

## **Cities of Refuge**

Deuteronomy 19:1-10, Matthew 5:21-26 by Patty Friesen (Aug. 20/17)

Patrick and I get through the winter by watching favourite TV series and last winter we watched Northern Exposure about a small community in rural Alaska where one of the self-appointed local leaders Maurice Minifield imports a fox and declares a town foxhunt. Storeowner Ruth Ann Miller takes issue with this and steals the fox and gives it sanctuary in her rabbit pen in her backyard. The humorous episode focuses around the role of conscience and providing sanctuary, lest innocent blood be shed.

The fifth and last book attributed to Moses, Deuteronomy, was written by several writers, preachers and reformers who shared a consistency of purpose that created this comprehensive guidebook for Israel to live as the people of God. Chapter 19 particularly deals with the sixth commandment around life and death, around accidental and intentional causes of death and their consequences in the community. The regulations provide for three cities of refuge, providing sanctuary for anyone suspected of the death of another. There they could be protected from the vengeance killing of the victim's family until they had a fair trial. True justice meant fairness for all, and this involved preventing the taking of innocent life and ensuring that any accused person was given an opportunity to present whatever defense he or she could offer. The process of law was deeply committed to protecting the innocent by ensuring that punishment was never arbitrary or untried. This is CSI Old Testament style.

So the purpose of designating cities of refuge was not to provide a means whereby offenders could protect themselves from the due course of justice, but to provide places where a proper examination of the charges could be made and a verdict arrived at by a

more impartial court than could be presented by the victim's family or local townspeople. This is an extremely important legal system in ancient times that cut through clan boundaries to control vengeance and escalation of violence.

And while it controlled behavior, these laws didn't address the feelings of anger and passion that led to the crime. Jesus addresses this in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 when he talks about our passion and anger as the root of all our conflicts. Anger isn't the problem but what we do with it is. Jesus talks about the quick recognition of our rage, how to calm ourselves at the altar and go and reconcile with the one who offended us, stating our concern calmly and clearly and making peace before it goes to the courts. Anger is something we all possess. We all get angry because we care about something. We are all equal in our anger – victims and offenders alike – we are a hair-width away from each other and the only difference is our upbringing.

When we went on a learning tour of Willow Cree Healing Lodge, we learned that most young offenders committing crimes of passion namely assault and murder, didn't have those self-control mechanisms we were taught in childhood. They weren't equipped with how to effectively calm themselves and express their feelings of disappointment and anger without hurting someone. This is why for these young offenders, Willow Cree Healing Lodge, Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs and Sentencing Circles are so important – for young offenders to meet victims, hear their victim impact statements and learn empathy, self-control and consequences of actions. Willow Cree Healing Lodge is a City of Refuge for young offenders.

While Cities of Refuge were designated for those accused of murder in Deuteronomy, it has been a concept claimed recently as sanctuary and safe places for

anyone being pursued or persecuted or in danger of their lives. Lutheran ministers, Andre Trocme and his associate Pastor Theis and their congregation in Le Chambon, France in the 1940's hid Jews, lest innocent blood be shed, the title of their powerful biography. Trocme and Theis preached that Jews were not being persecuted because of any crime, voluntary or involuntary, but only because they were Jews. They felt that these people were all the more deserving of refuge because of their utter innocence. They were unwilling to ignore the statement that if the innocent were slain in a city of refuge, the build would be upon those who had committed themselves to sheltering them in that city. The ministers and congregation believed that they had a Christian duty to protect the refugees. It is a core understanding of our faith. Because God is our refuge, we provide refuge for others.

Ordinarily, people have a strong obligation to avoid doing harm to others, but they are not obliged to go out of their way to do anything that will prevent others from doing harm. We are content to obey the 10 Commandments but we may need to take it a step further to prevent others from violating the 10 commandments. The spirit of the cities of refuge makes the prevention of harm doing, the prevention of injustice, a requirement. They must both refuse to do harm themselves and prevent others from doing harm. It is this extra obligation that Pastors Theis and Trocme preached to their congregation. It was an active, dangerous love that as a congregation, they rose to enact and hid Jews in their barns and attics to the threat of their own lives. If all Christians in Europe in the 30's and 40's had obeyed the Cities of Refuge commandment, there never could have been a Holocaust.

Cities of Refuge or sanctuary is a modern call for providing sanctuary for refugees and immigrants particularly in the political climate in the US. It's a way for communities to embrace diversity and tolerance and reject any attitudes that could lead to discrimination. It is a policy of support for immigrant and safe access to municipal services like transit, libraries and civic centres. San Francisco has declared itself a sanctuary city so immigrants in threat of deportation can go there and not be deported. In response the federal government has cut funding to their police services. San Francisco has taken the US government to court.

Lest we think we are above all that in Canada, this week's Star Phoenix had a warning to Canada. Canada has its own ugly history of racism and of marginalizing minorities. Though we pride ourselves on our tolerance and diversity – and politicians continually celebrate these qualities – we're capable of extremism. One recent national survey showed nearly 20 per cent of Canadians would support ending all immigration and another found that 30 per cent of Canadians felt the number of refugees being admitted was too high. On Monday, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland outlined our priorities in the coming NAFTA negotiations. Our agenda includes environmental protection, labour standards and Indigenous and gender rights. But it's not just up to government. Government will fail us sometimes. It may come down to us.

In Saskatoon, being a sanctuary city requires clarity on how Saskatoon City Police deal with undocumented immigrants who have not committed crimes other than their illegal residency, or other minor infractions. In addition, we must work hard at creating economic opportunity for newcomers and our country's original hosts in the First Nations. Immigrants and Indigenous peoples must know they have a real chance at

creating a better existence for themselves and their families to truly feel embraced. The term Sanctuary City or City of Refuge has a ring of kindness about it. The reality of creating a truly safe environment takes joint effort from religious communities and civic government.

As a congregation, we have a history of providing sanctuary for refugee families throughout the last decades from Vietnam and Colombia and are thrilled to have the Al Nouris from Syria come soon as we have been praying and preparing for them for years now. We have also provided sanctuary for US Army deserter Joshua Keys and his family during the Gulf War in the 1990s. Chris and Kaytee provided sanctuary for Patricia, an undocumented immigrant last year. The work of refuge is never finished.

May God be a refuge for us and show us how to be refuge for others. Let us pray: Sheltering God, you who have hid us and comforted us in our lives. Help us to do so for others. Give us the courage and vision in the ways you may be leading us as a congregation in the weeks and months ahead. Bless the Al-Nouris who are on their way to us and all you send our way. Amen.