

“A Huge Paradigm Shift”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Now this sermon I’m about to give needs a little bit of an introduction. When you hear it, some people are going to say, “Scott is just digging at the Republicans.” But I want to say that I’m an equal opportunity complainer. [Laughter] I complain about everybody, or if you want to say it another way, a more faithful way, “I try to seek justice in every situation.”

Lately I’ve been bashing the Obama administration, because in the last six months we were having to deal with a terrible issue in our Church, and all Churches, in fact in all not-for-profits, because we were dealing with the fact that no one could work more than 40 hours without over time - and there were even limits on it - to the point that we had one of our staff people who work with youth, who sometimes couldn’t come in to the office as early as Thursday, because if you have a lock-in, you have worked pretty close to your 40 hour week. It was frustrating, and I was pleased when the present administration cut that off. So I’m an equal opportunity complainer, and I want you to remember that as I give this sermon.

One of the great struggles for the future of the Christian church, is not other religions, not scientific atheism, or even denominational struggles. The greatest struggle we face in the Christian church is whether or not we can remain relevant. We say, “Where are our young people in our churches?” They are looking for churches that are relevant to their world, to this society, and to the issues that are meaningful to them.

As our society becomes more secular, the church must defend its existence in order to continue to have one. We have ignored justice issues. Fifty years ago when people wanted to find out what we believe in this world about ethics - what’s right and what’s wrong - they went to the church. Now we are the last place people go to find out what is ethical. People frankly don’t know where to turn, so we fall for anything. Many churches have lost their saltiness, and Jesus is calling us to be relevant again.

So, as much as I hate to talk about this issue - I don’t like conflict, because I like a pay check - but sometimes you just have to address things that you can’t ignore anymore. This week not only the nation but the entire world erupted when the White House announced the travel ban against seven different countries all having a Muslim majority. I struggled, because I don’t have time in a 20-minute sermon to address all of the inappropriate issues that I have been struggling with in the past week, so we are going to talk for 70 minutes. [Laughter]

I don’t have time to reflect on the abusiveness in singling out a single religious group, as if they were all extremists. I don’t have time to discuss the fact that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of convicted extremists in nations not mentioned in the ban. In fact the nations mentioned in this ban have extremely few convicted extremists. I don’t know if there is a single extremist coming out of the countries in the ban who actually killed an American on American soil - and meanwhile in the three nations where nearly 3,000 Americans were killed on American soil, the US still welcomes their citizens to apply to the U.S. for visas and travel permits.

The three countries that have killed the most Americans on American soil are Saudi Arabia, Egypt and The United Arab Emirates. Those three nations - none of the three are part of the travel ban. And I think, “Why? Why wouldn’t they be first?”

Saudi Arabia - the President registers eight companies tied to hotel interests in Saudi Arabia, and the President said, speaking of Saudi Arabia, “They buy apartments from me. They spend \$40 million, \$50 million, and I’m supposed to dislike them? I like them very much.”

I scratch my head.

Egypt - Egypt has two Trump business filings at this time listed in Egypt. And The United Arab Emirates? The President, before being elected, traveled there with his daughter, Ivanka, numerous times, playing golf and meeting with affluent Sheiks. The Trump organization has a licensing and management deal with Dubai for two golf courses. This information you can find in the February 1st edition of *New York Daily News*.

Why are they not in the travel ban, if this is about protecting ourselves from people who are out to get Americans? Why aren’t those three countries in the ban? Well, I can only imagine that it has something to do with money. Not just the President’s money - but all of ours; because if we deal with Saudi Arabia or The United Arab Emirates, or maybe even Egypt, we are talking about oil, and we like our cheap gasoline right now.

So we pick and choose who we are going to ban, but that isn’t even what I’m going to preach about directly today.

I want to preach about what I received from the Presbyterian Church (USA), our denomination’s mission agency this week. They stressed a ban in the present administration’s way treating refugees. This isn’t me - I’m reading from the denomination. It begins with a Scripture passage that says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35) Then the article begins by reminding us of another time in U.S. history when the Americans banned a minority religious group. It was during World War II and the Third Reich had banned Jewish refugees, before they ended up killing them in the gas chambers. Jewish refugees were fleeing persecution, war and violence, and they were turned away from American shores. We weren’t taking refugees.

The Presbyterian Church has consistently called upon the church to welcome refugees in the name of Jesus Christ. That call began when in the 160th General Assembly in 1948, they called for a resettlement of refugees displaced by World War II, and continued that agreement for accepting refugees through the 222nd General Assembly in 2016.

Now we have a smart aleck in the room and his name is Ken Arentson. [Laughter] Ken comes up to me before the service today, and he says, “So, your sermon title says ‘Huge Paradigm Shift.’ We have been doing this since 1948. What’s so huge about the Paradigm Shift?”

I said, “Great. I wish you had said that on Thursday. I would have had a little time to think about it.” [Laughter]

The answer is that maybe for once we are going to do what the General Assembly talks about. We aren't going to ignore it. I'm as guilty as anyone. The Denomination sends me something. I shove it under the bed, or I shove it in the bottom of my desk drawer. I probably have stacks from 1984 that I haven't even read, and more often than not they are accurate.

