

LOVING OUR GLOBAL NEIGHBORS

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Nazarene Missions International

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Week 1: Train Station Talks



LESSON OBJECTIVES

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

1. To remove the negative stigma of bias as we recognize that everyone has bias(es).
2. To create a space for identifying and naming our individual and personal bias(es).
3. To logically recognize that our bias affects how we view people that are different from us.
4. To learn to factor our bias into conversations we have with or about people who are different from us.



LESSON RESOURCES

Conversation starters by Include-Empower.Com:

<https://cultureplusconsulting.com/2018/08/16/a-ha-activities-for-unconscious-bias-training/>

“Refugees” by Brian Bilston:

<https://brianbilston.com/2016/03/23/refugees/>



OPENING ACTIVITY (10 Minutes)

INCLUDE-EMPOWER.COM has some excellent activities that can be used to open the conversation around bias (choose one):

- The Tag Game
- The Father-Son Activity
- The Circle of Trust.

The goal is to open the topic of bias and to remove the stigma/shame to allow people to recognize that all of us have bias(es) and that those biases factor into how we see people.



LESSON/MESSAGE

In September 2015, I was living in Hungary when the unexpected arrival of thousands from the Middle East, mainly Syrians and Afghanis, resulted in a humanitarian crisis at Budapest's Keleti train station. I, like many others, wanted to help.

On that first day, I remember feeling helpless and hopeless amid so much need. The Keleti station had changed from an orderly and efficient zone to an unusually and unexpectedly chaotic holding space for a massive number of people. Tensions were rising daily both in the local and global community, and amongst the people who were trying to transit.

Wanting to learn about people and possible ways to help, I set out to find stories. I asked God to lead me and settled on a young professional-looking man and two women sitting in front of a tent. Upon my approach, the trio quickly produced a blanket for me as a cushion against the hard cement. I began by asking them to tell me why they had traveled so far from home. The young man responded with surprise, "Surely, you know?" I admitted being familiar with the facts of the war but encouraged them to tell me their story.

"I was at university in Homs," he paused, "You know it?" I assured him that I knew of Homs, which seemed to redeem me from my earlier ignorance over Syria's war. He continued, motioning to the young woman on his right, "We were going to get married, but army guys came to my door and said, 'get ready'. They were coming back in two days to take me into the army." He adjusted his leg and shrugged, "I have friends and family fighting on both sides of this war. What should I do? I didn't want to kill anyone, and I didn't want to get killed, so, we left quickly. And here we are."

Processing his last statement, I asked, "How long have you been married?"

He smiled, “Well, we left home 21 days ago, so married for 22 days.” A look of love passed between them, and her eyes danced downward shyly. Following my shift to the woman on his left, perhaps he read my unspoken question or maybe he wanted to finish the introduction, “And, this is my sister-in-law. My father-in-law asked that we bring her with us away from the war.”

This trio from Homs were the first of many Syrians that would gift me their stories of seeking safety in Europe. I left that first interview newly aware and strongly convicted of my biases about Syrians from Muslim backgrounds. Let me share some of those biases and what I have learned about the cultural lenses that I wear.

Admitting My Biases.

I saw a young Middle Eastern man in a Central European train station, and I followed the stereotypes fed to me by the media: military-aged young man or Muslim invader or terrorist. As his story unfolded, it became evident that the most appropriate description for this twenty-something from Homs, Syria was pacifist, university student, newlywed, brave, considerate, and protective.

I saw two young women in clothing appropriate for their culture and labeled them potential extremists, and polygamists. Media-reinforced stereotypes around Sharia law and terrorism were also in my mind. As their stories unfolded, I found them to be hospitable and funny young women who were brave sisters. They were interested in music, movies, the internet, and relationships - the same topics that university students are universally interested in.

Nearly a decade later, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine can teach us some valuable lessons about bias and the powerful chemistry of media, politics, and propaganda.

Many Russians who emigrated out of Russia before the 2014 Maidan and the annexation of Crimea feel shocked by this war. They point to the long and consistent diet of a single story that labels and frames people into stereotypes. Words that dehumanize and strip people of their dignity are destructive.

Jesus Confronted Bias.

Think about the story in **Luke 10:25-37**. Jesus casts a Samaritan as the hero acting righteously and humanely, while the priest and the Levite fail to do so. Jesus boldly confronted a deep seated, historical, theological, and political Jewish bias that made being a good Samaritan culturally impossible. The Jewish crowd that day must have been shocked and probably offended by a story that openly confronted their bias against Samaritans.

