

(a sermon by Ashley Makar)

The Living Water We Share

A few summers ago, a Sudanese woman named Azhar invited me to a 4th-of-July picnic with her family and friends. They were fasting for Ramadan. The sun would set at 8:40, just enough time to do iftar before the fireworks would start. We gathered on a hill in New Haven near a community garden. I'd brought my new dog Nelson, a terrier mix rescue from Houston. He did great with the kids. But the sounds of the fireworks startled him. He tried to dart away, but he was on a leash. He clung as close to me as possible, shaking and whimpering. A Sudanese girl named Aya placed her hand on his shaggy barrel chest, to soothe his heart, and started singing. I couldn't make out the words, and I asked, "What are you singing to him?"

"O, just a song I'm making up," she said. "It goes 'Nelson, don't be afraid of the fireworks.'"

Azhar laughed. "She understands how scared he is," she said. "When we first heard fireworks, we thought they were bombs."

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I first met Aya, and Azhar's daughter Lameese, in the IRIS summer program in 2015. Lameese was a new arrival at the time, and Aya was showing her the ropes: how to decorate your notebook with motion stickers, how to be among the first in line at snack time.

I got the delightful assignment of driving Lameese and Aya on a field trip to the Mill River. On the way back, Aya was chattering away—"Did you see the swan? Did you row the boat? Wonder what we'll have for lunch?"

Her new friend Lameese didn't speak much English at the time.

But when Aya started talking dessert—"Wonder what we'll have—cookies or ice cream..." Lameese chimed in: "I love you, ice cream!"

"I love you, too, ice cream!" I yelled from the driver's seat.

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One of the things I love about working with refugees and immigrants is hearing the beautiful ways they speak English as they're learning—turns of phrase that are often more poignant than the standard ways of saying things. That you in "I love you, ice cream," makes all the difference—especially to me, the daughter of an Egyptian-American who made a new home in Alabama.

My dad's English was good, but his idioms were just a little off: "It takes two to dance in the tango," he would say. "Close the lights. My foot is sleeping."

My dad must have overheard my Alabama grandmother pray "Bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies" before a meal. My dad's way of saying grace went like this: "Bless this food to the nursery of our bodies."

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There's a tree nursery near the border between north and South Sudan, a project to regenerate the forestland and provide for people displaced by war. Refugee women plant and tend the seedlings. A 2km pipe, built by the U.N., brings White Nile water to the roots. The nursery is growing, thousands of saplings strong.

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In our first reading for today, we have Ezekiel's vision of restoration: a river and trees are rehabilitating the people and the land they inhabit: *the fruit shall be for food, and the leaves for healing.*

Rivers and trees connect us in ways that are more deep and vast than we can fathom. The roots of different tree species connect underground; some graft into one another. The root networks go on for acres, circulating water and nutrients, sharing resources, helping everything in the ecosystem thrive.

Rivers and trees connect us with strangers in ways we need to live: the leaves we need to breathe, the rivers that bring us living water. Indigenous people—from the Nuba Mountains of Sudan to the Quinnipiac River, have a lot to teach us about living in sacred relationship with one another and with the places we inhabit.

The trees and rivers that give us life have no borders. The more we turn away from criminalizing immigrants, the more we can flourish together. The more we turn towards nurturing and sharing resources, the better we can tend to the nursery of every body.

This 4th of July I'm celebrating *interdependence*, the care of community I receive with refugees who keep inviting me into kinship with them. They are my greatest teachers in the liberation work we need to do to build the beloved community.

It starts with planting seeds. In our gospel reading today, we see how generative and tremendous the smallest of all seeds can become: Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that, when planted, grows "into the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

Today, I'll elaborate on this my favorite parable, in light of what I keep learning from the refugees in my life: a kind of shared belonging that has the power to transform tribalism and the color lines that perpetuate white supremacy and the inequities that separate us.

We can all say, as Gladys says in the powerful poem she shared today, "I am a human you share this world with." So often we forget and act as if categories like refugee, asylum seeker, undocumented immigrant, U.S. citizen, defined people. Even we who want refugees and immigrants to come to the U.S. let categories limit our relationships with them. In faith communities, we often talk about welcoming the stranger. But I'd like to flip the script a bit: I'm here to tell you about all the ways refugee and immigrant strangers have welcomed me into kinship with them. This is such a gift to me, since I've lost most of my biological family to sickness and death. I've come to call New Haven home because of the refugees and immigrants

who keep inviting me into their lives. *We are no longer strangers and aliens. We are citizens with the saints.*

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Back in November, Rev. Laura preached here about God's kinship, in light of Father Greg Boyle's gang intervention work with kids whose lives have been shaped by violence. His work is not so much about serving these kids, but about practicing radical kinship with them. A big part of the work, to use Fr. Boyle's words, is "standing in awe of what people carry." This act of pausing to stand in awe can plant a mustard seed of kinship in our hearts. It can jump start an awareness of our shared belonging.

