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Erickson: Staying great: Jesus, the church, and the refugee crisis

This is not the moment to step back in fear, but a moment to step forward in faith and love.

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At a time when the world is facing the greatest refugee crisis in recorded history with more than 65 million people forcibly displaced from their homes President Trump recently announced a new policy that will dramatically reduce the number of refugees admitted to the United States. As an evangelical pastor, I respect the president's authority and am committed to praying for him. But I am very concerned by this policy change, not only for keeping refugee families apart, but also for our own social fabric as a nation.

Throughout the Bible, God commands his people over and over again to welcome, love, and seek justice for the poor, for the widow and the orphan, and for refugees and other foreigners. Words taken from the law-filled book of Leviticus bring this into sharp focus in relation to that last category: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 20:33-34). The call to care for the foreigner — the refugee, the immigrant, the alien — is dramatically linked with God's identity here, God's grace to his people in the exodus from slavery, and a reminder to put faith into practice.

Jesus affirmed this same sort of mandate for His followers in his striking parable about the final judgment, picturing humanity divided into sheep and goats based on how their faith became active in their lives with others. The story ends with a summary statement: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). For people of faith, particularly Christians, care for those in need, particularly refugees, is not something we can ignore.

I respect the fact that President Trump wants to protect the American people, which is part of his important role. I pray for him and others with authority to make important and far-reaching decisions, even as Scripture teaches us (1 Timothy 2:2; Matthew 5:44). However, I do not believe that we must sacrifice compassion for security in our policies related to immigration.

The United States has some of the most thorough screening processes for refugees in the entire world. This rigorous process involves the Department of Homeland Security, many other U.S. agencies and international agencies, taking potential refugees through medical, biometric, and biographical security assessments. As a result of this thorough screening, the Cato Institute's 2016 policy analysis of terrorism and immigration concluded that "From 1975 through 2015, the chance of an American being murdered by a foreign-born terrorist was 1 in 3,609,709 a year." President Trump's proposed approach to immigration will not truly help our security.

Instead the president's approach would actually weaken us as a nation. We are a country built on welcoming the foreigner, as the powerful words emblazoned at the sight of the Statue of Liberty speak:

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-tossed, to me:

I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Our national fabric derives strength from the gracious hospitality and new beginnings that many have found here. President Trump's approach threatens this vibrant strength by manipulating security fears through xenophobia. We all believe our nation is built of stronger stuff.

Regardless of policy decisions, Christians must continue to live out their faith by standing with and caring for the refugee and the immigrant. It is our high privilege as followers of Jesus to live a costly faith like this. It is a costly faith built on the love of God revealed in Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God with us, not just at Christmas but all through our lives. This is not the moment to step back in fear, but a moment to step forward in faith and love. The church continues to stand with refugees, because the faith-inspired spirit of welcome and love are what has made America great in the first place.