The story of the Good Samaritan is powerful because it reminds us that having bias(es) is human. He is 'good', not because he is bias-free, but rather because he submits to a Christ-formed ethic. Where his cultural and historical lens should have left him bitter and hardened to the need of the wounded man, the Samaritan overcame his own bias to act compassionately.

The conversation around bias and the confrontation of our own bias(es) is scriptural. **Romans 12:2** reminds us to submit our minds to renewal and transformation by Christ. This submission centers us in honest listening, respectful conversation, and mutual learning as healthy members of the Christ-body. Any echo chambers, social media algorithms, and political preferences need to submit to God's word, reflect the character of Christ, and value the image of God present in every human being.

The poem, "Refugees" by Brian Bilston reminds us that we have choices about the lenses we wear as we view people and issues.

Beyond that, intentionally getting to know people that are different than us, hearing their stories, their hearts, and knowing them is healthy. Finally, asking God to mold our minds and thoughts to live out the commandment, 'Love your neighbor' is imperative.



DISCUSSION

1. Think about your own culture. Who are the outsiders or the minority group in your culture that cannot be seen as 'good'?
2. If bias is part of our human journey, then how can we confront our bias(es) in healthy and constructive ways?
3. If the Samaritan is 'good' because he submitted to a Christ-formed ethic in how he fulfilled the commandment to "Love your neighbor", what is the lesson for us as believers?
4. Who do you struggle to put into the role of 'Good Samaritan' today? Explore that thought.
5. Take some time to ask God to show you where/how you are biased. Remember, everyone has bias. This activity is not meant to produce shame, rather, it is meant to create awareness.
6. Think about your favorite media outlet right now – the one that you listen to or read most frequently. Give an example of how your media used dehumanizing words or imagery to represent someone in the past week. If you cannot remember, or if you want to go deeper, decide to listen for any evidence of dehumanizing speech this week. Make note of the words.

Week 2: Compassion



LESSON OBJECTIVES

Scripture: Matthew 9

1. To recognize both the beauty and the cost of compassion.
2. To explore how God may be calling us into compassionate response.



LESSON/MESSAGE

In Poland's Przemyśl (P-shem-ish-l) train station, ten trains arrive and depart for Ukraine daily on Platform 5. At full capacity, each train carries approximately 500 people and Nazarene volunteers typically respond to 5 trains every day. These individuals in yellow safety vests are a consistent presence, caring for passengers by carrying bags, answering questions, engaging children, and ensuring safe procedures on the platforms. In the early stages of the war, they also connected refugees to emergency housing and life-sustaining resources. This is a physically taxing ministry of presence, of solidarity, of prayer and of relentless faith for travelers on traumatic and dangerous journeys.

Compassion.

On one dark night, I met a man arriving from Odessa, Ukraine. Generally, Ukrainian men refuse to let women carry heavy suitcases, but tired from his journey and soul sick for home, this elderly grandfather accepted my offer to carry his burden together. He had only one large suitcase, and as I grabbed one end, he made a joke that had us laughing together. At the top of the stairs, he leaned on the case and tapped the top saying, "I'll never go home again. All that is left of my life is right here." I watched the ocean of tears pool in his eyes.

There were no words that could fix his situation. No remedy for his pain. No formula to stop the war. No potion to restore his life. “We pray daily for peace in Ukraine,” I offered and watched him smile and respond by crossing himself in the tradition of Orthodox believers. “I am praying for you,” I continued. My prayers got a quick hug and then he seemed to gather his emotions as he gathered his case and set out resolutely for the next stage in his long journey. I watched him walk away with a heavy heart.

My journal entry for that day records his story, and the story of a multi-generational trio of grandmother, mother, and 8-year-old daughter from Zaporizhzhia (Za-po-reezh-zhee-a) who were trying to find their way to France. They had never been beyond the borders of Ukraine nor were they experienced travelers. Zaporizhzhia, on Ukraine’s southeastern border, is home to Europe’s largest nuclear reactor, which is six times larger than Chernobyl. France is a world away.

