

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 19, 2017
Neal MacPherson

COMMEMORATING THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE SIGNING OF EXECUTIVE ORDER 9066

A CALL TO FAITH AND ACTION

Genesis 18:1–15
Leviticus 19:33–34
Psalm 146
Matthew 25:31–46

My sisters and brothers, this weekend marks the 75th Anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin Roosevelt, which resulted in the incarceration of 120,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans. Among those who were incarcerated were four persons who have been directly related to the life and ministry of Nu‘uanu Congregational Church: Mae Kimura, the Rev. Paul Osumi who was incarcerated at Tule Lake, and also Sidney and Minnie Kosasa, Gloria Gainsley’s parents, who were also incarcerated at Tule Lake. Sidney was a student at the University of California/Berkeley staying at the home of the parents of Minnie Ryugo, who would become his wife. Because the Ryugo family was sent to Tule Lake, Sidney was sent there also. He and Minnie were married in camp, and after the war, as you know, they eventually made their way to Honolulu where Sidney had grown up.

These four people were not the only ones directly affected by Executive Order 9066, however. Many of our church members had family members living on the mainland who were also incarcerated. Anything I could say of the hardship and suffering, the fear and terror that the internees endured would be inadequate. So I would like us to hear three voices from those who were incarcerated. The first voice is that of the Rev. Yoshiaki Fukuda, Konko Church minister in San Francisco, who was arrested on December 7, 1941. He describes the train trip to the concentration camp:

“Although we were not informed of our destination, it was rumored that we were heading for Missoula, Montana. There were many leaders of the Japanese Community aboard our train . . . The view outside was blocked by shades on the windows, and we were watched

constantly by sentries with bayoneted rifles who stood on either side of the coach. The door to the lavatory was kept open in order to prevent our escape or suicide . . . there were fears that we were being taken to be executed”

The second voice is that of Mine Okubo, who was incarcerated at the Tanforan Assembly Center. She recalls her life in the camp.

“Humor is the only thing that mellows life, shows life as the circus it is. After being uprooted, everything seemed ridiculous, insane, and stupid. There we were in an unfinished camp, with snow and cold. The evacuees helped sheetrock the walls for warmth and built the barbed wire fence to fence themselves in. We had to sing ‘God Bless America’ many times with a flag. Guards all around us with shotguns, you’re not going to walk out. I mean . . . what could you do? So many crazy things happened in the camp. So the joke and humor I saw in the camp was not in a joyful sense, but ridiculous and insane. It was dealing with people and situations . . . I tried to make the best of it, just adapt and adjust.”

By the way, these voices are found in the publication of Dorothea Lang’s Censored Photographs with Commentary. I want to thank Shigeo Kimura and Art Goto for sending this publication to me. You can obtain access to it on the web, and we will make the website available to you. Perhaps the voice that made the most impact on me was voice of Ben Takeshita, who recounts his older brother’s ordeal at Tule Lake Relocation Center. His brother was segregated for causing trouble, and Ben describes what happened to him.

“They got to a point when they said, ‘Okay, we’re going to take you out.’ And it was obvious that he was going before a firing squad with MP’s ready with rifles. He was asked if he wanted a cigarette; he said ‘No.’ . . . ‘You want a blindfold?’ . . . ‘No.’ They said, ‘Stand up here,’ and they went as far as saying, ‘Ready, aim, fire,’ and pulling the trigger, but the rifles had no bullets. They just went click.”

What can we say to all of this? Surely that Executive Order 9066 was a travesty of justice, and that it must never, never be repeated again. The possibility of a repetition of the injustice concerns us because there’s been talk of it in high places and because we are seeing an unprecedented rise in

xenophobia, the fear of the stranger, the main victims of which have become our Muslim and Hispanic sisters and brothers. I hope you will forgive me for saying that the words and actions of President Trump are serving only to fuel the fire of xenophobia.

In light of all this, the thing I want to say this morning is that our Judeo-Christian faith, understood rightly, stands in stark opposition to anything coming close to xenophobia. We need only to hear again the words of Leviticus:

“The alien/stranger 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: I am the LORD your God.

—Leviticus 19:34

That commandment is repeated another 35 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Because we know what it was like to be unjustly treated in the land of America, we must always love the stranger as ourselves. That’s the bottom line, as they say.

The mandate to love the stranger is also repeated in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew’s Gospel. To welcome the stranger is to welcome Christ himself. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Then, there is that marvelous, life-changing story about Abraham welcoming the three strangers from the Book of Genesis. The appearance of the three strangers at the entrance of Abraham’s tent turns out to be a visit by none other than God himself. Abraham extends to the three strangers gracious hospitality. He provides water for them to drink and to wash their feet. He brings food to them. He invites them to rest. And in turn, the strangers, really God in disguise, disclose the blessing that Sarah in her old age will bear a son. The promise of a future for Abraham and Sarah and their descendants will not be denied. This beautiful story and also our parable from Matthew gave rise to the equally beautiful Gaelic saying:

*We saw a stranger yesterday,
We put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place*

*And, with the sacred name of the Triune God,
He blessed us and our house,
Our cattle and our dear ones.
As the lark says in her song:
Often, often, often, goes Christ in the stranger's guise.*

It's the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee who bear not only God's promises to us but also Christ's presence among us.

May I say that it all has to do with neighborliness. That may sound too simplistic to some, but I believe that neighborliness is a profound guide for our faith and action. Executive Order 9066 was an affront to the whole idea of neighborliness and to the commandment in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the teachings of Jesus that "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The hatred of the strangers in our midst, the Muslims and the Hispanics, the immigrants and refugees who seek a safe place in our communities to live in peace and unafraid is, frankly, anti-Christian and anti-human.

It does have to do with neighborliness. From the perspective of the scriptures, the neighbor is not just that family who lives beside me. The neighbor is not just the person who looks like me, who acts like me. As followers of Christ, our neighborhood includes and embraces the vulnerable, the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and yes, the stranger. Our human relationship with all people is central to our faith and action.

Why is this? Well, I believe it's because God chooses to be in a loving and just relationship with us, with all of humankind and with the whole of creation. We might say that all people, including the most vulnerable among us, belong to God's neighborhood. And this God of whom we speak is a God who is with us and for us. The Psalmist declares that God

*. . . keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.*

*The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.*

*The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow.
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

—Psalm 146:7–9

What God does for us, for humankind, and for the whole of creation becomes our mandate to do the same. We who were once strangers in the land of America, must welcome the stranger and love the stranger, the immigrant, and the refugee as ourselves. God help us, we can do none other.