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FAITH AND HOSPITALITY

Nina Beth Cardin*

Law, at its core, is a matter of heart. It is a way that any two or more people determine how to live together, how to share the time and space and stuff of life. It is an expression of what a society deems fair and good, or wrong and out-of-bounds, and the structures put in place to codify, enforce and adjudicate such beliefs.

Law, in short, is values made manifest, which is why it is right and proper, even essential, for faith communities to enter the conversation about law.

Especially now. It is precisely when difficult circumstances of global population displacement strain our social graces, when extraordinary times try our “better angels”, that we may turn fearful and inward, and seek refuge in law as a tool of protectionism and exclusion.

So it may seem banal in a time of such upheaval and dislocation, when millions of refugees fleeing for their lives are disrupting national and international stability, to call upon faith communities to speak to us about their traditions of hospitality. But that is what we must do. It is precisely now that the traditions, the attitude and the practice of hospitality are needed most.

Hospitality is first and foremost an act of selflessness triggered by the need, the call, of the traveler, the stranger, the exiled, the ones far from home. The Hebrew Bible speaks no less than ninety-two times of “ger,” which translates to stranger or immigrant and what we must do to care for them.¹ “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall enjoy the same protections as your citizens. You shall love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”²

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¹ *Scripture and Immigration*, WELCOMING THE STRANGER WORLD RELIEF, http://welcomingthestranger.com/wp_welcoming/learn-and-discern/scripture-and-immigration (last visited Apr. 19, 2017) (stating that “ger” is used 92 times in the Torah and roughly translates to immigrant).

² *Leviticus* 19:33–34.

And “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you yourselves know how it feels to be a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.”³

Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and other religions know intimately of the vulnerability of the stranger and celebrate the practice of hospitality, naming it an essential component of their traditions. Hospitality is a call for deep open-heartedness that urges us to displace ourselves from the exclusive center of our personal narratives and share that place, both physically and spiritually, with others. That is why it is so hard, because in the exercise of urgent hospitality, we are displaced, albeit temporarily, by the insistent, unbidden demands of the displaced other.

It is the faith community—with its sacred stories of hospitality—that has the capacity to call us to respond to this need of the “other.” Over 65.3 million people world-wide are refugees today, displaced by war, violence, hunger, environmental degradation, and poverty.⁴ They need places to go and people to welcome them in. They need host communities to honor their dignity, keep them safe, and remind them that though they have been displaced they have not been discarded. They need both the immediate physical safety and spiritual uplift that hospitality can provide, and the long-term help of either resettling in a new land or reclaiming the refuge of their homeland.

In times like this, when some seek to turn laws against the outsider, the faithful must work to assure that society remains open to their plight. Where laws are just, they must be obeyed; where they are wrong, the faithful must act to make them right.

To do that, congregations should and often do join forces with immigration and civil rights groups which speak out on behalf of refugees and immigrants.⁵ This is critical. For the voice of faith has a

³ *Exodus* 23:9.

⁴ *Figures at a Glance*, UNHCR (Jun. 20, 2016), <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

⁵ Tom Gjelten, *Trump Refugee Ban Clashes with Faith-Based Groups’ Religious Missions*, NPR (Jan. 27, 2017, 8:33 PM), <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/27/511997346/trump-refugee-ban-clashes-with-faith-based-groups-religious-missions> (stating six of the nine agencies that resettle immigrants are “faith-based”).

unique capacity to frame the public conversation, reset public sentiment that has gone astray, and positively affect public policy. And this voice must be loud.