The lines of my journal on the same day also detail the woman from Zaporizhzhia who was going back to a war zone. She had made one trip into Europe to bring her daughter and granddaughters to safety. Then, she returned home to collect her elderly mother and aunt. Having settled them in safety in Europe on this second trip, she was now returning home alone. “Is there someone waiting for you there?” I asked as we walked together to Platform 5. “No,” she indicated. And then, “I have to go back for my job, but I am very scared.” I set her heavy bags down and left her standing in the cold line back to Ukraine.

These people represent three separate journeys out of hundreds that memorably intersected my personal path on one given day. My journal details the prayer needs that I carried away from Platform 5 and I find myself repeating their stories over and over again because their pain moved me to compassion. But my compassion has limits and it is flawed, even in the best of times.

Inconvenience.

In Serbia in 2016, Nazarene volunteers worked with other NGOs to serve meals to nearly 1000 people a day as they were transiting. One night, I was engaging people in conversation as they waited in line for food. A 17-year-old from Afghanistan dominated the conversation, his chatter irritatingly excluding everyone else. I felt relief when his attention was finally drawn to taking a plate and I moved back to the end of the long line to chat with new people. I soon sensed a presence at my back and glance over my shoulder confirmed that my new Afghani friend had returned. He was now happily munching on fries and pita, while earnestly anticipating more dialogue.

I half-heartedly turned to include him in the new conversation, but he quickly dominated it again. He told me about his family and about their decision to send him alone to Europe. The family could not afford to send everyone, he explained, so they sent the strongest, the one who spoke English. They sent him on a dangerous journey to the West – to find a job, to make money, and to send it back home.

“Hey,” his eyes sprang to life, “do you want to hear some of my favorite Afghani music?” Not waiting for my answer, he pushed one end of his earphones into my ear as the unfamiliar rhythms created dissonance in my body. What a sight we were: an American missionary tethered to an Afghani music video and a pita-eating-teen who had adopted me as his favorite humanitarian worker.

As darkness descended, the team motioned to me that it was time to leave the park. “I have to go now,” I smiled. To be honest, the boy had grown on me over the hour. He nodded and then he said, “Thank you for talking to me tonight.” He shrugged with a half sad, half shy expression, “You remind me of my mom, and I miss my mom.”

Jesus Had Compassion.

Matthew 9 is a litany of miracles that Jesus performed, which are reported rather rapidly and succinctly by Matthew. One can easily miss the stories behind them. It might even be easy to miss the impact of these healings on the people who received them. Thankfully, Matthew includes verse 36. **“When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them” (Matthew 9:36)**. He uses a word that describes the compassion that Jesus feels as a visceral, powerful, gut-wrenching reaction. When Jesus sees the people and their needs, he was physically and emotionally moved to respond.

I find myself wondering if the crowds had different compassionate responses to the people Jesus healed. Was there a hierarchy determining who deserved a miracle and why? The paralyzed, the bleeding, the already dead, the blind and the possessed – what a litany of need within a hopeless and helpless cohort of humanity.

There are very real aspects of compassion that are emotionally heavy, irritating, uncomfortable, and discouraging. In a big world with oceans of brokenness, carrying a few bags or listening to music in a Serbian park feels like it fixes nothing. Our compassion is insufficient. And yet, Jesus told us that the harvest is plentiful. As we follow the gaze of Christ, compassion equips us to see like Jesus saw.

Seeing People.

Our youngest daughter, Jenna, wrote a poem in response to her time at the Polish-Ukrainian border in the summer of 2022. It helps to capture the importance of seeing people and engaging with people, not as news stories or topics of conversation, but rather as humans whose pain causes visceral emotion in Jesus. As people who are called to reflect the character and heart of God, we too must learn to see people in their pain and then to respond like Jesus.

In Another Life

By Jenna Sunberg

A volunteer's account of their experiences at Przemyśl Główny; a Polish train station on the Ukrainian border.

Today, I carried a bulletproof vest
For a mother with two small children
In another life, I may have been terrified.
But today, I picked up the bag and carried it through the station.

Today, I met a girl
Who was traveling alone
In another life, we may have grabbed a coffee together.
But today, she was fleeing a war.

Today, I saw a newborn baby
She giggled and smiled at me
In another life, I may have held her.
But today, I pushed her stroller to the next train.

Today, I saw a man in military gear
He was going towards a war
In another life, I may have preached non-violence.
But today, I thanked him for his service.

Today, I took a picture of a Russian volunteer
He panicked when he realized
In another life, I would have posted it.
But today, I deleted it.

Today, I directed people to their next train
Out of their desperation came chaos
In another life, I may have lost my temper.
But today, I knew I could be directing them to danger.



