

In This House We Believe...
Part 4 – Refugees, Every Last One of Us
Ephesians 2:11-22

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 14, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, ¹⁵ abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; ²¹ in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:11-22, NRSV)



Kyungu Mayaula has lost his home, and his homeland. Become of severe violence between rival groups in his native Democratic Republic of Congo, often in the form of attacks with axes and machetes, Kyungu and his family of 15 walked over 50 kilometers to escape the bloody violence in his home community. Desperate to

not only feed his family, but also to protect them from the violence, he took extraordinary risks that led to spinal shock and a fractured arm when he fell from the top of a palm tree where he was trying to secure food. Despite all the hardship he and his family are facing, he refuses to return home. The risk is just too great.

In the Kasai Region of this part of Africa, over a million people have been displaced. An extreme food crisis, particularly affecting children under five with acute malnutrition, has been one of the many devastating results. Many, many people have been killed, wounded, raped, or traumatized. Villages and fields have been decimated by fire. A long way from our secure homes and homeland here in the States, there are scores upon scores of people who no longer have either, no place where they now belong.¹

That, of course, is the very definition of a refugee, one who has been forced to abandon home and homeland to escape war, persecution or natural disaster. Refugee is a French word that literally means one who has gone seeking refuge. It is easy in the West to pretend that the world is a civilized place where most people can go about their business in peace and relative prosperity. But it’s simply not true.² Kyungu’s story is repeated around the world more and more often each year. The European Commission estimates that at the end of 2023 there were 110 million people displaced worldwide. That number is on track to grow to 130 million by the end of this year. These include Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, Ukrainian refugees in Poland, Romania, and Moldova, Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, Somali refugees in Kenya, and Palestinian refugees in southern Gaza.³ In our own country, more than 10,000 migrants arrive at our southern border every day, many of them asylum seekers.⁴ The numbers are hard to fathom. And each

¹ *International Committee of the Red Cross*, “Displaced persons in Democratic Republic of the Congo,” read article online at <https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/africa/democratic-republic-congo/democratic-republic-congo-refugees#:~:text=In%20the%20Kasai%20Region%2C%20over,violent%20clashes%20in%20Tanganyika%20Province>.

² N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 28.

³ *European Commission Online*, read at https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/forced-displacement_en#:~:text=By%20the%20end%20of%20June,forcibly%20displaced%20persons%20in%202024.

⁴ *Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas*, December 21, 2023. Read online at <https://www.wola.org/2023/12/weekly-u-s-mexico-border-update-heavy-migration-no-congress-deal-texas-law/#:~:text=More%20than%2010%2C000%20migrants%20per,of%20false%20rumors%20and%20misinformation>.

one represents a person who has lost home and homeland.

It is this global crisis which has led many people to make this third statement of this modern creed, often displayed on yard signs even in our own neighborhood: “No Human is Illegal”. I understand I’m taking some liberties with a creed whose proponents likely have most clearly in mind individuals here in our own country who some label “illegal”. But I think it’s in the spirit of this creed that I’ve expanded it to declare that all people in our world have the right to a home and a homeland, and that it is wrong for anyone to deny them this fundamental right.

Whether this brings you relief or causes you disappointment, I’m not going to touch at all today on American immigration policies and practices. This is a matter of crucial importance, of course, and one that we all should be engaged with. But just like I’ve already made clear the past weeks when I told you that I don’t believe the pulpit is the place to espouse my particular views on the Black Lives Matter organization, or the government’s policies around abortion, the pulpit is also not the place for me to try to promote or denounce how our nation or any other nation handles immigration policies. Again, those are critical discussions which ought to involve and concern us, but not in this context. Furthermore, I believe that sincere Christians can have legitimate and thoughtful disagreements on which policies best preserve order for our nation and, at the same time, promote justice for immigrants and refugees. These issues are complex, and political ineptitude is not the only reason they haven’t been solved here in America. Even with the best and most sincere political leadership possible, these issues would still be very difficult to solve.

