

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
"Refugee Psalm"
Psalm 137
20th Sunday After Pentecost
World Communion Sunday
October 2, 2016**

As you have heard, 25% of the Peace and Global Witness Offering received here at Davidson College Presbyterian Church will be used to support the resettlement of refugees.

It is fitting then that one of the Scripture passages which the lectionary offers for today is Psalm 137 for the Psalmist who prays the prayer that is our Scripture lesson is a refugee.

In the year 587 B.C.E., Jerusalem was burned and its temple destroyed, the king was exiled, the social fabric of the city was ripped to shreds, citizens were deported to the land of Babylon where their captors mocked them (1), thrusting them up on the stage of their Babylonian karaoke bars with the taunt, "Now sing us some of the songs about that silly God of yours!"

We often refer to the Book of Psalms as the hymnbook of the Jewish people, but Psalm 137 is not a hymn in the way that we generally think of hymns. Rather, it is a lament about the Psalmist's inability to sing in the face of deep sorrow and dehumanizing oppression. It is a difficult psalm to read and to hear. Some would say that Christians who have been taught by Jesus to love their enemies ought to turn aside from Psalm 137 and other Psalms which unabashedly declare ill will toward enemies and even the families of those enemies. (2) But let us not do this today. Rather let us listen for what the Spirit is saying to us through the verses of Psalm 137 in order that we may grapple with the real presence of threat, hurt, and anger in human relationships. (3)

Today is World Communion Sunday.

My perfect image of World Communion Sunday is Jan Richardson's fiber art piece found on the cover of today's worship bulletin (on the screen). (4)



World Communion Sunday brings to mind a global potluck supper, people of every race and nation, dressed in colorful traditional garb, sharing savory foods from their homelands, everyone at peace with beatific smiles on their faces, holding hands in a big circle, and sharing the bread and cup of Holy Communion.

Jan Richardson herself wrote a poem to accompany her art which is entitled "The Best Supper." It begins this way,

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive. (5)

It is a beautiful vision of what World Communion Sunday ought to be. Or perhaps I should say World Communion paints for us a picture of what God intends the world to be.

However, the lectionary by including Psalm 137 as a text for today intimates that this vision alone would be less than truthful. Alongside "The Best Supper" the lectionary places Psalm 137, a prayer moaned by a refugee whose grief and pain make it impossible to sing.

Now, surely, verses like "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" rightfully cause us to shudder. Yet, the language demands our attention in saying what war does to its victims. What happened to give rise to such bitterness among the Babylonian exiles? Most of us have never undergone such suffering as this Psalmist and her or his people had, or that the 21 million refugees in today's world, nearly 34,000 people who each and every day, according to the United

Nations Refugee Agency, are forced to leave their homes because of conflict and persecution, have undergone. (6) Staying with this psalm, all of it, can help us come to grips with the deep and ongoing costs of violence in our world. (7)

Of course, while most of us don't know this level of suffering, we do know what it is to suffer loss. One of my Roundtable friends is pastor to the guidance counselor at Townville Elementary School. That school, that community, the family of sweet 6-year-old Jacob Hall have experienced unspeakable horror and suffering this week as innocent Jacob has died from gun violence at the hands of a 14-year-old.

This brings us to another reason not to ignore Psalm 137. Psalms like this help us to be honest before God. Many of us have been taught and taken to heart what Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians, that we are to "give thanks in all circumstances." (I Thessalonians 5: 18). To be sure, a state of constant thankfulness is surely a worthy goal toward which to strive. But what if we don't feel thankful? What if all we feel is anger that an innocent 6-year-old is dead? In a world where we feel horror and anger at injustice and grief and pain, Psalm 137 grants us permission to come honestly before God with how we *do* feel, rather than wearing a brave mask of how we think we *ought* to feel. Indeed, it was a Psalm of lament, Psalm 22, that gave Jesus the words to cry out to his Father from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalms of lament, Jesus's prayer from the cross, demonstrate to us that we do not have to become pure and perfect before we enter into God's presence. Rather we can bring what we have to God and let God help us transform it into something that is life-giving. (8)

And that brings us to the life-giving thing to which I believe that Psalm 137 is calling Davidson College Presbyterian Church in these days.

For some time now, there have been various conversations about our becoming actively involved in refugee resettlement. The Global Missions team determined that the Peace and Global Witness Offering be directed toward refugee resettlement. The time has come to organize toward getting involved in a more direct way.

DCPC has a good and gracious history of befriending refugees.

During the 1980's, DCPC sponsored families from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Our most recent experience. The most recent experience was in the early 1990s.