DISCUSSION

1. How does the emotion of compassion present itself in your life? Do you experience physical responses in your own body or the inability to move on from someone else's pain?
2. Can you identify any differences in your levels of compassion for Ukrainians versus other displaced people, such as Syrians or Rohingya or South Americans? Discuss.
3. What is compassion costing you right now in your life?
4. Make a list of the markers of healthy compassion. Make a list of the signs of unhealthy compassion. Discuss.
5. Jesus said the harvest is plentiful. Where can you see a harvest in your life, your family, our neighborhood, your church?
6. Pray for the workers by name now. Send them a note letting you know that you have prayed for them.

Week 3: Chickens



LESSON/MESSAGE

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

We were living in Bulgaria in the late 1990s when the break-up of the former Soviet Republics of Eastern Europe led to serious conflicts across the Balkans. Thousands of Kosovars fled to neighboring countries seeking refuge from ethnic cleansing. Jay was sent with an assessment team to visit a Kosovar refugee camp in Northern Macedonia. They were eventually ushered into a tent in the center of camp and invited to sit in a circle. After more than an hour of harrowing stories that poured out their pain and loss, the team asked about the needs of the camp. “How can we help you?”

I remember hearing Jay’s animated re-telling of this experience when he returned from the trip. Our daughters were small at the time, and I listened with the ears and emotions of a young mom. He said, “We asked, how can we help you? And they could have asked us for anything: medicines, blankets, food, even money, but they didn’t.” Throwing up his hands, he continued, “You know what they said?” I leaned forward for the answer, “tell the world our story. We want the world to know what has happened to us.”

Jesus Listens.

Holding space for marginalized voices to be heard when injustice prevails is one of the most loving and Christ-reflecting actions of our Christian call. When Jesus heals the demon-possessed daughter of the Canaanite woman (**Matthew 15:21-28**), we hear a shocking example of Jesus making space for a woman to plead her case.

In a time and culture where women had no right to speak, this Canaanite woman asks for help and even corrects Jesus in front of other men. In response, Jesus holds space for her voice, and he heals her daughter. Shockingly, he also seems to center the mother's faith as the reason for the miracle. Instead of seeing her as a victim that he needs to rescue or a nuisance that he wants to eliminate, or an offense to his position or a challenge to his authority, Jesus centers her as the hero of the story. He rewards her, saying, **“Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted” (Matthew 15:18).**

Quiet Is Convenient.

At the apex of the migration of Middle Eastern people through Greece, they estimate that the Idomeni Refugee camp on the border with Northern Macedonia, held 10,000 people. As it grew, several thousand people hoped to avoid the desolation of Idomeni by creating an impromptu tent-city at a nearby gas station. On our visit to this smaller camp, we met a family of Syrians who showed us around and explained the community that had been created. There was a section for laundry and an entrepreneur selling falafel from his tent. With only two showers on the premises, people paid 1,50 euros (roughly \$1.69) and waited two days for their turn to wash. People lived in tents for months through the cold, the heat, and the wet Autumn. Conditions were brutal.

At the end of our tour, we asked the father of the family about their needs. He responded, “We are not chickens.” This was obviously a Syrian idiom, but unable to decipher its meaning, we asked for an explanation. With a mixture of emotions, he explained, “We are not chickens whose pain and need you can silence with a few pellets of food and a blanket over our cage.”

Voice Lessons.

War teaches us lessons that we do not want to learn. In the NCM-Polska Safe Space across the street from Przemyśl train station, Ukrainian mothers and children and the elderly can get out of the cold while they wait long hours for their next train. We have an 'art wall' that displays the drawings that have been created within this safe space. The wobbly, wiggly strokes, the bold crayon colors and disproportionate figures are all the familiar signs of childlike fingers navigating artistic expression. But almost all the Safe Space artwork is interrupted by the images of tanks and rockets and flags and even death. Where the heart is broken, the body bruised, and the mind in turmoil, the voice must tell its story.

In war, in crisis, in displacement, in abuse, in prejudice, the pain of people must find a way to be voiced to heal. The stories they tell, even about us, are often difficult to hear, sometimes offensive, and often though not always, true. Honestly, the Syrian idiom about chickens was accurate: most of the western world wished that the transitters would turn around and go back home.

