

Lenten Refugee Moment, Week 1: Syria

March 5, 2017

During this Lenten season, Creekside UMC¹ is lifting up refugees, focusing on a different refugee group each Sunday. The idea for the series came out of recent sermons and conversations around the question *Who is our neighbor?* and a challenge to the church to embrace a broader definition of neighbor—one that reaches beyond borders of family, community, and country to include people often relegated to the periphery of the human family—those fleeing war, terror, persecution, hunger, and poverty. Bulletin inserts will be provided each Sunday with background and resources to help us learn more about these communities, along with seven prayer suggestions—one for each day of the week. We are encouraged as a church to commit to a Lenten practice of daily prayer.

We *are* in the midst a global refugee crisis. In 2015 the number of people forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict and persecution exceeded 60 million for the first time in United Nations history. The number now stands at 65.3 million, one in every 113 people. Based on the rate at which people are fleeing conflict, 24 persons are displaced every minute.²

The highest number currently come from Syria, which is our focus today. Syria's 6-year-old civil war—which has four main sides fighting on the ground, each with a different foreign backer, and constantly shifting battle lines and alliances—has created the worst humanitarian crisis of our time.³ *Half* the country's pre-war population — more than 11 million people — have been forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge either outside the country or in other places within it.⁴ Bombings are destroying Syria's crowded cities, horrific human rights violations are widespread, and fighting has destroyed Syria's health-care infrastructure.⁵ UN emergency relief coordinator Stephen O'Brien told the UN Security Council on Jan. 26 of this year that the Syrian civil war is "a slaughterhouse, a complete meltdown of humanity, the apex of horror."⁶

Thousands of Syrians flee their country every day, often deciding to escape after seeing their neighborhoods bombed or family members killed. Still, leaving everything one has known is not easy, and the risks on the journey to the border can be as high as staying: Families walk for miles through the night to avoid being shot at by snipers or being caught by warring parties who will kidnap young men to fight for their cause.

"No one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark,"
wrote poet Warsan Shire about the crisis.
"No one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land ...
No one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore."⁷

Refugees leave only with what they can carry, and often where they go they are met with hostility and harassment. Even the most positive resettlement stories involve dislocation and loss—loss of family, friends, home, profession, familiarity with language, food, social norms, weather, health care systems, means of transportation.⁸

“I had to leave the home that I’d spent thirty years building,” said one Syrian refugee now living in Amman, Jordan.⁹ “One day I just had to close the doors, turn the key, and leave everything behind. I’m seventy-two. No one wants to leave home at my age. But I left because I have six sons, and I knew one day the soldiers would come for them.

“My sons weren’t political. They wanted nothing to do with killing, but that didn’t matter. Good people and bad people were all being treated the same way. I watched soldiers take away the neighbor’s boys with my own eyes. They were good boys. I’d known them their whole lives. But they were led away like sheep. They didn’t even speak up because if they opened their mouths, they’d be shot. I knew it was only a matter of time before they came to our house. We left everything behind, but now my family is safe. So I am happy.”

Like this family, most Syrian refugees who leave the country go to neighboring Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, or Egypt. The UN estimates only 1 in 10 live in official refugee camps. Some refugees stay with people they know in other countries. The rest are struggling to settle in unfamiliar urban communities or have been forced into crowded, makeshift settlements in rural environments that lack clean water, sanitation, and medical services. More than half of all Syrian refugees are under the age of 18. Most have been out of school for months, if not years.¹⁰

If we are truthful, though, for many of us, myself included, Syria feels very far away—our own family and work and community needs so much more immediate. It’s also a complicated war and for that reason easy to tune out unless something particularly awful happens. The war had already been going on for four years when, in September 2015, we got a terrible reminder of its human cost when a photograph went viral of a drowned Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, lying facedown in the sand. His tiny body, whom someone had lovingly dressed that morning in red shirt and blue shorts and black sneakers, had washed up on a Turkish beach after his family had attempted to flee the war by way of Turkey, hoping to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe and then on to a family member in Canada. They were on a dingy captained by a human smuggler when the sea got rough, the smuggler abandoned the boat, and it capsized. Aylan’s father desperately tried to hold onto his wife, Aylan, and their other son that day. He lost them all.^{11, 12}