Furthermore, it’s good to be reminded that the Bible teaches us that God has given human governments a unique and separate role in this world, quite different from the role he has given the church. This is perhaps most clearly articulated by Paul in Romans 13 where he writes, **“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God...The authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.”**⁵ There is a whole other sermon here, but briefly one of things this means is that our founding fathers were right, that

there always needs to be some separation between the church and the state, for each has a different role. History has shown that things never go well for the church when it gets in bed with the state. This is because the state is called to do things the church, as a community of those living and loving as Jesus lived and loved, should never do.

As an example, and as Paul points out, sometimes the state has to “bear the sword” in war against hostile enemies or to bring justice against those bent on doing harm to society. John Calvin, the Swiss reformer and father of our Reformed tradition, argued that civil government is ordained by God “to adapt our conduct to human society, to form our manners to civil justice, to conciliate us to each other, to cherish common peace and tranquility.”⁶ In other words, government enables us to live together in society for the common good. Or at least that is its God-given purpose. One of the things that this means is that from the perspective of human government, there is such a thing as being illegal. I’m about to travel to Kenya in a few weeks. If I attempt to go there without the required visa, that nation has every right to deny me entry or expel me if I enter illegally. Scripture teaches us that this right was given to the nation of Kenya by God himself.

With that in mind, I’ve tried to be clear all through this sermon series, and will continue to make clear, that instead of getting into the realm of partisan politics, or even into a discussion on whether or not human governments are carrying out their God-given responsibilities as they are meant to carry them out, we are instead trying to get to the biblical truth that is either informing, or being deformed by, each part of this creed. And at the heart of this creed, that no human is illegal, there is a beautiful truth to be found that is indeed at the very heart of the Christian gospel.

To get at that truth, let me start by making sure you know that not only is our world full of refugees, so is the Bible. And most of the time in the Bible, the refugees we read about are God’s people, or at least people God is calling to himself. A quick roll call. Noah and his family take refuge from the flood.⁷ That makes them refugees. God calls Abram and Sarah to leave their home and homeland and follow him to an unknown place.⁸ His son, Isaac, becomes a refugee in Philistia to escape famine.⁹ His son, Jacob, flees from his brother and becomes a refugee in Paddan Aram.¹⁰ His son, Joseph, is sold into slavery in a foreign land,

⁵ Romans 13:1,4. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁶ Cited by Richard Turnbull, “John Calvin and God’s Civil Government”, *Acton Institute*, April 27, 2022. Read the article online at [https://fio.acton.org/archives/123349-john-calvin-and-gods-civil-](https://fio.acton.org/archives/123349-john-calvin-and-gods-civil-government.html#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20Calvin%20advocate%20a,manifestation%20of%20the%20Christian%20religion.)

[government.html#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20Calvin%20advocate%20a,manifestation%20of%20the%20Christian%20religion.](https://fio.acton.org/archives/123349-john-calvin-and-gods-civil-government.html#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20Calvin%20advocate%20a,manifestation%20of%20the%20Christian%20religion.)

⁷ Genesis 6-9

⁸ Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 23

⁹ Genesis 26:1-6

¹⁰ Genesis 28:1-5

Egypt.¹¹ Eventually, a famine forces all the Israelites to join Joseph there as refugees for 400 years, eventually becoming slaves.¹² Moses, who was later used by God to set them free, had to first spend 40 years in the desert as a fugitive.¹³ When God finally frees them, the whole nation of Israel wanders without home or homeland in the wilderness for 40 years. Ruth left her home and homeland of Moab and lived in Israel.¹⁴ David was on the run for years before he became king.¹⁵ Israel spent decades in exile in Babylon. Mary and Joseph had to flee their home because of persecution and became refugees in Egypt with their newborn son, Jesus.¹⁶ And it wasn't long after the birth of the church, that persecution drove Christians from Jerusalem. In Acts 8:1 we read, **“That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.”**

It's remarkable just how much of the Bible is written about or to people who are on the move – exiles, refugees, wanderers, fugitives, foreigners, pilgrims.¹⁷ It actually might be easier to list the key people in the Bible who were never in one of these categories. I think it's a shorter list by far! It's almost as if time as a refugee, giving up your home and homeland, is a prerequisite to becoming one of God's people. Certainly, in retrospect we can see that in every one of these instances, the Lord was behind the scenes working out his purposes in remarkable ways.

