redeemed creation. We don’t feel at home in this world where God’s justice is not fully realized. We are longing for a better home.

But it’s true in the smaller stories we see in Scripture and in our own lives, too.

The people of Israel were refugees from Egypt. Indeed, for a good chunk of their history,

they have not lived in a permanent place, due to exile at the hands of various nations.

Jesus was a refugee. One of the first things he had to do was to flee to Egypt with his parents to escape the murderous King Herod.

And, of course, the Mennonite experience is one where we have been a wandering people. From Europe to the Ukraine to places like Paraguay, Canada, USA, Mexico...

As a people, we know what it's like to be on the run. We know what it's like to be desperate and in need. We know what it's like to be wandering nomads fleeing persecution and mistreatment at the hands of the powerful.

We know what it's like to have a country open its doors to us.

I was raised on stories from my grandparents who were so profoundly grateful to be able to come to Canada to escape the Russian Revolution.

At the time, it just seemed like kind of the background noise of my childhood... *Yeah, yeah, once upon a time grandma and grandpa had a hard life somewhere else and then they came to Canada...*

(I could be a miserable child ☺)

But I hear those stories differently now. I imagine them differently.

Some of you don't have to do much imagining at all. You *know* from personal experience, what it means to be a refugee. You know what it is like to be hungry and tired with nowhere to go.

You see yourselves in those images on our TV and computer screens.

And now, we have the opportunity to do the same for others. We have a duty to do so.

Just this morning, I encountered three passages from the OT that highlight the centrality of making room for the stranger:

Deuteronomy 10:19

**19** And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in

Egypt.

Exodus 22:21

**21** “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

Leviticus 19:34

**34** The 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.

And, of course, the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 7:12:

So in everything, **do to others** what you would have them **do to** you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Over and over again, look after the stranger... For you were strangers once, too.

And this is our story.

I am proud of our church for spearheading a Lethbridge initiative to bring refugees from Syria to Lethbridge.

I want to offer just a brief update.

It's been quite a week. The picture has put this issue in the spotlight and the calls and messages and requests to help are beginning to pour in.

This is quite quickly spilling far beyond our little church. There are, of course, the United Churches that are involved, but there are people from the university, other churches, community members with no religious affiliation...

It's really exciting to be a part of what is rapidly becoming a community initiative. But that means that we need to be flexible and adaptable and creative. This isn't just us. This could get much bigger very quickly here.

It's not at all hard to imagine more refugees coming once these first families arrive.

Last night, I did an interview with a radio station in Edmonton about our refugee initiative and how it got started and what we might expect going forward and when we

might have Syrians on the ground here in Lethbridge.

At one point in the interview, the gentleman on the other end asked me, “So, what motivates you to do what you do?”

This is, of course, the kind of question that people like me *dream* of being asked. 😊

And I think I said something pretty basic and correct. I said that I didn’t presume to speak for other members of our community, but that for our church, and for me, personally, the reason we have decided to do this is because we believe that it is basic to our Christian conviction that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves.

And, of course, we know that according to Jesus, that word “neighbour” is an expansive one. We know that for Jesus ...

- My neighbour does not need to be someone who I feel nicely disposed toward.
- My neighbour does not need to demonstrate an appropriate level of industriousness or measure up to some standard of “worthiness” as defined by the ones who get to make the rules and control the purse strings.
- My neighbour does not need to share my religious convictions.
- My neighbour does not need to occupy the same rung on the socioeconomic ladder.
- My neighbour could easily be my enemy.

(I didn’t say that last part, but it was going on in my head 😊.)

Matthew 7:12. *All* the law and prophets is summed up in these words: Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

And I was ok with this answer as I was driving in to church this morning.

But then as I read Hebrews 11 again, and as I think about some of these passages we’ve looked at this morning, and as I think about the narrative of Scripture in general, I wish I would have said more.

I wish I had said, “We do this because we are all strangers, longing for way home.”

We are looking for that better home that Hebrews talks about.

A basic duty throughout Scripture, one that is fundamental to who we are, is that *we have an obligation to pass along what we have received.*

We were once foreigners and we were welcomed in.

We were once in need of forgiveness, and we were forgiven.

We were once in need of mercy and we were shown mercy.

Scripture is **so** clear on this. *Jesus* is so clear on this. What we have received, *we must* pass on.

Widening the circle and welcoming people in just *what we do* as Christians, because it is what has been done for us.

That's what I wish I had said to the guy on the radio last night. But he probably wasn't looking for a sermon. 😊

So, please pray for those of us who have been entrusted with providing leadership to this initiative, as we try to effectively manage and channel all of this good will.

And as a church, let's not forget to pray and to prepare ourselves to welcome strangers into our community. Let's keep up on our pledges. Let's be generous.

The people that we welcome may never darken the door of our church. But we still have an obligation as Christians, as people of *faith*, to love these neighbours as ourselves, to pass along what we have received.

May God help us to be good neighbours—to welcome the stranger, for we, too, were once strangers. And we follow a Saviour who *was* a stranger.

May the words that Claire and Nicholas sang and played for us earlier, be our words, too.

I want to walk like... see like... hear like... be like the Man of Galilee.

Amen.



