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Turning away refugees violates Christian principles: Bishop Sean Rowe

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One of my favorite Bible verses comes from the first chapter of the Gospel of John: "A light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." I have been thinking about that verse lately as darkness began to fall over our country and light struggled to reassert itself.

The executive order closing our borders to Syrian refugees and suspending refugee resettlement and immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries is a profound betrayal of Christian principles and American ideals. If we, as a nation, are to be that indomitable light the Scripture speaks of, we must resist the efforts to close our border to those who are in desperate need of our help.

The events of last weekend have given me reason for deep unease, but also reason for hope.

The executive order - less an embodiment of policy than an outpouring of fear - is deeply troubling, not least because it is unnecessary. According to a recent study by the Cato Institute - no bastion of liberal thinking - an American's chance of dying due to an act of terrorism committed by a refugee was one in 3.6 billion for the 40-year period ending in 2015. Indeed, since Congress strengthened the vetting of refugees in 1980, there have been no terrorism-related deaths linked to refugees.

In a changing world with so much uncertainty we often find the need to create villains, human villains. Apparently, Muslims will fill that role during this time. This sort of paranoia, and the religious scapegoating that ensues, has precipitated millions of deaths throughout human history, and yet somehow, we are in its grip once again.

What is worse is the play for Christian support by imposing an immigration ban exclusively against predominantly Muslim countries while promising that Christians and other religious minorities from these countries will be given preferential treatment going forward. Faithful Christians should not be goaded.

Just as God in the Hebrew Scriptures commanded ancient Israel to welcome the alien and stranger among them, we are commanded to welcome people who practice different faiths. A refugee ban that specifically targets Muslim people, or that gives Christians special priority in

resettlement simply because they are Christian, is, for Christians, a violation of our tradition and beliefs.

All of the power of the executive branch of our government had been brought to bear on this misbegotten ban. And yet, a light did shine. The light was the unexpected - by me, at any rate - torrent of resistance that flooded into airports across our country last weekend as Americans from all walks of life rose up in support of people who had been unfairly victimized by the poorly conceived and badly executed executive order that left a newborn here and an almost 90-year-old matriarch there in the custody of the Customs and Border Patrol.

This outpouring of generosity motivated by patriotism and principle, and the belated but nonetheless helpful response by at least some of our elected officials, made it clear that our country is not willing to sacrifice its values without a fight. We learned, too, that those Americans who were raised in Christian churches remember the biblical injunction to care for the stranger and the foreigner, and that Jesus commanded that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

By the time federal judges began staying the executive order, the light was shining brighter still. To keep it burning, though, each of us must do our part, whether that is protesting, donating to refugee resettlement organizations and those protecting the civil rights of refugees, or simply by standing up and being counted.

Right now, more than 65 million people across the globe are displaced by war, conflict and persecution - the largest number in recorded history. We have an urgent moral responsibility to receive refugees and asylum seekers who are in dire need. To turn away refugees in need is both un-Christian and un-American.