

Proper 21, Year C

- Gospel readings for the past several weeks have asked us some rather uncomfortable questions
- Asked us how deeply we're willing to love our neighbors – whether our love for them will persevere even if love affects our bottom line
- It's a worthwhile question to ask, even though we aren't always likely to be proud of the answers we would give
- And all of those uncomfortable questions, with their uncomfortable answers, seem to build to a crescendo this week
- The prophet Amos crying, "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria."
- Paul telling Timothy that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."
- And the unforgettable story of the rich man and Lazarus
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- I have to confess that I am nervous this morning
- Nervous about the message that I feel I must preach, since I know that because it touches on politics there are some who will undoubtedly see this as a partisan political statement
- But there are times where the Gospel has extremely clear political implications, and I don't think we as Christians have the luxury of shying away from that fact
- I have in mind times like just this week, when the current administration opted to further reduce the number of refugees who will be admitted to the US in the coming fiscal year, which begins on Tuesday. This reduction cuts the refugee ceiling nearly in half to 18,000, after only allowing as many as 30,000 in the current year.
- The word refugee is itself rather strictly defined, according to the 1951 Geneva Convention.
- Refugees are not just immigrants, or even those fleeing merely economic hardship, but rather must demonstrate that they have a reasonable fear of persecution in their home country.
- Which is why two thirds of all refugees right now come from five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. Those countries may sound familiar, if you watch the news, because they're places locked in deadly conflict.
- The US used to be the world leader in taking in refugees, having a cap of 110,000 in 2017,

and for decades accepting more refugees than all other nations in the world combined, but in the coming year we won't even accept as many as our Canadian neighbors.

- The cap of 18,000 for the coming year is also the lowest number of refugees ever allowed in the US since 1980, lower even than the years immediately following 9/11.
- That compares to a total of just under 26 million refugees who are currently seeking a new place to call home, or more than the entire population of Australia. This is the highest number of refugees witnessed since during the years of WWII.
- Over half of these refugees are under the age of 18.
- Refugees, in others words, are some of the most vulnerable people on the face of the planet – people forced to flee because absolutely anyplace seems better – safer – than home
- It was the experience of refugees that led Warsan Shire to write a poem entitled “Home,” which opens with two rather unforgettable lines:
 - no one leaves home
 - unless home is the mouth of a shark
- And later goes on to say
 - you have to understand,
 - that no one puts their children in a boat
 - unless the water is safer than the land
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- The application and investigation process to be granted refugee status and allowed into the US usually lasts between 18 and 36 months – refugees are screened more or less as thoroughly as I was when I was given a Top Secret clearance to work in the military intelligence and was trusted with national security information
- Since 1980, not one of the 3 million refugees admitted to the US has killed even a single American in a terror attack, and the Cato Institute estimates the annual risk of a refugee committing a terrorist attack resulting in any American loss of life in the US at 1 in 3.6 billion.
- So there is no serious national security reason to limit the number of refugees we offer safe haven to.
- The question is simply whether we think our table is big enough.
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- Incidentally, of course, that's the same question our readings are asking of us: is our table

big enough?

- Beginning with the prophet Amos: “Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria. Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches,”
- It isn’t until the end of this passage that we’re told their sin isn’t their comfort in and of itself, but that they live in such comfort “but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.”
- Their comfort in the face of the discomfort of others is what Amos decries
- Their dispassionate detachment from the suffering that should alarm them, that should break their heart just as it breaks God’s
- The Psalmist today sings praises to God, “who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps his promise for ever; Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger.
- “The Lord, we’re told, “sets the prisoners free... cares for the stranger... sustains the orphan and widow...”
- This ancient song of praise exults in a God who cares for those in need.
- Paul reminds Timothy that we brought nothing into this world and can take nothing out of it; that the desire to be rich carries with it many other temptations, causing people to wander away from the faith. He urges Timothy to tell the faithful to “to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”
- And of course, Jesus tells us a story of the rich man who pays no heed to the man in need at his gate. In the afterlife, the rich man is told by Abraham that his suffering there is because he has already received his reward, the wealth that he felt was so important during his life; the wealth he didn’t see the need to share. Abraham even reminds him that Moses and the prophets warned against this lack of concern for neighbor, and that those who ignore their message will ignore the message even of the One raised from the dead.
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- These are not easy words to hear.
- And yet we’ve been hearing words like them for weeks, urging us to reconsider our priorities
- Urging us to recognize that God provides all, and that it is not for us to hoard those things that rightfully belong to God
- Urging us to love our neighbors in need, whether they are next door or in a refugee camp

seeking a safe place to call home

- Urging us to realize that no matter what rationalizations we come up with for not loving our neighbors in need – whether out of alleged concern for national security or for fear that we simply can't afford to share our wealth – loving our neighbor without counting the cost is what God quite clearly asks of us – has asked of us again and again and again
- And so if we are disciples of Christ, if we are followers of the God who is our refuge and has called us to love our neighbor regardless of cost, there are times where we have to ask ourselves these hard questions. Is this who we want to be? Are we willing to love our neighbors as ourselves? Isn't our table big enough?