

WELCOMING CHRIST AMONG US



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June 14, 2020
Matthew 10:40-42

Refugee Awareness Sunday

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward. (Matthew 10:40-42, NRSV)

When I was little, our church in Sodus had a potluck on the second Sunday of every month. Places for everyone would be set in the Fellowship Hall. And long tables at the front held covered dishes with sliced ham and green bean casseroles and molded jello salads. And my very favorite dishes, which I eagerly anticipated each month, were heaping trays of fresh hot egg rolls.

In 1979, our church sponsored a refugee family from Vietnam. Word spread, and strangers asked us if they also could sponsor a family. 'Yes,' and so the friendships began. Mathew "Bud" and Jean Borre welcomed Thanh "Tran" and Lap Tran, and we with them. This week, nearly 40 years later, Tran and Lap's son Steven and I reminisced for hours. "What do you remember from when we were children? Where are you now?"

During the war in Vietnam, Tran had worked for the U.S. Government as a cartographer, mapping the terrain and showing where enemy territory was. After the war ended and the U.S. pulled out, Tran remained and was imprisoned. When Tran was released, he and Lap fled by boat. They were taken to the island of Bidong with thousands of other Vietnamese refugees. On the island, food was scarce, and Tran found discarded barrels, and foraged wood from the forest and strapped it all together to build a raft that he used to fish. Tran had his U.S. government credentials and applied for resettlement in the United States. After about a year of vetting and processing, Tran and Lap arrived in Southwest Michigan. For years they had dreamed of having a child, and soon after arriving, at ages 45 and 37, Lap learned she was pregnant. I still remember hearing the news that they were expecting and rejoicing greatly at Steven's birth in 1980.

Our families sat together in the same pew at church, my Mother and Christina and I, with Tran and Lap and then baby Steven. We watched Steven grow and learn to walk. During worship, when sitting still and being quiet got long, we entertained Steven with pencil drawings of animals on the offering envelopes. After a while, Tran himself was able to sponsor his youngest sister, Hong. And at Hong's wedding, Christina and Steven walked down the aisle of our church as flower girl and ring bearer. And when able Hong sponsored her best friend from Vietnam. Hong and Lap made those heaping trays of egg rolls every month. And at more than one family outing, Steven and I traded egg rolls and bologna sandwiches.

The Borre family owned ACE Hardware, and Tran worked at ACE. Lap made lamp shades in their home. Tran and Lap both sent as much money as they could to help their families in Vietnam, never feeling they could give quite enough. At the same time, they navigated their lives, languages, food, work and family in the United States. Incredible.

In 1987, our family moved away, and circumstances changed, and news of one another became slim. As Steven and I caught up this week, I learned.

Tran worked faithfully at ACE Hardware until retirement. The Tran family and the Borre family came to be like an extended family and shared holidays and support, for as long as the Borres lived. After Lap retired, she returned to Vietnam. And when Lap died, she was living in a Buddhist monastery, serving the poor. Steven graduated at the top of his class and went on to become a pharmaceutical researcher. He now overseas teams developing new drugs to fight cancer. Tran lives with Steven and his family.

Steven shared, "Sometimes my Dad, asks, 'What if I had never gotten on that plane? What if I had never come to St. Joe? Like a flip of a switch, my life would have been so different.'"

Our current refugee resettlement program in the United States started during the era after the Vietnam War. Until recently, the U.S. State Department resettled an average of 90,000 people per year. This program not only saved lives, but those who came have enriched our communities, and saved our lives. The number of refugees who are admitted each year is determined by the U.S. President and our current one is the first to drastically cut the program, forcing many resettlement offices to close, and threatening the very existence of the program. Meanwhile the numbers of refugees in the world are at an all time high. Dr. Stephanie Nawyn has researched the connection between the rise in white supremacy activity in the U.S. with the rise in anti-immigrant and anti-refugee policies.

The Presbyterian Church of Okemos has supported refugees since those early years when my United Methodist Church, Chapel Hill, in Sodus was doing so, along with an entire nation. Ten years ago, with the dream of Judi Harris and the incredible work of Paula Frantz, together we formed and continue supporting the Global Institute of Lansing, GIL. Five years ago, we gathered faith leaders and directors of our refugee support agencies to create the All Faith Alliance for Refugees, (AFAR). The call to 'welcome the refugee' is

something all major faiths share. AFAR meets regularly to learn refugee updates and brainstorm ways to be supportive. The biggest need now is to financially sustain our refugee resettlement office at St. Vincent Catholic Charities through severe federal cuts. Doing so supports those who have arrived and be able to one day welcome new arrivals again. In doing so, we rise to resist white supremacy and live out the call of our faith, our God.

Last fall, Hong Son drove to my parents' home in South Haven with the gift of egg rolls. We saved them in the freezer and served them as a special treat for my father's 80 birthday dinner. You see these egg rolls and all they represent, are more than a favorite food of my childhood, they are sacramental. And Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."