Margo Williams has written about that experience here in a piece that appeared in davidsonnews.net a few years ago:

The Krimons and Davidson

Back in the early 1990s, Davidson College joined in a consortium of colleges that welcomed a wave of students from the former Soviet Union countries to study in our country. Happily, for the college and the town, our two students were Oleg and Olga. Oleg was from a region in the Caucasus Mountains and Olga was from Odessa. Many of us in Davidson got to know both of these wonderful people quite well.

Oleg went on to law school at Wake Forest and practices in the Pacific northwest. Olga became increasingly worried about the rise of anti-Semitism in her native country of Ukraine and came to several

of us at Davidson College Presbyterian Church to talk over the situation and, ultimately, she asked whether or not we could help her family immigrate to the United States. Olga had come to think of Davidson as a great place for her family to settle!

Rosemary Raynal and I took the lead in this effort, though it involved the significant help and participation of dozens of members of DCPC. We sought help from the Jewish congregations in Charlotte, who were participating in a program providing asylum for Jewish families from Ukraine and other countries. The Session approved budgeting for the cost of bringing the Krimons to America, and the Jewish Community Center kindly allowed us to participate legally under the auspices of its program, making it possible to move on this relatively quickly.

It took a little over two years for the Krimons to make all the necessary contacts and arrangements in Ukraine, all while Olga kept up her studies in Art History at Davidson, having received a full scholarship to complete her undergraduate education. It was a tense time for her and the rest of us because of delays and misfires in the process. However, the Krimons finally had their papers in order and their flights booked. Ilya and Vica Krimon, along with their nineteen-year-old son, Yuri, arrived in Davidson, North Carolina in April 1993.

A big contingent of Davidsonians met them at the airport and brought them to Davidson and their temporary home with Anne White in the small, attached apartment she generously made available. Ironically, Rosemary, Brenda Barger and I were all in Russia on the day the Krimons arrived! We could not believe that it coincided with the timing of our long-planned trip to Russia and Prague, and though we had a wonderful trip with many adventures - some planned and some not - we were all anxious to meet the Krimons back in Davidson.

Because the Krimons have hospitality in their very souls, the first time we got together was in their little apartment. They cooked for us! How many of us were gathered around their tiny table? Probably as many as 15 people. It was like the loaves and fishes. And despite the fact that they spoke little English and we spoke no Russian, we talked and laughed and cried and ate Vica's delicious food for hours that night. I remember looking at their beautiful cerulean blue eyes, a family trait, across the table and I never tired of seeing those eyes whenever we met. We learned at that moment that Vica is the Martha Stewart of Ukraine. She cooks and entertains effortlessly and a seat at her table became a coveted place during their time in Davidson. You haven't had borscht until you've had Vica's borscht. And I don't even have the words for her cakes. Combined with Ilya's big bear hugs and his infectious laugh and Yuri's brilliance and sweetness, time with the Krimons made one feel better about life. Their home became like a spiritual rest stop.

After only a few weeks in Davidson, the Krimons and I drove into Charlotte to take care of some paper work for INS. They were still tired, and a little stunned, from the travel and years of struggle in Ukraine and their heads nodded in fatigue on the way home. We were traveling along Albemarle Road and I saw the "Hot Now" sign flashing in the window of the Krispy Kreme. I turned the wheel with a snap, figuring that a hot Krispy Kreme and a cup of coffee would be just the thing to turn this into a party.

Of course, the smell let them know that something special was on the way, and they perked right up. Then came the first taste. Hot, tender, moist. Ilya Krimon practically killed himself eating doughnuts that day! I lost count. We took home a couple of boxes, too, but that first hot Krispy Kreme made him smile from ear-to-ear. We talked about "dog-noots" all the way home. I think it was that day that they

decided that they really could live here and move on from being pulled up by the roots from the only home, the only culture, they had ever known.

Their apartment had been promised to others, so we had to find a new place for the Krimons to live. These early months were intense for them, with English lessons and job searches and applications to UNCC for Yuri. We wanted for them to have a nice place to live but we were not finding anything suitable or affordable, and we became more and more concerned about their living situation.

One day, right before Christmas, I was in the sanctuary at DCPC with our youth groups, sorting out the White Gift food offerings to deliver to families. I looked up and saw a tall, slim, well-known figure walk in and he came right up to me. Without any chit chat, he being a straight-to-the-point kind of person, he said, "We have a large, detached apartment at our house and the Krimons can come there."

I said, "How much do you think you will need to charge, and we'll try to make it happen."

He responded, "We will not charge anything. Tell them. And bring them by to have a look at it. We like it. I think it will work nicely for them."

"That is so generous. But they would want to try to pay something. They want to make their own way."

"Well, they don't have to pay, and I won't take anything. Period."

