

## The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

July 14, 2019

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Pádraig O'Tuama was sitting in a psychoanalyst's waiting room in Australia — Australia being about the furthest place he could flee to from his old life in Ireland. He was inspecting a brochure rack intently — a strategy for avoiding eye contact with anyone else — when he came across a phrase in Irish, of all things. I won't try to pronounce it. But the phrase he read translates, "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live."

10,000 miles from home and very much alone, Pádraig reads a message in the language of his childhood. "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live."

But he knows his Irish well enough to know the word *skáth* can mean "shelter" or "shadow." "It is in the shadow of each other that the people live," is probably not what the brochure's author had in mind. But it can also be true. Sometimes other people are the ones who block the sun. Sometimes we're the ones who block the light from others.

Pádraig soon moved from Australia to Belfast. He'd been a migrant for nearly a decade, moving from his home in Cork to Dublin to Switzerland to Australia, with stops in Lithuania, Uganda, and the Philippines along the way. He was ready to settle. Ready to make a place a home again.

But in Belfast, where he could read the road signs and even unpack the etymology of place names... in Belfast, on the same island he'd been born on, a hundred miles from Dublin and a car trip from Cork, he didn't know whether the next person he met would greet him as a local or as a dangerous foreigner.

"I love Cork," one man told him. "It's a great county."

"Oh, you're from Ireland," another would say. "I was in Finland once."

He quickly learned that people were listening for slips of the tongue by which they'd determine whose side you were on. Whether you'd say "Northern Ireland" or "The North," or if you called Britain "the mainland" or "across the water," whether you went to mass or to church, and whether you carried a Bible with you when you did.

Language can be a shelter, and language can be a shadow. It's hard to say when and where a migrant will actually feel at home. That one can feel so displaced, so close to what should be home is a reminder that we are all of us migrants. All of us. We all move. And we can all be made to feel included or very much on the outside when we do.

Maybe you've never thought of the parable we know as the Good Samaritan as a story about migrants. Or as a story for migrants. But it is, in a very important way.

The story comes right after an important turn in the gospel of Luke. We heard it two Sundays ago. "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem." Things get a little graver here. A little more intense. All those strange sayings follow... "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have their nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." It's where he says, "Let the dead bury their dead," and "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom."

The language gets stark as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, the place where his own rejection as a dangerous outsider will be complete.

The ominous language has a very specific purpose, however. It's meant to prepare seventy people whom Jesus is sending out, two by two, to scout out the towns along the way. Last week we heard about the seventy. He says he's sending them out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Sending them into a world where strangers and foreigners will not always find welcome.

I can imagine the people hearing all this must have been nervously making mental checklists of what weapons they'd need to carry for self defense and what provisions they'd need to pack for a trip through a world as inhospitable as this. I would have. I would have been well into my list when Jesus says, "Oh,

and another thing. Carry not only no weapons, carry no purse, no bag, no sandals..." He says, "I am sending you into towns as people with nothing to offer, no resources, no wealth, no protection. No markers of status or citizenship. Nothing. You will arrive in these places with only your humanity. And if you are not welcomed, shake the dust from your feet and move on. God's judgment will be upon the place where such a stranger finds no welcome.

This is why I say the parable of the Samaritan's kindness is a migrant story. It's another story set very intentionally along a road, and one that very intentionally includes a foreigner. And it's told on the heels of seventy of Jesus's disciples' having been sent on an empty-handed mission through their world to see where they find welcome and where they do not.

You probably remember the setup to the parable. It's a lawyer who wants to know what he must do. Got that? Not who he must be, but what he must *do* to inherit eternal life. So Jesus sends this lawyer back to the Law. And the Law says you have to love. That's what you have to do. Love God and love your neighbor. That's how one steps into eternal life. By loving.

But then we learn the lawyer's real agenda. He doesn't want to take up a loving way of life. He wants to justify himself. So he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Which is really a way of asking, "Who am I legally obligated to love, in order to get eternal life for myself?"

Now, I want us to pause for a moment. Our Irish friend Pádraig once said he was mostly bored by Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But one word stuck with him. It's the Japanese word *mu*. M-U. It's a one word response to a bad question. There is such a thing as a bad question, friends. The Zen response is *mu*. It means, "Unask the question."

Well, the parable Jesus tells is effectively a *mu*, isn't it? The question was, "Who am I obligated to love?" The lawyer wants to justify his place among a certain category of people. And if love of neighbor is what secures his place, he'll need to know who counts as a neighbor. But the story doesn't tell the lawyer who his neighbor is at all, does it?

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..." That's how the parable begins, right? "A man." The category of the person who is going to need mercy is simply "human." If you let any other category rise to the level of this one — tribe, nation, religion...priest, Levite, Samaritan...American, Mexican, Syrian, Irish... These human inventions may have their place, but compared to the category "human being" they are fleeting and small, and if they get in the way of our mercy, they are nothing less than enemies of Christ.

"Who is my neighbor?" *Mu*. Unask the question. Because the point is not to determine whom you're obligated to love. The point is that it is in the act of mercy, in the act of loving the next human being who needs it, we step into the eternal life Jesus kept telling us about.

Jesus unasked the bad question and told us a better story and expanded our imagination about who is included and just how large our mercy might become. A story that dismantled the categories we make up to justify ourselves and exclude other children of God from the law of love. A story that showed us, yet again, a more excellent way.

When the world asks us terrible questions, like whether a family, a child, a woman, a man who crosses a border without papers deserves to be treated with the dignity of a fellow human being...when the world asks a bad question, Jesus insists that we answer it with a better story. A fuller story. A truer story borne of a moral imagination of biblical proportions.

A story that reminds us, perhaps, that it is in the shelter, not the shadow, of one another that the people truly come alive.

"These are the kind of things we need for the tired spaces of our world," Pádraig O'Tuama once wrote. "This is the way we need to move forward in a world that is so interested in being comforted by the damp blanket of bad stories. We need stories of belonging that move us towards each other, not from each other; ways of being human that open up the possibilities of being alive together; ways of navigating our differences that deepen our curiosity, that deepen our friendship, that deepen our capacity to disagree, that deepen the argument of being alive. This is what we need. This is what will save us. This is the work of peace. This is the work of imagination."