Perhaps the most striking example of refugees in the Bible, one which I skipped over, is the very first example. In the opening pages of scripture we are told that Adam and Eve, because of their refusal to trust God, lost their home and their homeland. Genesis 3:24 records, **“[The Lord] drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.”** Because of their sin, Adam and Eve become the very first illegal aliens, and God, in response, has them essentially deported, making the angels the very first border guards. Ever since that time we all have become refugees, wandering far away from our true home and homeland, with no way to make it back on our own. Have you ever considered that at least in the spiritual sense, which may be the most crucial sense, you are a refugee yourself? If you think about it, haven't you always lived in this world with the gnawing sense, even the stark awareness, that

you are somehow far from your true home? We are all refugees, every last one of us.

Thankfully, the story doesn't end there. We see God's initial response to human sin, which was to remove us from our home. There was no other option. As sovereign and righteous Lord over all, God cannot allow for those in his creation to live in defiant rebellion against him and his ways. But God's initial response was not his ultimate response. Though the border between heaven and earth was initially closed, it did not remain closed. But God didn't just open the border, *he crossed the border himself and came after us!* Nowhere in scripture is this more beautifully described than in Philippians 2, where Paul declares that in pursuit of lost humanity, Christ,

**who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.¹⁸**

Think about it this way. Imagine if the king of a nation rightly deported people because they were in his country illegally, illegal because they were living in open rebellion and treason against him. But then that same king not only left his country, but gave up his throne as well, with all it's power and privileges, and traveled to the place where these people were living as fugitives and became one of them. And then, as one of them, he willingly gave up his life in the most shameful and excruciating way possible so that those people could be made legal again and come back to their home and their homeland to live in peace and flourishing prosperity for all time. Is this not what God, in Christ, has done for us, every last one of us? He left the refuge of heaven that we might find that refuge again. He became a refugee, even a fugitive, that we might become once again rightful citizens.

This is what Paul is getting at in the passage from Ephesians which we read earlier. He's writing here to specifically make clear that Gentiles, once considered to be excluded from God's people, have now, through Christ, been included as full brothers and sisters.

¹¹ Genesis 37:28

¹² Genesis 46:1-7

¹³ Exodus 2:15

¹⁴ Ruth 1:16

¹⁵ 1st Samuel 27

¹⁶ Matthew 2:13-15

¹⁷ I'm indebted here to Dustin Crowe, "Loving the Sojourner: Reflecting God's Heart for Immigrants & Refugees." Read this wonderful article online at <https://indycrowe.com/2020/02/27/loving-the-sojourner-reflecting-gods-heart-for-immigrants-refugees/>

¹⁸ Philippians 2:6-8

Aliens and strangers have become family. Those far off have been brought near, given full access to God and God's life. In verse 19 he writes, **“So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”**

Let me make this personal, in hopes that it has its intended impact. Because of our sin we have all become refugees. Even worse, fugitives from God's kingdom, God's family, God's life. But because of the grace of God through Christ, achieved for us at infinite cost to himself, we have been welcomed back home. Psalm 46:1 declares what the Bible often declares: **“God is our refuge.”** The word in Hebrew literally means “a dwelling place,” not only a physical structure to call home, but a community or family where you belong and are always welcome and beloved. In this sense, our world is full of refugees. All of us, of course, are spiritual refugees because of our sin. But beyond that there are also refugees who live on the streets of our city, surrounded by homes but without one to call their own. And there are refugees among us with a physical house that keeps out the rain, but with no true community or family. There are also refugees who may have both, but who still wander in this world seeking refuge from all manner of things which threaten us, not only violence and displacement, but despair and depression, regret and guilt, addiction and failure, grief and loneliness.