Brave Syrian souls at a gas station in Greece taught us to listen. We visited that family on multiple occasions over the next eight months and when they eventually made it to Germany, they graciously hosted us in their home. We spent days laughing and learning and discovering Syrian hospitality.

I must admit that on that first visit, my intent was to leave some blankets and a few bags of food to feel good about my compassion. Real compassion, real love for neighbor leans in, listens, learns. The compassion of Jesus holds space for the stories that must be told, even when the listening is not easy.

We pray for the faith that heals all of us – our minds, our bodies, and our souls. In our unfair and unjust world that is so deeply torn apart by war, may the story of a God who treats us like beloved children instead of chickens become our favorite tale.



DISCUSSION

1. Are there people in your neighborhood, city, family, church who are not being heard or listened to right now?
2. What happens when people in pain are silenced?
3. How does the Syrian idiom of covering the chicken apply to any current situations in your culture, family, or life?
4. What does the example of Jesus making a space for the Canaanite woman's voice teach us? How can we practically make space in our culture for the voice of others?
5. Whose marginalized voices need to be amplified* and why?
6. How can we hear offensive things and recognize whether there is truth in it? What should we do with that recognition? Do you have any examples from recent events?

*Note: To amplify someone's voice is more than simply hearing/listening to their story. It is making space for them to tell their story. It may mean using your power (cultural, social, economic) to make a space for them in places where they may not be naturally welcomed. It might mean giving up your space so that they can be heard.

Week 4: Eat As Much As You Love Me



LESSON OBJECTIVES

Scripture: Matthew 26:17-30

1. Discuss the importance of hospitality.
2. Recognize the beauty of hospitality in several cultures: Syrian, Persian, Eastern European/Slavic.
3. Remember the generous hospitality of Christ to us.
4. Ask how the hospitality of Christ affects our understanding of hospitality to others.



LESSON/MESSAGE

Working with displaced people from the Middle East brings the art and beauty of hospitality into focus. Christians, Muslims, and Jews all draw our understanding of the table from Abraham's hosting of the three angels. Called the Abrahamic Code, the table is the source of life, grace, generosity, and welcome for the stranger and family alike.

Persian people (from Iran) are incredibly proud of their tea, which is a rich infusion of black tea, saffron, and cardamon. The proper way to drink this delicious mixture is with a cube of sugar between the teeth. Sips of the hot liquid flow through the sugar delivering a pleasantly sweet mixture of Eastern flavors.

At a Syrian home, the key is pacing. The fully laden table of fruits, salads and bite-sized pitas will quickly be replaced by an extravagant second course of meats and vegetables and potatoes. And that will eventually be replaced by deserts and thick, sweet Arabic coffee. With each course, the hostess will sweep her hand across the length of the table and proclaim, "Eat as much as you love me."

In Europe, Eastern hospitality that flows from Slavic and Romanian culture is also deeply rooted in the Abrahamic code. I remember one afternoon when we had progressed through borscht, salads, and thickly buttered bread slices. On a full road to food coma, we began turning down offers to take more. "I am too full," said Jay apologetically. Our hostess looked at us in surprise, realizing that we thought the meal was over. We looked at her in surprise, realizing that we had only consumed the starter course. Vaguely gesturing towards her small apartment, she proclaimed imperiously, "Walk around the apartment a couple of times and come back to the table in 15 minutes for the meal." Three courses followed: chicken, vegetables, and potatoes, then fruits, followed by desert, finally pots of hot, black tea.

Hospitality is an integral and breathtaking cultural expression of grace and care and welcome. During the mass migrations of people into Europe from the Middle East, I did a lot of interviews on the ground in front of tents. I came to know that their agreement to be interviewed would come with two non-negotiables. Firstly, they would never allow me to sit directly on the ground. The hostess would immediately produce a towel, a cushion, or even a piece of cardboard or newspaper for me. Secondly, someone would be quickly dispatched to make or to find tea for me.

During the hot summer of 2016, the Greek temperatures easily pushed past 100 degrees Fahrenheit, especially in the open fields of Hercules Refugee Camp. We spent large portions of the summer there offering Courage for the Journey-Central Europe Field NCM programs of English and sports. The month of Ramadan, in which Muslims fast from sun-up to sun-down), fell in the latter and hottest part of the summer that year. It was a humbling experience to be daily welcomed by the women with salads, desserts, and hot tea even though they refused to partake.

The Last Table.

