

“Strangers”

TEN Vital Verses #10

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline

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Deuteronomy 10:19

Today I am going to tell you three stories from different times in our country’s history. The words that I am going to share are not mine. The stories that I am telling are not mine. I tell these stories to honor the individuals and to celebrate their humanity even as others did not. These stories are from newspapers, magazines and books, and I have edited them for length and in some cases due to the graphic details of the stories. If you would like the full stories, please feel free to reach out to me and I will provide them for you.

Deuteronomy 10:19 - “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

The first story is of Katsumi Neeno. It was written by Anna Marie Lux in the August 1, 2015 edition of the Gazette Xtra out of Janesville, WI.

http://www.gazettextra.com/20150801/behind_barbed_wire_japanese_american_recalls_internment

A quote from Gen. John DeWitt, U.S. Army's Western Defense Command, February 1942

The Japanese race is an enemy race. While many second- and third-generation Japanese born on U.S. soil, possessed of U.S. citizenship, have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted ... It therefore follows that along the vital Pacific Coast more than 112,000 potential enemies of Japanese extraction are at large today ... The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken.”

All these years later, Katsumi Neeno chuckles as he reads Gen. John DeWitt's explanation for recommending that 112,000 Japanese Americans be sent to internment camps during World War II.

“It's so stupid,” the 89-year-old Neeno said.

The retired Janesville pediatrician was a teenager when the government forced him and his family from their California home into a desert camp in Arizona.

More than seven decades later, Neeno does not resent his country for the violation of his civil liberties.

“But remember, you are talking to a guy who was 17 years old when it happened,” Neeno said. “If you asked my sister, who is far more sensitive than I, you would get a different answer.”

He tells his story as a reminder that laws alone cannot protect liberty when people act out of racial hatred and fear.

Neeno, his father, mother, sister and brother each was allowed to pack one suitcase before being forced to abandon their home.

Tagged with numbers around their necks, they boarded a bus for the long, hot ride to the middle of the desert south of Parker, Arizona.

“My parents went with the tide,” Neeno said. “That's the Japanese way. They had respect for authority. At no time ever in their lives did they criticize the U.S. government for anything.”

At Poston Relocation Center I, the Neeno family and 10,000 other Japanese Americans lived in barren barracks, which were blistering in summer and freezing in winter. Military police with machine guns stood around the perimeter where barbed wire replaced the sage brush and mesquite.

“An internment camp with machine gun towers?” Neeno asked. “No, it was a prison camp.”

Neeno will never forget the camp.

His family lived in a 16-by-20-foot room with straw for mattresses. Adults in the camp set up makeshift classes, and Neeno continued his high school studies.

The only way people could get out of the camp was if someone inland sponsored them. Neeno's brother eventually found a sponsor in Illinois. Later, his brother sponsored young Neeno, who washed pots and pans for a while in Chicago.

The camps closed in 1945, when people who lost everything each got \$25 and a one-way ticket to any U.S. city.

The Neeno children took care of their parents, but many camp residents had nowhere to go and often faced violent prejudice.

In 1946, Neeno joined the Army. Eventually, he was sent to Japan as an interpreter.

During his stay, he met his grandmother, aunts and cousins for the first time in a badly bombed Tokyo.

“They showed no enmity at all toward me,” Neeno remembers. “They realized I did not pull the trigger.”

Neeno studied pre-med at UW-Madison and entered medical school in Philadelphia. He came to Janesville to practice medicine in 1957, when the city had few minorities. But his race never seemed to matter to his patients.

“They put their children's lives in my hands,” he said. “No one ever asked my nationality. I didn't ask my patients what they were, either.”

Still, he knows he lost his freedom for a time simply because of his ancestry.

“If you scratch the surface, there's an Archie Bunker in all of us,” he said. “I think it is human nature.”

(You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt)

This second story is of Anna Maria Nobles. The story appears in the 1986 book *Sanctuary: the New Underground Railroad*, written by Renny Golden and Michael McConnell

My name is Anna Toledo De Cruz. My husband's name is Federico and I have a son five months old. I left Guatemala because of the situation in my country and because I was a member of the Catholic Church. The church founded the Credit and Savings Cooperative, where I worked. After I worked at the Cooperative about two years, the government tried to kidnap me. That day I decided to leave the country. There are many reasons for my persecution. Almost every Catholic is accused of being a communist, just because we practice what the Bible says – to love one another. I resigned my job and was given severance pay. I used the severance pay to buy what I needed to leave the country. I didn't come to the United States to make money or for any other ambition. I know that I am not a US citizen and that I am taking food from

you. I have to thank you. You don't know what it's like to suffer as we have, and yet you still help us.