As Laura preached, "Whatever brokenness we might carry ourselves or for one another, we belong to one another, and God is in the midst."

For me, the mustard seed parable grows, in light of our brokenness.

The kinship of God is like a community garden in a food desert.

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A few years ago, Azhar started growing food in the IRIS community garden. She'd learned how to plant seeds from her dad in Sudan.

He owned a small grocery store on a street corner, and one day he caught someone trying to rob the shop. At the time, Azhar was 8 years old, and she was watching and waiting to see what he was going to do with this young man who'd tried to steal from him. To her surprise, her dad made him a sandwich. He asked Azhar to bring the man some water and tea. This is radical kinship: the bread we break, the living water we share.

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On a walk in East Rock Park, Azhar told me how reading helps her remember her dad. His name was Kumi. He worked so hard to put her through primary and secondary school. In Sudan, public education is not a right. Azhar's brothers had to work to earn money for their school fees. But her dad paid her tuition, so she could focus on her education.

While Azhar, her husband, and their daughter were living as refugees in Egypt, her dad got sick. If she went back to Sudan to see him, she could lose her chance for resettlement to the U.S. with her young family. Soon after they finally got their visas, her dad passed away. She couldn't go home for the funeral.

He died of *fashil kilwy*" she told me. "I don't know the word in English."

I barely know Arabic, but I've spent enough time in hospitals with my Egyptian family members to know that phrase. Even broken language is a vein.

"Kidney failure," I said. "My dad, too."

"I'm so sorry," she said. And then we told one another about our dads.

How much they encouraged us to study. How tired the dialysis made them. How they would try to sneak & cheat on their dietary restrictions.

Part of my heart is hollow since my dad died, and it's that hollow part that wells up with love, when refugees invite me into kinship with them, knowing how much they've lost to be here.

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In a recent celebration for World Refugee Day, Azhar told the story of “Kumi’s Dream,” a new project she started in honor and memory of her dad. “When he was alive,” she said, “my dad helped people in our city of Khartoum, Sudan, people who came from the village because of the war, or were unemployed. He offered them jobs, a place to stay, something to eat.”

One night in March, Azhar had a dream of her dad. “In my culture,” she told us, “when you see someone who has died in a dream, it means to help people who need food.”

She got inspired: What if Sanctuary Kitchen, the small catering company that employs refugee chefs like her, were to feed people who are homeless and hungry in New Haven?

It's a fantastic, outlandish idea. Way out of the box, just like the kinship of God.

Sanctuary Kitchen, like many small businesses, is struggling to recover from the pandemic. Azhar didn't know if her idea would fly with her co-workers and their manager. But she had to try.

She went in to work and got up the courage to talk to the Sanctuary Kitchen team about her idea for a project inspired by a dream and asked if they'd be willing to help. “They said yes!” and “They were so excited,” she said.

“And so we created Kumi’s Dream.”

Every two weeks, they make meals for New Haven's Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen. Chefs, friends, and families pitch in for groceries. They cook at Sanctuary Kitchen—mostly Sudanese, Syrian, and Afghani food: eggplant borani, lamb stew, lavash bread with za'atar. Azhar's favorite part is delivering the food to the volunteers and guests at the soup kitchen.

Kumi's Dream started out as a mustard seed Azhar planted, and now we have its life-giving branches.

After the world refugee day celebration, I texted Azhar to say, “Kumi’s Dream is beautiful. You're honoring your dad, and his spirit shines in everything you do. It is such a blessing to meet him through you.”

She texted back with a triple heart emoji and wrote back, “We're glad you are part of us.”

Azhar has a gift for practicing the kinship of God on earth as it is in heaven. It reminds me of my favorite lines from a Li-Young Lee poem:

When the wind asks,

Have you prayed?

I know it's only me...

or my father through me, asking,

Have you found your refuge yet?

Asking, Are you happy?

...

[What's left]

is trimmed and leavened to make the bread

the living and the dead share.