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## *Concerning the Sojourner*

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*Leviticus 19:33-37*

**Tim Hart-Andersen:** We just heard these strong words from the book of Leviticus:

“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.”

(Leviticus 19:33)

The Hebrew word is *ger* (“gare”). It means stranger in the land, one who sojourns among you.

*The sojourner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you.*

Two years ago, one of our youth deacons wrote an impassioned letter to the elders of Westminster, asking them to consider whether our church might become a

sanctuary congregation, which would mean hosting a refugee or asylum seeker on-site. After careful study, the elders decided that rather than hosting someone in our building, Westminster would begin a ministry in support of refugees and immigrants – *sojourners in the land*.

Now, in partnership with the Minnesota Council of Churches we are recruiting church members to help Westminster host a refugee family upon their arrival in Minnesota. And in partnership with Advocates for Human Rights we are now recruiting church members to serve as court observers in cases of asylum seekers. Talk to associate pastor Alanna Simone Tyler to sign up.

To hear what it's like to be a refugee today, listen to one of our church members, seeking asylum here, who has given me permission to read from a letter they wrote:

“We have lost the opportunity to feast in our homes with our neighbors. We have lost schools, houses and villages which have been burned down. We have also lost the call to worship God in a befitting structure; we worship in forests under trees. We have lost the bond of a community because family members, friends, and neighbors are missing forever. Travel for

pleasure is now replaced with kidnapping for ransom. The resilience of our mothers and sisters is now replaced with rape and torture. Our fathers' and brothers' ability to protect us is now replaced with imprisonment or executions. The yearning to love and endure has vanished from our bodies. This pain is hard to bear.

“You shall love the sojourner as yourself, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”  
(Leviticus 19:34)

That high school deacon was following an ancient mandate found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures:  
*remember that the foreigner residing among us is no different from us, and should be treated as one of us.*

Today, on this third Sunday of Heritage Month at Westminster, we will explore our congregation's ministry over many years with immigrants. It begins at the beginning, with Scottish and Welsh newcomers establishing the church in 1857, on land that had been home to the Dakota people for many generations.

In 1870, the Rev. Robert Sample, the third pastor of Westminster, travelled to China to visit Presbyterian mission work there. Upon his return, after hearing about his trip, the women of Westminster started the church's first global mission partnership.

It would soon impact us much closer to home.

Construction of the transcontinental railroad began in 1863. To meet the need for workers, men were recruited from China. They endured terrible discrimination as they labored on the railroad. They were paid half the wages of white workers. They had to find their own food, while the white workers were supplied meals. They slept in tents outside, while white workers were given beds in railroad cars.

After the completion of the railroad in 1869, Chinese communities grew in California, and racism continued to assert itself in increasingly violent ways. Anti-Asian fervor resulted in the passage of the Page Act by Congress in 1875, prohibiting immigration by Chinese women. It was followed in 1882 by the Chinese Exclusion Act, the only law ever passed by Congress prohibiting immigration on the basis of ethnic or national origin.

*When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress them. The sojourner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you.*

In those difficult years – the 1870s – Presbyterians in San Francisco and Minneapolis began collaborating to support Chinese escaping racial violence aimed at them on the West Coast. The Rev. Sample, Westminster's pastor, served on the board of the Presbyterian Mission Home in San Francisco's Chinatown, today called Cameron House. The Mission Home was as a leader in helping Chinese flee persecution in California. As a result, the first Chinese to arrive in Minnesota came through informal Presbyterian networks organized in our state in the 1870s by Westminster.

In 1882, the same year the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, our church began a formal ministry teaching English and providing support to Chinese immigrants. The nation went one way; Westminster went the other. Our church became *the* center for Chinese in Minneapolis, assisting newcomers in settling and finding their way into this community.

That youth deacon who asked the elders two years ago to support immigrants and refugees was standing in a long tradition at Westminster.

The biblical injunction to care for the one who sojourns among us is not a one-off text in some obscure corner of Leviticus. We find it everywhere in the older testament. It becomes a repeated refrain throughout the Bible. Jesus enacts that same mandate when he tells stories about heroes who are disliked foreigners, like the good Samaritan. Or, when he welcomes those whom others shun as outsiders, like the woman at the well, also a foreigner. Or, when he ignores the mandate not to pay attention to people living with leprosy or other illnesses that exclude them.

