

Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-15; Rom 7:15-25a; Matt 11:16-19, 25-30

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – July 9, 2017

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Trinity Episcopal Church

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP, p. 231).

I attended the River Pilgrimage Celebration on July 4 at Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford. The liturgy was bi-lingual, in Spanish and English, and there were all sorts of people there from many countries. In the service the Mothers United Against Gun Violence founder was present, and we remembered in the prayers all of the people killed in Hartford since the beginning of 2017. That's the church that now houses the poignant sculpture of stones with sayings of young adults killed in Hartford or sayings about them carved into the stones. The cultural feast that followed had foods from Africa, a variety of Caribbean Islands, a variety of Hispanic lands, America, etc. It was a celebration of diversity and of our pilgrims traveling on the Connecticut River—an experience of the differences in peoples and foods and language. I saw the non-English speaking mother of a friend and found someone to translate for me, so we could have a conversation. I wanted to know how my friend is doing, for we haven't connected for a time. My friend is

from Colombia and is currently in Brazil and Colombia for 3 months. The translator was awesome and brought joy in communication.

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The next day or so I read in the Episcopal News Service about a priest in Dallas who is the founder and executive director of Gateway of Grace. “Gateway of Grace is a ministry that mobilizes Episcopal and other churches to bridge sociocultural gaps and remove the fears, anxieties and spiritual apathy that stand in the way of Christians connecting with refugees. Gateway partners with more than 50 congregations to adopt refugee families upon arrival, and provides job readiness, language and other trainings.”¹ It sounds similar to the work of IRIS in New Haven. On Wednesday nights Gateway gathers refugees from 16 countries—including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Cameroon, Syria—and six religious backgrounds for fellowship, prayer, a meal, and conversation.

This founder and 44-year old Episcopal Priest, the Rev. Samira Izadi Page, is a former Shia Muslim who was married to a Sunni Muslim. In her native Iran she was studying for her Ph.D. at her home and there was a knock on her door. The Intelligence Service came into her home, tore it apart and found a copy of Salman

¹ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/07/06/qa-samira-izadi-page-founder-of-dallas-gateway-of-grace/>.

Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The Intelligence Service took everything in the household, shut down their business and accounts. She and her husband and two children walked through four feet of snow over two nights to freedom. They escaped empty-handed. They went to Turkey where they got some financial help from her husband's brother and hired smugglers to take them from Turkey to Mexico where they were left in Mexico City with less than \$500 and no documents. They had nothing. A few days later Samira spotted a rug store and went in, asking if they carried Persian rugs. By her accent the storeowner recognized she was Iranian and began talking in Farsi. She began crying.

In this very small world we live in, it turned out that the shop owner knew Samira's husband's family from Iran and helped them to find a place to live where they remained for one year. They then crossed the border at New Laredo and walked through the river and turned themselves in at the immigration post and applied for asylum. They were eventually sent to Dallas and arrived there one day at 7 a.m. and started looking for an apartment. They found out they couldn't rent an apartment because they didn't have social security numbers or jobs. She saw an Islamic center that couldn't help but knew of someone who helped refugees. By 11:30 a.m. that same morning they were in a fully furnished apartment. Samira says, "We had done our grocery shopping. We had paid a month of rent where we didn't know a soul; without documentation." A Bosnian family had been scheduled to move into the apartment given to them, and the Baptist Christians who were

sponsoring them opened the doors to Samira and her family. Samira's family had been nominally Muslim, and she ultimately journeyed to Christianity and later ordination. She knows the enormous challenges of refugees, having lived through the resettlement process. Her organization not only helps refugees but also helps potential sponsors work through the fears and anxieties of sponsoring Muslims or persecuted Christians from Muslim countries. Samira gives back profoundly.

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Yesterday in Kenny's service the Cathedral Dean who is Latina, Rowena who is Bahamian, and I were at the altar. We were all part of Kenny's life that brought together folks from all walks of life yesterday. In the midst of our varied differences we came together to give thanks for his life.

Loving God and loving neighbor are common across all of our Abrahamic traditions and across most religious traditions. Jesus summarized the law this way when questioned by the religious establishment of his day. It was a way of telling his followers how to live differently, despite their individual differences. The Matthew passage begins with the children of the land not understanding each other and John the Baptist not being understood and even Jesus not being understood. We're called to seek understanding in life. It takes work for us to understand one

another and to understand the ways of Jesus. Some of those times wear us out, and then we remember Jesus' invitation.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30). Coming home to Jesus soothes the soul when we need it most, and then we're ready to head out again, refreshed and reminded of our focus to love God and love our neighbor in the midst of all the differences we encounter. That's Good News, my friends!