In light of this, think of the unbridled joy somebody like Kyungu Mayaula would experience if he and his family could find their way back home, and find their home not in shambles but restored to a place of peace and prosperity forever! If you meet somebody who has been a refugee, or even a person without citizenship, and they finally receive the full status, protection and rights of a citizen, their new passport may instantly become their most prized possession. Finally they have a sense of identity and belonging. How much more ought to be our joy in the identity we have been given by God through Christ, received into his family where we are promised that all these things which may threaten us currently will, in time, be no threat ever again. It is the joy of coming home.

At the heart of the creed “No human is illegal” is the core value of hospitality, which is also at the heart of the Christian gospel. In 1st Peter 4:9, for instance, Christians are commanded, **“Be hospitable to one**

another without complaining.” The word we translate as “hospitable” is the Greek word *philoxenos*. I give you the Greek because it's instructive. This is a combination of two words. *Philos* is the word for brotherly love. Think of Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. *Xenos* is the word for stranger. Xenophobia, as you know, is the fear or dislike of strangers, often implying strangers from other places, strangers like refugees. So hospitality literally means “the love of strangers.”¹⁹

Has this not always been descriptive of the heart of God, best exemplified in the life of Jesus who openly declared, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”**²⁰ Jesus would eat with anybody. Jesus would heal anybody. Jesus would befriend anybody. Jesus would even die for anybody, that those who would come to him would find rest, and more than that, refuge in God himself. All of us are refugees of one sort or another. Because Christ himself became a refugee, all of us have now been extended the most gracious invitation to once again find our true homeland, and our true home.

Now, one obvious application to all this is that while in the world today there may in fact be humans who are illegal, at least from the perspective of human governments. Again, if I sneak into Kenya in a few weeks without a proper visa, I am rightly considered illegal. But in God's kingdom, the border is open for all who desire to come back home. Those of us who, by God's grace, have found our way home, must now extend the hospitality we have first been extended, even hospitality in the manner of Christ. It's one thing to open your home to a friend or trusted neighbor, or even a stranger who comes knocking at your door. It's quite another thing, however, to actually leave your home and go out into the streets looking for people who may not be so friendly towards you, and to go with a willingness to make great personal sacrifices that they might find their way home. Is this not the radical hospitality which Christ has shown to us through the cross? And so as 1st John 4:19 bluntly declares, **“We love because he first loved us.”** We do. We must. We also welcome the stranger because when we were strangers, Christ welcomed us.

This has always been a central calling of God's people, though we have often forgotten it is so. All the way back in Exodus 22:21 God tells his people, **“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”** In the heart of the Old

¹⁹ I'm indebted here to Ian Wilderboer, “What is Christian Hospitality?”, The Gospel Coalition, July 31, 2023. Read online at <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-is-christian-hospitality/>

Testament law, we read verses like, **“The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”**²¹ The prophets declare, **“Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor.”**²²

When we imitate God’s heart toward the stranger, we show hospitality to God himself. Remember when Jesus himself declared, **“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”**²³

Practically speaking, there are so many ways we can follow God’s heart and example here in our world today which is increasingly full of refugees - political, spiritual, economic, and otherwise.