With that one photo, suddenly the deaths of refugees in the Mediterranean, a tragically common occurrence, inspired widespread outrage.¹³ It actually changed European policy on receiving refugees.¹⁴ But memories are short. Our routines and

preoccupations return, and the war fades from our consciousness. In December of 2016, just a few months after Aylan died, *Christianity Today* reported that American Christians were less responsive to the Syrian crisis than they were a year ago, with the number committed to praying for refugees down by more than a third.¹⁵

Refugee stories are often very hard to hear, but our faith calls us to pay attention to the suffering in the world. Our faith calls us to be compassionate. To have compassion means to suffer with, to put ourselves in the shoes of the other. The reason the photograph of Aylan Kurdi touched us so profoundly was because it humanized the crisis. He was a *child*. His death was an indictment of collective human failure to care for the least of us. “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said in Matt. 25, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

If we believe our purpose is to help build the kingdom of God in the here and now, in this globalized world where everybody has become our neighbor, then we need to know these stories and to allow ourselves to be touched by them.

During this Lent, I invite you to pray with me that God will open our eyes to a hurting world and move us to compassion. In praying for others may we experience God’s presence in the suffering *and in the hope* of these refugees, and move us to react and respond in love.

In closing, please join me in practicing the Methodist tradition of singing our prayers. Turn to number 2187 in *The Faith We Sing*, “Now It Is Evening.” We’ll sing just the first two verses, and as we do, I invite you to think of the word “evening” however makes sense to you, perhaps imagining evening in a refugee camp, or that evening refers to the lateness of the war or the darkness of its forces.

May the light of Christ surround all persons affected by this war and bring them peace.

¹ Creekside UMC is in Sutter Creek, CA.

² Adrian Edwards, “Global Forced Displacement Hits Record High,” United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, June 20, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

³ YouTube, “Syrian War Explained in 5 Minutes,” November 17, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxzMa7j6LN0

⁴ Mercy Corps, “Quick Facts: What You Need to Know about the Syria Crisis,” March 9, 2017, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>

⁵ Priyanka Bogani, “A Staggering New Death Toll for Syria’s War — 470,000,” PBS Frontline, February 11, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/a-staggering-new-death-toll-for-syrias-war-470000/>

⁶ World Vision, “Syria Refugee Crisis: Facts You Need to Know,” Jan. 31, 2017, <http://blog.worldvision.com.my/syria-facts/>

⁷ Poem “Home” by Warsan Shire, <https://qz.com/897871/warsan-shires-poem-captures-the-reality-of-life-for-refugees-no-one-leaves-home-unless-home-is-the-mouth-of-a-shark/>

⁸ YouTube, “Syrian Refugees in the United States: One Family’s Story,” June 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rdi9SZX2k8>

⁹ Sarah Jacobs, “20 Stunning Portraits from the 'Humans of New York' Photographer's Interviews with Syrian Refugees,” *Business Insider*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/syrian-refugee-stories-told-by-humans-of-new-york-2015-12/#gaziantep-turkey-8>

¹⁰ Mercy Corps, “Quick Facts: What You Need to Know about the Syria Crisis,” March 9, 2017, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>

¹¹ Adam Withnall, “Aylan Kurdi’s Story: How a Small Syrian Child Came to be Washed up on a Beach in Turkey,” *Independent*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/aylan-kurdi-s-story-how-a-small-syrian-child-came-to-be-washed-up-on-a-beach-in-turkey-10484588.html>

¹² Helena Smith, “Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees,” *The Guardian*, September 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>

¹³ Laurel Raymond, “The Powerful Psychology of the Photo of a Dead Child that Rocketed Around the World,” ThinkProgress, September 4, 2015, <https://thinkprogress.org/the-powerful-psychology-of-the-photo-of-a-dead-child-that-rocketed-around-the-world-141ed181ca4a>

¹⁴ YouTube, “The European Refugee Crisis and Syria Explained,” September 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvOnXh3NN9w>

¹⁵ Kate Shellnutt, "Pray for Aleppo? Survey Says Fewer Christians Pray for Refugees," *Christianity Today*, December 22, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/december/survey-fewer-christians-pray-for-refugees-syria-aleppo-iraq.html>