23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Romans 13:8-14
September 7, 2008

Ever hear of Uighurs? If the answer is "No," don't feel bad. Neither had I until a few weeks ago.

Uighurs are an ethnic group who live in what is now the Xingjian region of China—way up in the northwest of that vast country with Mongolia to the east, Russia to the north, and Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and India to the west. Uighur country is sparsely populated. It's mostly deserts and mountains. I think it's fair to say that most Americans have never heard of it.

Uighurs speak Turkic, and most of them are Sufi Muslim— have been since the 13th century. Like their neighbors in Tibet, the Uighurs have been persecuted by the Chinese government for decades, but unlike the Tibetans, they don't have a spiritual leader like to Dali Lama to tell their story and keep their plight in the international headlines.

The U.S. State Department officially lists Uighurs as the victims of state persecution on account of their religion, and that status is a sticking point in Chinese-American relations.

Now this is a sermon, not a social studies talk, and in any case I've told you just about everything I know about Uighurs. Now I'd like you to meet a few Uighurs—in your imagination at least. Each has a slightly different story, but I've learned enough to give you a general picture.

Turn your calendar back to the year 2001. Having fled China to escape persecution, some Uighur men were living in a refugee camp in the mountains of Afghanistan—the Tora Bora mountain range, to be precise. It seems they were in that settlement on September 11, 2001, when, far away in cities they had never heard of called New York and Washington, D.C., planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

We all remember what followed.

- The declaration of a "war on terror."
- The invasion of Afghanistan.
- The hunt for Osama bin Laden and the bombing of the Tora Bora caves.

The men in this story made their way across snow-covered peaks into Pakistan, where they hoped to find refuge. Some local tribesmen took them in, fed them a feast, and then betrayed them. They turned them over to the military authorities in order to collect the $5,000 bounty per person the Americans were paying for allies of Osama bin Laden. The problem is, these Uighurs had never heard of Osama bin Laden.

Twenty-three Uighur men were caught in that snare and were eventually hooded, shackled, and flown to the U.S. prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

That was seven years ago, and they've been there ever since. They're not "terrorists." What they are are refugees who were caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. They're certainly not "the worst of the worst," as we were once told was the case with all the prisoners at Guantánamo. What they are, in biblical terms, is the "least of the least."

There are now seventeen Uighur men being held in Guantánamo. I've told you a bit of their story because there's a chance that in October a federal judge in Washington, D.C. will be ordering their release—or in legal terms, their "parole." If that should happen, these Uighurs will have no place to go. Return to China is impossible, and it appears no other nation in the world will risk China's displeasure by showing hospitality to Uighurs.

The volunteer attorneys who represent these men are hoping that there might be some communities around the country who would agree to take a few of them in —give them housing, find them jobs, teach them the skills they will need to make new lives in the country that has imprisoned them for so long.

A few weeks ago I was approached by someone close to these men's cases and asked if I thought Tallahassee might be a place where three of these Uighur men might find hospitality. "I'm asking you," this person said, "because I've heard of First Presbyterian Church and thought that if any congregation would be willing to work on a project like this, it would be yours."

I thought about that. I thought about the welcome our session gave to the family of John Spenkelink, back in 1979, when Florida reinstituted the death penalty, and John's family needed somewhere to hold John's funeral. I remembered the time refugees from El Salvador occupied our chapel, living there during Holy Week to raise awareness of their nation's plight. I thought of the

Vietnamese families we have embraced through the years and of the folks fleeing hurricanes Katrina and Rita three years ago. I remembered all that Cajun food being cooked in our kitchen, and how I didn't eat anywhere else for a whole week.

More than that, I remembered how the faith communities of Tallahassee pulled together to minister to those 700 Katrina victims who found themselves in Tallahassee. I remembered sitting around the table with Christians pastors and clergy from Temple Israel and Masjid Al-Nahl, one of the two local mosques, planning pastoral care for the folks at the Red Cross Center. I thought about the conversations I've been having with colleagues in the organization called "Tallahassee Interfaith Clergy," which is co-chaired by Rabbi Jack Romberg and me.

I put all that together in my head and I told that person, "Yes. I think the congregations of Tallahassee would be up to that challenge."

In the past few days the momentum has been picking up. I sent out an e-mail to my ministerial colleagues explaining the situation. Every time I check my e-mail I get another message saying, "Yes, we'll help." We're talking with a local Presbyterian pastor who worked for three years resettling refugees up in northern Virginia. He's an expert. He says he'll show us how it's done.

And as we worship the triune God this morning, a conversation is taking place with the governing body at a local mosque. "If you'll take the lead," we're telling the Muslim community, "the other faith communities in Tallahassee will help. We'll stand with you, and together we'll follow God's call."

I said this was a sermon, and it is. It's a commentary on today's reading from Romans. I didn't know it at the time, but all week long the Holy Spirit has been writing my sermon for me, putting into context these words from the Apostle Paul.

> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not covet;" and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

For Christians, the meaning of the word "neighbor" is found not in a dictionary, but in a story. You know that story well—the parable of the Good Samaritan. Neighbors, that story implies, are not just the folks who live nearby; they're the folks whose need cries out from a ditch on the road to Jericho, or from a Red Cross Service Center, or even from a prison on Guantánamo Bay.

Seldom does that cry arise at a convenient time, and it almost always involves crossing some kind of boundary. That's the nature of "neighbor" in the Christian tradition. Jews and Muslims have different traditions, but I suspect they would arrive at much the same conclusion when it comes to the story I've been telling you.

A patriot might say that what our nation has done to these men is shameful and ought to be put right in order to restore our nation's honor. A prophet might say that they have suffered a great injustice. A Christian might well agree with both the patriot and the prophet, but when it comes right down to it, these men are simply our neighbors, and Christ commands us to love our neighbors.

The story of these Uighur refugees is far from finished. The congregations of Tallahassee will be writing the next chapters. Let us pray that when their story is told to our children, they will give thanks to God for our faithful response to God's call.

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