I have found that my experiences of hospitality from Eastern Europeans to Syrians to Persians has enriched my understanding of what Jesus invites us to on his last night. With the disciples gathered around and the table full of food, the atmosphere is already rich with hospitality. I see this very Jewish Jesus breaking the bread and holding up the wine, saying “Eat” and “Drink” for this is my body and this is my blood. The extravagant generosity of the tables that I have been invited to, the robust welcome of “Eat as much as you love me”, the encouragement to be filled by the goodness lovingly prepared by the Host, the sweet flow of sustenance with the bitter dregs of suffering, these all enrich my understanding of Jesus. When this Jewish Jesus lays out a table and invites us to it, he leans into the extravagance of his cultural hospitality. His invitation ‘Eat’ and ‘Drink’ is the robust welcome of inclusion, sustenance, and fulfillment in Christ.

The Blessing.

On cold nights after everyone going back to Ukraine on the 11:30 PM train from Przemyśl is in line and waiting for the doors to open, NCM-Polska volunteers give away tea. It is a rather humbling experience to come with our insulated hot water pumps, tea bags, and sugar cubes. I call this the ‘tea blessing’ because it is the last expression of hope and solidarity that we can offer before people step on those trains that return them to uncertain futures. At times, it feels so very inconsequential in the face of a brutal war. I pray as we prepare the hot water in the Safe Space and then transport it down the stairs, through the tunnel, up the stairs, and onto Platform 5.

I love to do this ‘tea blessing’ with two teenage Ukrainian girls, Dasha and Vika, who are part of the NCM-Polska team. They make funny jokes to the crowd as we walk the long line, people laugh and join in the momentary merriment, or they visibly relax as they sip the hot tea.

There on Platform 5, Jesus draws close in the dark night where the tea, the laughter, the breathed prayers for safe journeys are all powerful reflections of the hope and the welcome that the table embodies in Christ.



DISCUSSION

1. Remember a time when you received hospitality. Describe how it made you feel.
2. What would table that is welcoming look like in your church or your home? Think a minute about the faces around that table. Describe them.
3. What does extravagant love look like in your context?
4. Take time to discuss the fact that in **Matthew 26:17-30**, Jesus invites and hosts both Peter and Judas Iscariot to the table. Both men will deny Jesus in the next hours.
5. How should the gracious hospitality of Jesus to Peter and Judas Iscariot form our understanding of welcome towards the Other?

Week 5: Best Guest Behavior



LESSON OBJECTIVES

Scriptures: Matthew 2:13-23; Ruth 1

1. Create an awareness of culture shock.
2. Create an awareness of the levels of vulnerability in displaced people groups.
3. Encourage empathy for those who become guests in other cultures.
4. Encourage exploration of how/why the Church should be welcoming to people from other cultures.



LESSON/MESSAGE

When our four girls were little, we had a ‘best guest behavior’ catch phrase as we visited homes. In retrospect, there was a lot of pressure on our small humans to navigate the labyrinth of being a guest. When the culture is unfamiliar, being a good guest is a stress-producing endeavor.

For missionaries, that pressure to navigate a foreign system is never fully alleviated, though it does lessen over time. Western missionaries, especially, have resources such as language, finances, education, and cultural collateral that help them learn how to live and function in their new context.

Refugees or migrant workers rarely have that support making them more vulnerable. I cannot imagine the strength and energy it takes to navigate language and culture with little or no outside support. Being away from family and culture for long periods is emotionally exhausting and painful.

Fourteen million Ukrainians have left home since February 24, 2022 and 12 million have returned. When we ask them why they are returning to Ukraine while the war wages on, the most common reply is that they simply want to go home. Other factors include the difficulties of navigating life in another culture and language, the concern for their children's schooling or future, the loss of cultural heritage, and the pain of living through culture shock. The world has noted the courage and strength of Ukrainian women who single-handedly carry a generation of children out of a war zone.

They represent various levels of vulnerability. Some had friends or relatives in other parts of Europe who provided places to stay or even financial support. They spoke another language, and had prior experience in travel. Other people had no travel experience, nor did they have contacts, but they spoke some English or German which helped them to navigate processes more easily. The vulnerability increased with a third group who had no second language skills, no safe people beyond the borders of Ukraine, and little to no financial surplus. However, they were Ukrainian. A fourth group with extreme vulnerability were those from marginalized groups within Ukraine, such as Roma and other minority groups. They had little to no safety net inside Ukraine.