When the law veers from the path of justice, congregations may practice faithful civil disobedience, serving as the guardians of the right path until the law finds its way back. Today, congregations are signing on to become sanctuaries, consistent with the ICE “sensitive locations” policy.⁶ As such, they are serving as places of refuge for undocumented immigrants whose contributions to this country, and the real dangers they would face if forced to return to their home countries, demand that they not be deported.⁷ People of faith should and often do support efforts such as those promoted by Maryland’s Attorney General, Brian Frosh, to have the federal government honor courts, schools and hospitals as “safe harbors.”⁸ This, too, is consistent with ICE’s “sensitive locations” policy, which are designed to assure the safety and well-being - the “rights of protection” mentioned in the Bible - of all immigrants.⁹

Some people of faith are going further. They are building safe rooms in their homes, places where families and children can hide until the laws, or at least the law’s most severe implementation, are changed.¹⁰ While this strategy cannot significantly shield the 11 million immigrants currently in the U.S. government’s crosshairs, it

⁶ Memorandum from John Morton, Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, to Field Directors, Special Agents in Charge and Chief Counsel, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Enforcement Actions at or Focused on Sensitive Locations (Oct. 23, 2011), <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/ero-outreach/pdf/10029.2-policy.pdf>.

⁷ Holly Meyer, *Churches Increasingly Feel Need to Offer Sanctuary to Undocumented Migrants*, USA TODAY (Feb. 22, 2017, 1:23 PM), <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/02/22/sanctuary-churches-movement/98247276>.

⁸ Anamika Roy, *Frosh Requests “Safe Harbor” Designation for Md. Courts, Hospitals, Schools*, DAILY REC. (Mar. 2, 2017), <http://thedailyrecord.com/2017/03/02/frosh-letter-safe-harbor>.

⁹ *Enforcement and Removal Operations: Sensitive Locations FAQs*, U.S. IMMIGR. & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT, <https://www.ice.gov/ero/enforcement/sensitive-loc> (last visited Apr. 19, 2017).

¹⁰ Kyung Lah et al., *Underground Network Readies Homes to Hide Undocumented Immigrants*, CNN (Feb. 26, 2017, 8:46 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/23/us/california-immigrant-safe-houses>.

can and does send a powerful public message to the immigrant community that there are many in America who are committed to their cause.¹¹

None of this suggests putting our country at risk. Hospitable homes still have locks on their doors; hosts must still determine and enforce who may come and who must stay out, and guests must still adhere to reasonable behavioral expectations. So too, must our country preserve the integrity of our borders and assure, as much as is humanly possible, the propriety of those who enter. But hospitality demands that compassion temper fear, kindness trump prejudice and prudence seek the truth and not succumb to the fabrications of our lesser selves.

But that is not all. There are other “others” today, beyond the stranger from without, who need our open-heartedness. They are the “strangers” within, those who live in the margins of our society and who deserve to be welcomed. Minorities, LGBT people, and new citizens who are still considered “outsiders.” They too deserve a hospitality of spirit. They deserve that the majority let go of the hegemony of their own beliefs and make room for the other in their hearts and the greater society. This does not mean ceding or surrendering one’s own values or surrendering to relativism, but rather acknowledging that we must be humble, for there may be many faces to truth. As Pope Francis movingly said, “Who am I to judge?”¹²

This “banal” idea of hospitality is, then, after all, not so facile. It is demanding, awkward, even unsettling. But one basic law of life is that all of us, sooner or later, need another’s hospitality. Sooner or later, somewhere and sometime in our travels, we are all strangers, marginal, outsiders. We too need a daring society, compassionate

¹¹ See, e.g., *Q&A: Implementation of the Executive Order on Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States*, U.S. DEP’T. HOMELAND SEC. (Feb. 21, 2017, 8:30 AM), <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2017/02/21/qa-dhs-implementation-executive-order-enhancing-public-safety-interior-united-states>; see also Ben Casselman & Perry Bacon, Jr., *How Trump’s New Plan Affects the 11 Million Undocumented Immigrants in the U.S.*, FIVETHIRTYEIGHT (Feb. 22, 2017, 10:39 AM), <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-trumps-new-plan-affects-the-11-million-undocumented-immigrants-in-the-u-s>.

¹² See Joshua J. McElwee, *Francis Explains “Who Am I to Judge?”*, NAT’L CATH. REP. (Jan. 10, 2016), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-explains-who-am-i-judge> (explaining Pope Francis’ remark).

laws, gracious people to open up and welcome us in. Today, those of us who are blessed with a home must open our hearts justly to the other. More than any other sector of society, the faith community can remind us of this and make this come to be.