

Called to Welcome, Called to Serve

Mark 9:30-37

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“First came the protests. Then the siege. The skies spitting bombs. Starvation. Burials. .My dear Marwan, these are the things you know... You know a bomb crater can be made into a swimming hole. You have learned dark blood is better news than bright. You have learned that mothers and sisters and classmates can be found in narrow gaps between concrete, bricks, and exposed beams, little patches of sunlit skin shining in the dark... Your mother is here tonight, Marwan, with us, on this cold and moonlit beach, among the crying babies and the women worrying in tongues we don't speak. Afghans and Somalis and Iraqis and Eritreans and Syrians. All of us impatient for sunrise, all of us in dread of it. All of us in search of home. I have heard it said that we are the uninvited. We are the unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere. But I hear your mother's voice, over the tide, and she whispers in my ear. 'Oh, but if they saw, my darling. Even half of what you have. If only they saw. They would say kinder things, surely.'” (excerpt from *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini)

This is an excerpt from *Sea Prayer*, a new book of short fiction by Khaled Hosseini. You may know him by his more famous works *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Sea Prayer* was just released last Tuesday. I had heard months ago that Hosseini was working on a new book, and I had pre-ordered it because I love Hosseini's other books. At first, when I got *Sea Prayer* in the mail on its release date, I was a little bit disappointed because it's not the full length novel that I had been looking forward to. When I sat down with it, however, I realized that it is a beautiful and important book. It is a father, speaking to his sleeping child, as they wait to begin a risky journey from Syria to Europe.

Khaled Hosseini felt compelled to write *Sea Prayer* after Alan Kurdi died on September

2, 2015. Alan was a three year old Syrian boy of Kurdish ethnic background. He and his family were fleeing the violence in their home country, trying to reach Europe. Alan's family had made it as far as Turkey. On that September day, they boarded a small boat, one of those inflatable kinds. The boat was designed for eight people, but there were sixteen on board. The family was trying to reach the Greek island of Kos, which is only about 2.5 miles from Bodrum, Turkey, where they started. Within five minutes the boat capsized. Alan drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, along with his brother and his mother. It was Alan, however, whose image captured international attention when his lifeless body washed up onto a Turkish beach and was photographed by a journalist. The picture was seen around the world and provoked compassion and outrage about the plight of refugees. You can pull it up on Google images if you have never seen it, but be warned – once you see the photo, it will haunt you.

Khaled Hosseini, an American writer who was born in Afghanistan, wrote *Sea Prayer* to recognize not only little Alan, but all people who have lost their lives trying to get away from violence and oppression. The book is dedicated to “the thousands of refugees who have perished at sea fleeing war and persecution.” At the end of the book, Hosseini notes that in the year following Alan Kurdi's death, 4,176 other people died or went missing trying to reach Europe from Syria. Hosseini is also making a personal sacrifice to raise awareness and provide assistance for refugees – he is a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and he is the founder of The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a not-for profit organization that provides assistance and relief efforts for refugees around the world. He is donating all of the author proceeds from *Sea Prayer* to these two organizations. I find it hopeful and gratifying that a writer of his stature is taking note of this terrible problem. Not only that, he is making an effort both to raise awareness of the suffering and also to *do something about it*.

He's using the gift God gave him – that of creating images with his words – to address one of the issues that will shape our global future.