As Christians, our core conviction insists on hospitality to those deemed *other* by the world around us. That includes the sojourner among us – and anyone else known to be the most vulnerable in the community. That conviction is the biblical basis for the American creed, enshrined in Emma Lazarus' poem on the Statue of Liberty:

*“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,*

*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

She wrote those words in 1883, a year after Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. The country was struggling to reconcile its commitment to welcome those from other lands with the nativist sentiment beating in many American hearts. The biblical mandate to care for the sojourner in the land appears *so often* in scripture because human nature works in the opposite direction. Westminster has witnessed that tension throughout its 164 years, including today, as the nation sees rising anti-immigrant bias, hostility directed at Asian-Americans, and drastically curtailed welcome of asylum seekers, like the one from whom we heard jus now.

*You shall love the sojourner as yourself, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup>, Westminster continued to resist the racism bearing down on Chinese immigrants. The church created safe space for them. We led the way for the first Chinese woman to come to Minnesota, Liang May Seen. The Chinese Mission Home in San Francisco was sheltering Liang May, when Woo

Yee Sing, a Westminster member, visited one day. He had travelled from Minneapolis in search of a wife. His Presbyterian connections led him to the Mission Home.

Liang May and Woo Yee got married and moved to Minneapolis, and to Westminster, where they raised their adopted child, Howard. Howard Woo was a contemporary of Pearl Wong, whom we will meet on screen shortly. He was part of Westminster's Chinese Sunday School, as were Pearl's children and hundreds of others over the years, right up until the early 1957. We will meet several of them, now 50-year heritage members, in the video in a moment.

But first, the Rev. David Tsai Shinn will pick up the story...

**David Tsai Shinn:** Our roots are deep and our roots are wide with our heritage with Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans.

In our "Living Faith" book that chronicles the first 150 years of Westminster's history and story, it writes, "Rumor that Westminster was practicing racial segregation put an abrupt end to the Chinese Sunday

school in 1957.” The intent of the decision to end the Chinese Sunday school was to integrate the Chinese members into the larger congregation. While it was well intentioned, it caused the loss of an important part of the Chinese American community here in Minneapolis. In a couple more minutes, you will hear from our heritage members as they speak about this loss, and why Westminster’s Chinese Sunday school was the grand central station for spiritual growth and community formation for many in the Chinese American community.

Fast forward to the 1960s. Ecclesiastes reminds us, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...” The decade of the 1960s brought a new era for the whole United States, and Westminster maintained vigilant with its moral compass and inner call to care for the sojourners and their fundamental right and benefit to citizenship. As the nation was grappling and fighting for civil rights to overcome the systemic and generational racism, which we heard from Tim on the first Sunday of June, Westminster participated in this march and action. Listening to the call for moral holiness just as commanded by Leviticus, Westminster’s leadership and community attuned its heart to listen for the Holy Spirit’s nudges and guidance.

With the intent to reach out to the Chinese American community, and recognizing the greater and crucial racial reconciliation in our city and country, Rev. Dr. Stephen Tsui was hired by the session in 1969 as the first Chinese American pastor on Westminster's clergy staff. According to Stephen, the leadership of the church urged him to stay in Minneapolis, and delay his doctoral education and the desire to return to Hong Kong. To this, Stephen credits the Holy Spirit and many in the Westminster community. He began his work among us by teaching Sunday school to the Chinese American members. Furthermore, he bore the telling presence to the city by reaching out to the broader Twin Cities' Chinese American communities, and forming international connections both in Hong Kong and in Taiwan. Representing Westminster, Stephen's ministry among us was crucial at that time because of the rising awareness of China and Chinese Americans after President Nixon's visit, and it was also crucial in our standing strong in the support of the Asian American community today. The fight against discrimination was relevant then and it is still relevant today.

We turn now to two videos in which we will hear first-hand from Westminster heritage members, all of whom have been a part of our congregation for more than half a century, and the Rev. Dr. Stephen Tsui.

**Tim Hart-Andersen:** Two years ago, that youth deacon was on the right track She was pushing us to stand with immigrants in our midst was sounding a biblical alarm, a biblical refrain:

*You shall love the sojourner as yourself, for you, too, were sojourners in the land.*

She was reminding us of the commandment to welcome the stranger, to show hospitality to the foreigner residing among us, to care for the most vulnerable. Church members wanting to engage in Westminster's historic and continuing ministry with sojourners in the land have new opportunities to do so today.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.