Even under the best of circumstances, the weight of being a guest is extreme. In 2011, we moved from Bulgaria to our third country, Hungary. It was a move that we decided to make, we were fully supported by the Church as we transitioned, and culture shock was not a mystery to any of us. Seven months into our new country, the girls were doing well in school, and I went to the grocery store for supper. As I was standing in line with a package of hamburger, I could feel tears rising as I experienced a wave of culture shock. I willed myself to not cry while I paid for the groceries.

The dam of tears broke in my car. I sat behind the steering wheel sobbing so loudly that Hungarian passersby were looking in with polite but distant curiosity. My heart broke over the misery of missing home. I share that story with humility for two reasons.

Culture shock is a beast that everyone who wanders beyond home must fight. It does not matter if you chose to leave home under the best of circumstances, or you left home because it was the only way to stay alive. It does not matter how terrible home had become or how wonderful the host country is in comparison. Missing home is inevitable and excruciating.

Secondly, I experienced culture shock from a place of privilege. I have the most powerful passport in the world and the lingua franca of this generation is my native language. Navigating new cultures and systems is hard but I have endless help to do so. I cannot imagine the loneliness, hopelessness, and exhaustion that a mother from Syria or Mexico or Guatemala experiences.

Jesus Was A Refugee.

When the angel of the Lord wakes Joseph in the night and tells them to flee to Egypt as protection against Herod (**Matthew 2:13-23**), the holy family becomes refugees. We would expect that they experienced culture shock and perhaps prejudice as they navigated the Egyptian systems as strangers. They certainly did not navigate that transition with the safety nets that I have had, rather they belonged to the third or even fourth category of vulnerable persons. Jesus and his parents were political refugees.

The story of Naomi and Elimelek (**Ruth 1**) is one of economic migration. The family leaves Judah and moves to Moab because of famine. Naomi decides to return to Judah when life there has become easier – the famine ended. Ruth, a Moabite, moves to Judah as an economic migrant. Not only was Jesus a refugee, but his lineage and his history are the DNA of migration and refugeeism.

The common English word ‘stranger’ appears 210 times in the KJV with shades of meaning such as alien, sojourner, foreigner, non-Israelite, guest, and visitor. There are multiple verses that directly talk about the responsibility of the host to offer hospitality, including protection to the stranger. A quick Google inquiry about the number of Bible verses that speak to the question of our responsibility to foreigners and guests results in answers between 22 and 78 passages.

Best guest behavior was always an emphasis for our family, though I fear that we have hosts with stories of the Sunberg tribe testing the boundaries of their hospitality or even failing in our endeavors. I hope and pray for the mothers who come behind me who are carrying their trauma, pain, and hope across borders. May the body of Christ, this beloved family of God in safe places be a welcoming, safe, warm, inviting, extravagantly generous host to them in the same way that it has been to me and my family.



DISCUSSION

1. Describe an embarrassing or funny time when you failed at being a good guest somewhere.
2. What strikes you as the hardest part of integrating into a new culture?
3. What would you miss the most if you had to leave your home unexpectedly and move to another culture/country? What physical items would you absolutely take with you?
4. Make a mental count of the number of people that you know who are from a foreign culture. Of that number, how many of their immigration stories do you know? With how many of them have you socially interacted (gone to dinner, met a friend's home, chatted in church or the office). With how many of them have you gone to lunch/dinner in a neutral setting as friends? Have you ever been invited to their home or invited them to your home?
5. How do you feel about the suggestion that Jesus was a political refugee and that his lineage is formed from family who were economic migrants?
6. Locate one verse that gives instruction about how we are to treat foreigners, guests, strangers, refugees. Read it. What encourages you? What challenges you? What convicts you?

Week 6: Guest-ship



LESSON OBJECTIVES

Scripture: Luke 10

1. Increased awareness of the concept of guest-ship
2. Explore the roles of hospitality and guest-ship for the Church.
3. Increased awareness of the dangers of borders and transit points.



LESSON/MESSAGE

Medicines Sans Frontier (Doctors Without Borders) did an empirical study of the violence that refugees experienced on their journey from the Middle East to Northern Europe. They focused on information gathered from people being treated in Serbia. Their study found that the most dangerous place for a Middle Eastern refugee was the transit points and borders between countries. Furthermore, the most dangerous individual they encountered on their journey was not a smuggler or a human trafficker, rather, it was a border guard.