We hear a lot about refugees, and their plight – what has happened to them, where they should go when they can no longer safely stay in their home countries, what nations are responsible for integrating them into their own societies. At least here in the United States, the subject of refugees gets all tangled up with other controversial related topics like immigration and asylum. Some people believe that welcoming refugees will increase the risk of terrorism in our country, or that our “traditional” culture will be subsumed by another. These issues get wrapped in politics and cloaked in inflammatory rhetoric. We get trapped in debates that never end, and we forget that refugees are real people, flesh and blood. We forget...until we see a picture of an Alan Kurdi...gone too soon, through no fault of his own.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” I cannot help but wonder if Alan Kurdi would be alive today – a happy and healthy six-year-old – if we as a nation and we as a global community took those words of Jesus seriously. Not everyone is in a position to bring a child into their home, I understand that, but there are lots of ways to welcome people who need a place to start a new life. What would it mean to welcome an Alan Kurdi into our community? We could push our leaders to provide schools with adequate classroom spaces and enough teachers and extra help for kids who have been through a lot and need attention. We could make sure that every kid gets a couple of decent meals every day – that one seems pretty basic to me. We could recognize a diverse population as a strength and a gift, instead of being threatened by people who are different from us. We could befriend a child like Alan and live in relationship with him. As a congregation, we’re doing some of these things already...but it is important that we understand

why we are doing them. We're doing this stuff because Jesus said to. It's really that simple. "Whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me." We are called to welcome.

If Jesus were physically present among us today, I wonder if he would expand the concept of children to include all children of God, not just the chronologically young. I think he would. The image of a drowned child captured our attention three years ago, but the horror that hundreds of thousands of people of all ages have endured is just as appalling. It's overwhelming and we want to look away, but we cannot. We cannot look away if we want to be faithful to the spirit of Jesus' teachings.

I recognize that questions of border security and population and economics are complex. It would be a complicated undertaking to integrate however many people into our society and make sure that they had work and homes and adequate money and opportunity to build new lives. No one nation can take full responsibility for the millions of people in our world who are displaced for all kinds of reasons. But surely we can do better than we are right now. Surely babies do not need to be swept from their parents' arms and carried out into the ocean. The only reason any parents would make the heart wrenching choice to take such a risk is that their lives are in even more danger if they stay put. Who should have to make a decision like that?

I've already made reference to the time and energy that we spend, as a society, arguing about who is at fault for the plight of displaced people and who is responsible for their well being. Seems like we argue about everything these days – sometimes I think all the debating is a well-orchestrated means of keeping us from actually *doing anything* about the problems. We blow off a lot of steam and release a ton of hot air into the atmosphere, but all the arguing is really a distraction. The rhetoric and division just deflect our attention from taking action and working together as a worldwide community to find workable solutions to these problems.

I couldn't help but nod in recognition when Jesus asks his disciples "What were you arguing about on the way?" They're embarrassed, and rightfully so, because they had been discussing which of them was the "greatest." Did Jesus want to weep with frustration in that moment? Did he throw up his hands, roll his eyes? Did he ask them "Really? Are you *serious*? Who cares?" We don't have any written evidence that he did any of those things, but in his shoes I surely would have wanted to.

And yet Jesus just sits down with the disciples and reminds them (maybe for the umpteenth time) that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then he tells them to welcome the child. Welcoming God's children is an integral part of serving. But like the disciples all those years ago, we get caught up in stupid arguments. We might not say it so overtly, but some of our ridiculous debates boil down to who is better than whom. Which of God's children deserves love? Who deserves a safe and decent place to live? And what may be the underlying motivation for all the debating: Who makes those decisions? Who calls the shots? Who determines what happens to these people who are fleeing for their lives? At least in today's context, I think "greatness" has to do with power and control, and we fight about it just as much as the disciples ever did. And when we get caught up in our own verbal dexterity and our insatiable need to be right, we lose sight of what matters.

We are called to serve and called to welcome. When we fail to be faithful to those callings, real people are affected. Some, like Alan Kurdi, lose their lives. We must do better. We must move beyond pointless arguments and get about the business of welcoming and serving. At the end of *Sea Prayer*, as the father looks at his sleeping son, he prays the following words. "All I can do is pray," he says. "Pray God steers the vessel true, when the shores slip out of eyeshot and we are a flyspeck on the heaving waters, pitching and tilting, easily swallowed.

Because you, you are precious cargo, Marwan, the most precious there ever was.” I pray the sea knows this.” O Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.