With that, he turned and left the sanctuary. I felt like I had been visited by a very business-like Christmas fairy.

Sure enough, the Krimons loved the apartment. It had two bedrooms and two baths and a comfortable living room, with plenty of space for a larger table. Vica had people to feed, after all. They remained there until they moved to California in 1998.

Both Vica and Ilya found work early on, mostly in manufacturing plants in the area. They are both highly educated with graduate degrees from the most prestigious programs in Russia and Ukraine. Vica always laughed and said that she had a degree in economics, but the only problem was that it was in an economic system that no longer existed! Ilya had a graduate degree in telecommunications engineering, which has served him well in this country. Vica tutored many people who were interested in learning Russian and found herself to be a natural born teacher.

Olga graduated with honors from Davidson College, and through a cruel twist of fate, had to return to Russia, after working in New York City for two years, to start over again on her immigration papers. She had entered our country on a student visa and INS would not allow her to stay under her parents' asylum status. We consulted lawyers and pleaded our case that Olga's family was here now, but to no avail. She lived in Moscow for about two years, and when she returned, she settled in the Los Angeles area. She received an MBA at the Marshall School of Business of the University of Southern California, and is increasingly praised as a portrait painter. She is the mother of two beautiful sons.

After his first few months in Davidson, Yuri entered UNCC and was a tremendous success in Computer Science and Electrical Engineering. I mentioned his brilliance, right? He lived at home, worked to support himself, and graduated with honors. He was the recipient of several academic awards, as well. Upon graduation, he was offered a great job with Intel in Folsom, California, where he still lives today.

The Krimons had to face that both of their children lived in California, and they didn't come to this country to be separated from them by an entire continent. So they made the difficult decision to move to Folsom in 1998. It was hard to see them go, but we understood that they needed to unite their family. In addition to their children, they also had extended family who had settled in various parts of California. Ilya was fortunate to find work for which he was educated with the state telecommunications system, Pacific Bell. And Vica teaches American History and English as a Second Language at a community college for students from around the world.

Back in 1998, we had a going away party for them that was filled with stories of their adventure, great covered dishes, and profound affection for this family that dropped into our lives and changed us forever. The array of people at the party whose lives they had touched was amazing: USAirways pilots, preachers, teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, residents of The Pines, and folks from every other age range, too. The Krimons had given us so much more than we could ever have given them, and it was a privilege to know and welcome them into our community.

They invited me to join them in Sacramento on July 4, 2000 on the occasion of their becoming citizens of the United States America. It took place in the State Capitol building and was deeply moving. Imagine leaving one's lifetime home and starting over in a foreign country, where nothing is familiar or easy. Not only did they do that successfully and graciously, they embraced us and our little town. They, then, did the same thing when they moved to Folsom. They have contributed so much to our society, worked hard to fully participate in our way of life, and always have given back to the community. They are the kind of citizens that we should all aspire to become.

Anne White, who was intimately involved in these resettlement efforts, says, "A good committee" is the most important aspect when undertaking refugee resettlement. Bill Strong adds that you also need people who may not feel called to serve on a committee, but who bring special knowledge, experience, and skill in particular areas like health care, education, housing, and employment so that they can respond when there are particular needs and challenges. Other people who simply have flexibility in terms of time are invaluable so that they can transport our guests to social service agencies or a job interview on the spur of the moment.

I invite you to pray about your calling to serve in this ministry. Communicate your interest to Robert Alexander (ralexander@dcpc.org) or me (lmcgregorsimmons@dcpc.org). When we have the names of those of you who have indicated a willingness to get involved, we will all get together and the Holy Spirit will lead us where we are meant to go!

Friends, it is true. The number of refugees in the world is staggering. The atrocities emanating from war are horrifying. Yet our inability to solve a global problem is not an excuse to ignore it altogether. We do what we can. We listen to our brothers and sisters who are refugees. We lament with them. We befriend them. (9)

And on this World Communion Sunday, we believe that by God's grace and in God's power,

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.

And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.

1. Walter Brueggemann, "Conversations Among Exiles," *The Christian Century*, July 2-9, 1997, 630.
2. See Psalms 109:12; 143:12; 18:40.
3. Marti J. Steussy, "The Enemy in the Psalms," *Word and World*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Winter 2008, 5.
4. The Best Supper. Copyright Jan L. Richardson.
5. Jan L. Richardson, "And the Table Will Be Wide,"
<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/09/30/and-the-table-will-be-wide/>
6. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>. Accessed October 2016.
7. Steussy, 8.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Mary Hinkle Shore, "Jesus As a Refugee," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XL, No. 1, Advent 2016, 7.