This week, according to Rev. Jimmie Hawkins - the Director of the Office of Public Witness for our denomination - he wrote another long explanation because we have all been talking about this ban all week. Rev. Hawkins said, "Right now nearly 60 million people are displaced by war, persecution and violence. Thirty million - and that's over half of those displaced - are children." Children. So when we talk about these refugees, over half of what we are saying are children. Eleven million of those displaced right now have left Syria. The Syrians cannot go to school in Syria. They could not tend their land or raise their children in the place they called home. The families are risking their lives, fleeing their home to find safety for their family.

Imagine if it were you, and you were unlucky enough to not be born in America but be born in Syria, and you and your young family had to leave everything you knew, and start out on a dangerous journey. You spend months journeying, sleeping outside in the desert, worrying about everything from snakes to wild animals, to paying smugglers for safe passage and praying there would be enough food each night to feed your children and maybe a little left over for yourself. How are they doing it?

Our nation has historically stood up for hope and welcome for those fleeing war and persecution. We can't turn our backs right now, and that's biblical. When Jesus was a tiny infant he became a refugee. For political reasons the Holy Family fled King Herod. Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus became refugees, and then became immigrants to Egypt - perhaps even illegal immigrants. What if Egypt had introduced a ban? Then probably Herod would have killed Jesus before he even had a chance to save us all from sin and death. We can't be worse than Pharaoh's Egypt. We have to be better than that. Would the Messiah have been killed? Perhaps. If we are called - to quote the Bible - to, "go and do likewise" how can we not provide opportunities to show God's love by embracing the immigrant people?

So let's look at the underlying issue; what I believe to be the issue behind the ban. I believe the ban is a symptom of something deeper: Fear. One of my favorite Christian writers is a United Methodist bishop and scholar named Dr. William Willimon. He used to be the chaplain at Duke University. Dr. Willimon points out, "When many of us were children, the first passage we memorized was John 3:16. Go to any football game. The guy with the afro - the rainbow afro - would show you John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever liveth and believeth in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.' For God so loved the world. It didn't say 'For God so loved allies.' It didn't say 'For God so loved the nations that accept our hotels and golf courses.' It said, 'For God so loved the world.' The *whole* world."

What keeps us from fulfilling God's love with our worldwide neighbor is fear, and I don't blame them. When we see a truck running down the streets of Paris and Nice, blowing up dozens of people, it is scary. But we have to move beyond that fear to come up with a way

that works well that is somehow appropriate, that deals with everyone individually and nations fairly. This isn't doing it.

Dr. Willimon tells the story of a colleague, while they were at Millsap College. He said, his friend summoned up the courage to ask a girl he had been eyeballing for a long time out on a date. He finally asked her, and she said, "Yes."

He was so excited. They went to the restaurant in town, and they sat down and waited to be served. They waited and waited. The waitress was busy, but she kept going by. After just about everybody else had been served, he asked her, "Excuse me. We haven't been served yet. She turned to him and snarled, "Take the hint!" They got up and he turned to the girl and said, "I guess we aren't really hungry tonight." In that moment, as African-Americans they were reminded yet again just how "other" they were.

As a white, male, protestant, American, I have rarely felt what it's like to be "other," and with that gift of not being the other, I also have a huge responsibility. It is my responsibility, as well as everyone else that is an insider, to bring others into the inside, to expand us and not just them; to make us all one family. Making room on the inside, now takes courage. It takes humility. It takes intelligent thought and commitment, and we are reminded of I John 4:18, "For perfect love casts out fear." We have to learn how to get beyond that fear and address it in a way that works.

Dr. Willimon states that any Christian move toward the other is based upon Jesus Christ moving toward us. According to Romans 5:10, "We were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies." We're the other. In the kingdom of Heaven we are the outsider - we are the other. We are the ones who have sinned. We are the ones who are inappropriate for Heaven. Only by the love of Jesus Christ who died on a cross, who accepted fear and overcame fear and death, were we the outsider brought in. The rich and poor, Christian, Jew and Muslim, faithful, atheist and agnostic, not one of us is an insider in the kingdom of Heaven. We are the other, and we are all refugees in the kingdom of Heaven.

To say, "No," or exclude anyone is hypocritical and offensive to God, because God accepted *our* eternal passport into the kingdom of God. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has affirmed the phrase, "We Choose Welcome." Just as God has welcomed us, we are to welcome one another. It won't always be easy. We won't always agree, but we as Presbyterians, and we as a nation, need to figure out how to relate because, just as the Third Reich was on the wrong side of history, just as Americans were who denied Jewish people access to our borders, were on the wrong side of history, just as people who said, "No," to black people, required separate bathrooms, separate drinking fountains, the wrong side of the bus, were on the wrong side of history, we are at a moment when we can be on the right side and are inclusive, or on the wrong side of history. Which will we be?

Our children and our grandchildren are watching. Where will we stand? Let's not be irrelevant. Let's make a real difference by welcoming the "other." Bring them in, and call them family. Nothing less will please God. That is our prayer. Amen.