- To begin with, we ought to use whatever political means is at our disposal to persuade those in positions of power and influence in our own nation to work towards justice, yes, but to do so with compassion when it comes to those who are displaced here or elsewhere.
- Beyond that, there are remarkable organizations, many of them led by followers of Jesus like World Vision and World Relief, with whom we can continue to partner by offering our time, our prayers, our financial support.
- Each of us can find ways to serve refugees or other immigrants who live in our own city, as many of you here already do. Did you know that there are about 8,000 Afghan refugees living here in Sacramento? We also have the fourth largest population of Ukrainian immigrants and refugees in the nation. How can we serve refugees in our own city?
- In all of this, of course, we can ask Christ to help us become people who learn to show true love to whatever stranger he puts in our path, for everybody we meet is seeking refuge in one way or another. We know where refuge can be found. Will we point others in the right direction? Better yet, will we give them a taste of it ourselves!²⁴

This world, at least in its current state, is not our true home. In 1st Peter 2:11, Peter refers to Christians as “aliens and strangers.”²⁵ What he is implying is that

there is no dual citizenship in God’s Kingdom. My daughter, Isabel, who married a Canadian and lives in Canada is on track to become a Canadian citizen. When she went to Bible School in Costa Rica after high school for a year, I asked her not to fall in love with a German guy. Not because I don’t like Germans, but because I knew that a lot of amazing German guys would be at this school and I didn’t want my grandchildren growing up half-way across the world where I would rarely see them. I didn’t think to warn her about Canadian guys! In all seriousness, she has a wonderful Canadian husband and that far outweighs the fact that I may have to use my passport if I want to visit my grandkids someday.

My point in all this is that Isabel, as she becomes a Canadian citizen, can still retain her American citizenship as well. But dual citizenship like this is not possible in God’s Kingdom. To become a citizen of heaven means you then, at least for a time, become a refugee in the kingdom of this world. In fact, as you become more and more like Christ, it is absolutely natural that you will feel more and more out of place in this world which largely rejects Christ. Followers of Jesus truly are aliens and strangers here in this time.

And one of the ways followers of Jesus will always stand out in this world, assuming that we are living our lives as Jesus would live them if he was in our shoes, is that we will be marked by a hospitality that is absolutely foreign in this world. In a world that increasingly treats the stranger and the outsider with contempt, and is also full of people huddling more and more together in tribes of those who look and think like they look and think, we remain a strange anomaly in the ways we treat others as Jesus has treated us, demonstrating a love of strangers that is increasingly uncommon. This is because a part of our creed, which is not only our belief but a belief that guides the way we live, is that even when humans are told that they are illegal in the kingdoms of this world, they are not illegal in the kingdom of heaven. We all are refugees, every last one of us. But in Christ, who became a refugee for our sakes, we have found that God is our refuge, our true home and our eternal homeland.

Amen.

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²¹ Leviticus 19:34

²² Zechariah 7:10

²³ Matthew 25:35. See also Leviticus 19:10, Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalm 146:9, Hebrews 13:1-2

²⁴ For more ideas, see Suzanne See, “Ways to Welcome the Refugee: An Interview with Matthew Soerens of World Relief,” *The Gospel Coalition*,

September 19, 2015. Read online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ways-to-welcome-the-refugee/>

²⁵ “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.”

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. When you hear the creed, "No human is illegal!", what comes to mind? What is your first reaction?
2. Read the passage from Ephesians 2:11-22 again. What do you notice? Pay special attention Paul's words about strangers, aliens and citizens.
3. Do you personally live with an abiding sense that you are a citizen of God's kingdom, a member of his household? If so, how have you come to have this confidence? If not, what is the barrier?
4. Why do you think that almost all of God's people in scripture have either been immigrant, refugees, exiles, fugitives, or foreigners? This can't be coincidence, can it?
5. How do you respond to the claim that we are all refugees, every last one of us from Adam and Eve on down?
6. Do you ever live with the gnawing sense that this world, as it is now, is not our true home? If so, what give you this idea?
7. Read Philippians 2:6-8 again. In what sense did Christ become a refugee so that we might find our true home and homeland?
8. What are practical ways which you as an individual or family, or us as a congregation, can show love to the stranger (i.e. hospitality), especially strangers who are immigrants or refugees?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Do you know what it feels like to be a foreigner in a foreign land, where you are different from most everybody around you? Do you think followers of Jesus ever feel like this in this world?