During the time I was fleeing, I met my husband. I became pregnant and delivered my child during my flight from Guatemala. It was late at night when we slipped through a hole in the barbed wire. I carried my baby on my back, Guatemalan style. Suddenly a bright light was shining in my eyes and two INS agents grabbed my arms. I insisted I was Mexican; the only way I felt I could save my life. 'Where are you from?' they asked me. I said 'I'm not going to respond and I'm not going to sign deportation papers'. They were so mad that I knew my rights. So they started to threaten me by taking my child away. I told them not to do that, because I was breast-feeding him. The taller of the two agents leaned over me and said 'those rights are not for women. Here in the United States women have no rights' I shot back, 'that's not true.' They took me to Nogales, Mexico, where a Mexican judge determined that I was Guatemalan. They were ready to leave me in Mexico to be deported to Guatemala. At that point I was desperate and wasn't sure of the correct thing to do. I resolved inside myself to be strong and I told them the truth.

They took me back to Arizona to fill out some documents. They told me at 4pm that they were going to send me to a jail or a church. They didn't say exactly where. I had been detained for 32 hours in Nogales with nothing to eat and under stress and psychological torture. They locked me in the same small room. The door opened and a man wearing a green uniform came in. He looked Central American. He came through the door shouting profanity at me. I just watched him because the screams were so loud. They scared me and my son, just two months old. There were moments when I thought he was going to torture me. He asked me where I was from. I didn't respond to anything because I knew any information would endanger my family back home. Finally I told him 'I already have a lawyer, so that's why I don't have to respond to you'. Finally, the immigration agents took me out of the room. They became friendlier after they thought I had a lawyer. They took pictures of me, but when they filed them, one was missing. Then in Guatemala it appeared on television; the announcer gave my name and said that I was a university student who had traveled to Cuba. I was accused of being a guerrilla and a reward was offered for turning me in. I was put in prison for 3 days. On the following Friday an official arrived and told me I could go free. It was strange. Suddenly they let me go.

(You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt)

The third and final story appears on the website for the magazine *The Atlantic* and is written by J. Weston Phippen from October 15, 2015

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/unaccompanied-minors-immigrants/410404/>

Guillermo's family home sat on a hill in San Salvador.

One night, Guillermo, then 15, walked outside with friends as it rained. A Barrio 18 gangster fired from the window. Guillermo ducked behind a parked truck. Guillermo was fine, but a young father who had stepped outside to make a call was shot in the stomach. He died the next day.

Guillermo's mother, Lorena, had already left for the United States two years before.

When the economy turned, she'd lost her job. So had Guillermo's father.

This meant Guillermo's father was alone to protect his son from the gangs.

“You have to join,” Guillermo remembers the gang members saying. “And if you don’t, we will kill you, or we will kill your two brothers.”

On July 1, his mother’s birthday, Guillermo stared at the door of his father’s home while his twin brothers, both 8 at the time, sat in front of the TV. “I knew my little brothers were looking at me,” Guillermo said, “and I didn’t want to look back because I knew if I looked back, I might regret it, and I might not want to leave.”

The migrants rode through the jungles, through hills, mountains, valleys, and more hills. They lived bus to bus, with different coyotes (smugglers) handing them off each time. It takes about 25 hours to cross Mexico in a straight drive, and they’d done it in five days. When they reached the Rio Grande’s edge, they hunkered down in scrub and brush. When they had crossed they knelt behind a drainage canal, praying together.

“Go to the bridge and find the first policeman you can and turn yourselves in,” the coyote told them just before he swam back to Mexico.

Guillermo remembers agents took him first to a small Border Patrol station, then transferred him to a place commonly called a hielera, or “icebox,” because of how cold agents keep the cells.

Guillermo remembers a concrete floor in the hielera and so many kids crammed into the cell that they slept in shifts. They shared one toilet, and the water that agents provided tasted as if it was mixed with salt. “I didn’t drink water for three or four days,” Guillermo claimed.

Next, they stayed at a warehouse with rows of chain-link cages like indoor dog kennels. Children here slept on pads with blankets seemingly made of tinfoil, beneath the omnipresent glow of fluorescent lights. The guards taught the kids American football. Guillermo said some placed bets on kids and made them race each other for microwavable burritos.

One day in the cages with the other children, a guard called his name. The children whooped and yelled. “Is it me?” Guillermo asked. It meant he was leaving.

In Virginia with his mother, Guillermo enrolled in high school and earned straight As. He joined the soccer team. He had a girlfriend. All the while, his immigration court hearing hung above his head, threatening to deport him to a country where he was certain he’d be killed.

Inside the brick courthouse, mothers in fast-food uniforms or dresses, fathers in construction clothes or buttoned shirts, lined the seats, which looked like church pews. Guillermo’s lawyer sat in the middle of the three rows. Guillermo sat a row behind with his mother, who pulled nervously at her arm.

Then they called Guillermo’s name.

The judge held three pages of the “Agreed Custody Order.” The judge asked Lorena to raise her right hand.

“Is this all true and correct?” the judge asked.

“Yes,” Lorena said.

The judge flipped through the pages. Stapled to the back was a signature from Guillermo’s father. In order to ensure Guillermo’s safety, Guillermo’s father, who’d taken out a \$7,500 loan to pay for his journey to America, now had to declare that he’d failed to protect his son—and legally disown him.

The judge mumbled something about a similar case in another district. The judge flipped through the papers again. He looked at the boy who stood before him.

“I grant the order,” the judge said.
(You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt)