

Victoria Linner

5th Sunday After Epiphany Sermon – Migration with Dignity Sunday

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Amen.

Today is Migration with Dignity Sunday, a day when we uplift the dignity of migrants and consider the practical implications for how to love our neighbors, those from near and far.

To start, migration is normal and common. Most Americans have some connection to migration in their own lives or in their family backgrounds. I’ll name my own. My grandfather on my mother’s side was one of the estimated 2 million Black people who moved from the South to the North in the time period of the two World Wars.¹ This period of US history is called the Great Migration.

More recently, my father immigrated from Sweden in the early 1980s. And now, I stand before you, a person from almost 800 miles away.

I share this to put into perspective the reality that people move around. Take a moment to think about your own or your family’s migration story if you have one.

When I think of a migrant, I think of my grandfather who walked from Georgia to Connecticut, fleeing the oppression of Jim Crow.² When I think of a migrant, I think of my dad, who came to and stayed in the US for education and academic opportunity.

I picture people that I love. People that are part of my family. I empathize with them. I understand completely why they migrated when they did. And I thank God for the people who welcomed them in their new homes.

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>

² My mom informed me that he hopped a freight train.

But now, I want us to challenge ourselves. Think about the kind of person that you can't relate to at all: a person whose language, culture, customs, and beliefs are foreign to you. Now picture that person moving to your area, becoming your next-door neighbor. Do we have the same feelings of warmth and care? Do we have the same eagerness to welcome this person as a new member of our community?

We have all kinds of ways to classify people, especially in terms of how we describe people who have migrated. Think about who is called an alien, migrant, or immigrant and who is called an ex-pat or just by their name. For some people, being from another country is viewed as a fun fact. For others, being from another country is viewed as the single most important aspect of their existence. They are viewed as nothing except an immigrant.

This reality is antithetical to the gospel. Our identity is not primarily about citizenship. It's about the fact that we are all beloved children of God who are called to love each other. This is the bedrock of our faith. Our belief that all people are children of God and created in God's image supersedes any human made category or identifier.

Nowadays, faith is often discussed as something that is personal and private, faith is something that is only between you and God. But this is not the Gospel that Jesus is describing in Matthew. Jesus' metaphor of his followers being Light is not describing a private faith, a hidden religious practice that's contained in the walls of a home or site of worship. Instead, Christ is calling his followers to public, visible, far-reaching witness and ministry.

It's also not about empty public displays of piety. Isaiah addresses this in the lectionary reading for today. The prophet Isaiah is correcting the people of Israel, specifically the people who are fasting and humbling themselves in an effort to get God's attention and favor. They're bowing their heads like the bulrush, which are cattail plants. They're lying sackcloth and ashes.

And how does God view these actions, this kind of fast? God says this is not what I want you to be doing. This is not the fast that I choose. Instead, what God wants is for the Israelites to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. God wants them to share food with the hungry, let the homeless poor into their houses, and to clothe the naked.

While this passage doesn't specifically mention foreigners and migrants, it is a recurring theme throughout the Hebrew Bible that God commands us not to oppress the stranger. Also, the commands to care for the poor do not exclude foreigners. And since people who migrate are often in precarious situations, they are even more so meant to be the focus of our care and love of neighbor.

“The fast acceptable to the Lord combines the rejection of the ways of violence, incarceration, and oppression with a commitment to care for those in need” regardless of where they came from.³

So how can this call to righteousness, the fast that is acceptable to God, and this call to being the Light of the world be actualized in this reality where migration is a norm? Migration with Dignity Sunday offers 6 guiding principles for the practical care of migrants.

The six Migration with Dignity principles are:

1. A universal right of movement, including freedom to leave and return to one's country of origin, freedom of movement within one's country of origin or country of settlement.
2. The right to be secure: from sexual violence including rape and sexual exploitation, human trafficking, slavery, forced labor and arbitrary and abusive detention.

³ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14GKXJZoUEAHUSfTgJFkeY8hTkXyYD4-3Ft5eXrBXSb4/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.7130rgox3ya>

3. The right of equality, to include: 1) equal treatment with no discrimination under the law based on color, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, political affiliation, national origin; and 2) equal opportunity for upward mobility.
4. Rights to a basic quality of life, including employment, housing, and food rights.
5. The right to access services such as health care, education and legal representation.
6. Civil and political rights guaranteeing the right to identity, to use of one's language, and to freedom of speech and religion.⁴

What will it take for our society to live by these principles? I see a mixture of policy needs and spiritual healing that will lead to behavioral change.

“The Migration With Dignity principles are unflinching in their insistence that it is not enough to talk about immigration law or policy, but that we must also think about how we are going to meet the needs of those who migrate, including their basic needs for quality of life, health, and education, as well as their cultural and emotional needs to maintain ties to their own culture while also making a home with us.”⁵ Migration with Dignity necessitates moving away from a scarcity mindset and towards an understanding of the abundance that we have, and our divine mandate to share it.

“⁶We are in a time of crisis, a time where injustice against migrants is rampant, but our own actions of witness and solidarity, wherever we are, illuminate our networks of care for one another and celebrate one another’s identities as children of God.”

⁴ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14GKXJZoUEAHUSfTgJFkeY8hTkXyYD4-3Ft5eXrBXSb4/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.7130rgox3ya>

⁵ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14GKXJZoUEAHUSfTgJFkeY8hTkXyYD4-3Ft5eXrBXSb4/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.7130rgox3ya>

⁶ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14GKXJZoUEAHUSfTgJFkeY8hTkXyYD4-3Ft5eXrBXSb4/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.7130rgox3ya>

May our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. Amen.