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## The Refugee Down the Pew

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## The Refugee Down the Pew

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### Disciplines

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### Comments

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## THE REFUGEE DOWN THE PEW

Sitting down the pew from her, you wouldn't be able to tell. She's got a small scar on her cheek from a fight with a boy in camp. She has another on her knee, the result of a fall as she fled a ghost called *phīn* the language of that time and place, also in camp. These are markers you don't see.

Sitting down the pew from her, you wouldn't be able to tell, unless you had a little race-in-America savvy, in which case it wouldn't take much to guess. She's Southeast Asian in a 99 percent white, 90 percent ethnic Dutch congregation. To bet that she's adopted or a mission project would be cynical, perhaps, but also right.

Today, she probably wouldn't fight you for calling her a mission project; she might just flip you off like she once flipped off a whole basketball crowd from the free throw line for calling her a racial slur. She doesn't need you to comment on something you know nothing about. She doesn't need you to categorize her.

She's a refugee, sure. She's also one who found refuge. I can't help but think that's the way this is supposed to work.

But it's not as if it was ever easy. In 1979, America still had a Vietnam hangover. The "yellow man" was known for his cruelty in war and his willingness to eat anything, a typical formula applied to an enemy: their uncouth behavior showed their savagery.

For at least one of the sponsoring families, that hangover ran beyond Vietnam to Korea. "They were yellow," this woman told me of her first impressions of the Laotian refugees in flip-flops who spilled off the plane. "My uncle had been killed by men who were yellow in Korea. I didn't like them."

Still, when some church friends in a rural Minnesota town of a thousand people saw an article in a local newspaper requesting church communities to sponsor immigrants from Southeast Asia, they recognized it was something they could do. Though they had growing families of their own to think about and though they may have considered the threat this venture would be to those families, they also saw it as a calling and an opportunity.

They made sure the families had plenty of support. The sponsoring group swelled to eight families, including a bachelor. They would pass the hat and rent a place for these refugees to live, gather second-hand coats for them to survive the winter, connect them with English-language learning opportunities, find them jobs.

They had little idea what the families that got off the plane—a husband and wife and two kids, and a mother and grandmother and three kids—were seeking refuge from besides communism. They had no idea, for instance, that American planes had so completely sown the eastern edge of Laos with "[bombies](#)" that children would still be getting maimed by them when [President Barack Obama visited](#) the country more than forty years later.

The woman's family fled communism, yes, but it was more complicated than that, tied up in family drama probably much like your own family, except complicated by ideology and international politics that spawned war. The sponsors had no idea about the domestic tangle that would explain why the woman down the pew was missing her father. That her mother had left him because he was abusive. That the catalyst that drove the mother to cross the Mekong river at night with two children under five was a letter from that man commanding her to join him in reeducation camp. Rather than join him there, under the joint forces of communist control and domestic abuse, the woman's mother

had fled the country and spent two years in a refugee camp waiting for sponsorship. That's where the woman down the pew got the scars, in a Thai refugee camp.

The woman down the pew came into an America with plenty of anti-immigrant sentiment, even for a small town in the Midwest largely untouched by Vietnam. Crossing town on her bike, she never knew when crowds of teenagers would erupt in anger against her.

"Bug eater!"

"Is that all you do, ride your bikes, you f—ing Asians!"

But the church families circled the wagons. Out of their joint stability they made a space. There were jobs and houses. The church took offerings and paid the tuition for the local Christian school.

Oh, there were mistakes. There was invasion of that most sacred of American ideals: family privacy. Every Sunday after church the white people showed up, and every Sunday the mother of the woman down the pew made coffee and sticky rice. When the coffee was too dark, a man who still carried his own Dutch accent would quietly add tap water to it. When the wicker basket of sticky rice was passed around, white hands and yellow hands pried out handfuls and took turns dipping it in the dark soy sauce. Sure, over the years there was meddling, paternalism, favoritism. The Christian schooling may have been like a trick for a Buddhist family who spoke almost no English.

But it was refuge. There were children, games. There was celebration, Christmas presents, and always food. Tall white men folded down by low Asian tables mopping their heads, sweaty from the spice. The mother of the woman down the pew learned what not to serve—blood, embryonic eggs—and at other times to hide what it was that was being cooked, the generic "beef" in place of the specific "tongue" with bitter sauce made from bile, a delicacy.

The woman down the pew has lost much of what she came with at age six, but she holds on tightly to other things. Like food. Her children eat snails, tongue, fish eyes, all vegetables—though she's careful about the smells, still offensive to American noses. She makes her family carefully brush their teeth after eating certain Lao meals, to brush away the *bdak*, the fish sauce so signature but also so enduring.

And of course there was no guarantee that she would end up as the woman down the pew, that coffee and sticky rice after church would continue for thirty-seven years. That was not the point. The first Lao family the church group sponsored got on their feet and found an immigrant community in a city where they felt more at home.

The point was refuge—refuge for refugees. Makes sense.

Among the major metaphors for the way the church understands itself, the church as "pilgrim community" is one I'm not big on. At least where I live, the idea that the church is a ragtag group, beleaguered and afflicted by the world as it journeys its way toward its true heavenly home, is simply disingenuous. The histrionics to make it one—the idea that liberal agendas and the media are oppressing these stable communities often buffered by a stable of full-size SUVs on Sunday mornings—would be comical if it weren't such a lie.

No, it's easier for the churches in my area to live out another metaphor, that of "kingdom citizens": the kingdom is already come in Christ, this metaphor says, and living out that truth in our lives means that kingdom continues to come. Unfortunately, "kingdom citizens" is about the easiest metaphor for America to co-opt there is. "The kingdom is come," it's easy enough to think, "and I can see it has in the laws that protect my private life of consumer privileges/ religious freedoms."

I'm not saying understanding the church as refuge is a better metaphor than these two, especially if by refuge we mean a place to hide, to hunker down and await the Lord's return. But when I think of

the definition of church, I think of those families creating a space for both the woman down the pew and the bachelor; I think of white and yellow hands dipping from the same bowl of soy sauce, of folded-down men wiping sweat from their brows.

This morning, between the woman down the pew and me sit our two sons, who have almost nothing to take refuge from, and that's a blessing. After we read the Scripture passage for the sermon, I give them pens and they draw. Even this, the space the sermon provides for bulletin art apart from the cacophony of media, is a kind of refuge, I suppose.

But that very stability is also a type of calling. Today, our country attempts to hallow terms like *homeland* and *security*, even as we find them more and more elusive. That's the way with idols. We're faced with a new type of refugee with mysterious global and religious forces at work outside and inside them. And we're faced with what to do. Weekly, I read a bulletin announcement about refugees that calls us as Christians to a very different response.

To be a refuge.

For Christians with any kind of stability to do so, the call to provide refuge is an age-old call. "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ," says the rule of St. Benedict, "for he himself will say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*"

It's not easy. It wasn't for Benedict, it wasn't for a group of families at First Christian Reformed Church of Edgerton in 1979, and it won't be today. To give us courage to open our arms, we need to remember all the stories of all the women down the pew, all the ways the church has been refuge to give us the power to be a refuge once again.