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Houston ministers on immigration: An open letter

'Holy Scripture is consistent and unequivocal'

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Photo: Lisa Gray, Houston Chronicle

Outside Trinity Episcopal Church, in Midtown, on Wednesday.

We are experiencing a time of rancor and division in our nation unseen in generations. Even people of faith and goodwill are conflicted, and admittedly, Holy Scripture often offers counsel in more than one direction. On at least one issue, however, the witness of Holy Scripture is consistent and unequivocal: the treatment of immigrants and refugees.



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Early in the Old Testament, God reminds the people of Israel of their own formative experience as immigrants and refugees in Egypt and of the suffering they received at Pharaoh's hand. God delivered the Israelites into the Promised Land, and God commands them to redeem their worst experience by embracing those in similar circumstances:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. — Leviticus 19:33-34

God's people were human, as we are all human, and they often failed to follow God's command to offer sanctuary to aliens in their land. They were faithful to come together and worship together, proclaiming loudly, "This is the house of the Lord!" but they neglected God's call for grace toward immigrants and refugees.

The prophet Jeremiah reminded the people that worship is pleasing to

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God only as an outgrowth of empathy and justice. And in what does God's justice consist? Through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 7: 5-7,11), God says: "If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place."

God ends this injunction ominously: "I am watching, says the Lord."

Jesus himself likewise commands his followers to care for the vulnerable. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus gives us the model for how to care for the sojourner in need. In Matthew 25, Jesus proclaims that those who welcome the stranger in their midst actually welcome Jesus himself and have a place in God's kingdom, while those who do not will be cast out. And the author of the Letter to the Hebrews makes the point most eloquently, "Show hospitality to the stranger, for by so doing some have entertained angels unaware."

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Finally, the Book of Ruth chronicles the story of the widowed Moabite Ruth, an immigrant who moves to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth offers a poignant speech of loyalty and commitment to her mother-in-law and her newly adopted country. In later centuries, rabbis constructed a Jewish catechism from Ruth's speech. In other words, Ruth the immigrant became the very model for what it meant to be a faithful Jew.



Just so, we — who are ourselves a nation of immigrants — can learn lessons of fortitude and faith from today's immigrants and refugees who seek shelter in our great land. Like Ruth and like our forebears, they hope for a new life of safety and prosperity for their families. Like Ruth and like our forebears, they wish to work hard and contribute to our communities. They can remind us of our best selves, but first we must receive them with grace and compassion.

The Rev. Hannah E. Atkins, Rector, Trinity Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Jim Birchfield, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Harvey Clemons, Senior Pastor, Pleasant Hills Baptist Church

The Rev. John Ogletree, Senior Pastor, First Metropolitan Baptist Church

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