This statistic among many along with my own observations and experiences have led me to propose that the Church has a responsibility to be present at borders during mass migration events. Borders represent some of the most physically dangerous, darkest, and most unseen spaces on our planet. And, while we might assume that churches are present, they are not nearly as present, as active, or as prepared as is the need. In other words, the workers are few.

Sent Out.

Scripture is no stranger to migration and immigration, rather displacement and refugeeism are a major theme in Scripture. The story of our bodies being without a home, of being on a journey back to the physical space of home, of experiencing danger, darkness, and brokenness in our bodies is the story that Adam and Eve tell. Abraham and Sara tell us this story. We hear it in the words of Hagar and passed down in the traditions of Israel. Ruth and Naomi embody this story as does Jesus and even the Early Church. Each one of us breathing, searching, and hoping for that final place where Heaven and God's creation rests in the reconciliation and peace that Revelation promises. All of us know what it feels like to be out of place, unseen, unwanted, our words misunderstood, and waiting in the dark spaces. This is part of our human experience.

Not only does Scripture center our story of displacement, but it also redeems it. Jesus teaches his disciples how to be intentionally displaced for the sake of the Gospel. In **Luke 10:1-23**, Jesus gives instructions to 72 disciples whom he has appointed and is sending out. Remember that in **Matthew 9**, Jesus viscerally feels compassion when he saw the crowds and he notes that the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Here in **Luke 10**, he again notes that the harvest is plentiful and therefore says, **“Go” (verse 9)**.

As Jesus sends them, he outlines how they will go: in vulnerability, dependent upon their hosts, committed to place and relationship, and proclaiming peace, even in places that reject us. The weight, the responsibility, the stress of being ‘best guest behavior’ is on us, the body of Christ.

Lessons Learned.

Displacement and its trauma are a lived experience within our physical world for 100 million people annually. Whether they come from Syria or Afghanistan, Northern Africa or Ukraine, most people come carrying the hope of a better life and passionate about their children, their heritage, and open-hearted to their host country. Unfortunate circumstances, unwelcome interactions, untreated trauma, and culture shock can affect and destroy those good intentions.

I have carried away a treasure trove of wisdom and joy from my interactions with guests at European borders and transit points. I have also gained some perspective about what it means to continually be ‘the guest’, because there is a heavy mental and emotional burden attached to this role. I find the loss of control over my environment to be disconcerting. No matter how wonderful my host, one never completely relaxes as a guest. The accumulation of this stress is exhausting.

When I come as a guest to your home, I give up a lot of control. The host tells me what time to come, but I need to infer what time to leave. The host decides what I will eat, whether to factor in my dietary restrictions and preferences or not. The host decides the amount of food that is offered, the music that is played, whether we give thanks for the food or not. For the time that I am in the host’s home, I experience some level of vulnerability to my host. I may thoroughly enjoy the time and feel treated and respected and valued by my host, but I probably have not felt the relaxation that I feel in my own home. It takes effort to be the guest.

When we look at the sending out of the seventy-two, there is a sense that Jesus is placing the weight, the discomfort of guest-ship on the shoulders of his disciples. We are to embrace vulnerability, to carry the burden of ignorance in unknown places, to sit at tables and eat food and learn to speak the languages of our hosts.

In a world that is increasingly impacted by stories of displacement, migration, vulnerability, and violence, learning to be good guests is an old-new paradigm. It begins with learning people's stories, not from our favorite news or media outlet, but from the real people living out a dark night of the soul. It takes honesty about our biases and the courage to change where necessary. It takes being moved to compassion and learning to make space for voices, even those that speak words that are hard to hear. It takes humility and a teachable spirit. It takes extravagant expressions of hospitality, and it takes best guest behavior practiced and perfected.

May Christ break our hearts, transform our minds, bless our efforts, and lead us in the paths of rightness for the love of neighbor and the love of God.



DISCUSSION

1. What would it look like to be the Church on the borders? How can we build a church with people who are transiting?
2. What would it take, in our current cultural reality, to be people that others (different religious backgrounds, ethnic or cultural backgrounds, economic backgrounds) invite into their lives and homes?
3. What does being a good guest, in the sense of the instructions to the 72, look like in your cultural scenario?
4. If displacement and refugeeism have been a major theme in scripture, then how are they major themes today in your culture, neighborhood, and life?
5. What are some practical ways that your church could take on the burden of 'guest-ship' in the surrounding community?