



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

August 22, 2021 Message on Afghanistan Carter J Carter

Good morning.

I'm honored to be with you, and grateful for the grace and space you have offered me and my family today. My daughter Lily has never been to church before, and while we have tried to explain to her that she is not supposed to yell, she is, like her father, often heedless.

I'm here to tell you the story of my family. I do not trust myself to do so without crying, for reasons that shall become apparent. I beg your indulgence.

My mother's father was a man named Faiz Khairzada. He led an extraordinary life. He was born in Kabul to a prosperous family; going back many generations, his family had been scribes for Afghan royal courts. Faiz was a man of the world who was surpassingly devoted to his country. After being educated in the West, he returned to Afghanistan to be of service to his people. He was the government minister in charge of arts and culture. He built theaters and libraries, made films, conserved priceless works of art and ancient artifacts. He brought Duke Ellington to Kabul, who was rather puzzled when everyone stopped to pray in the middle of his set. Faiz's wife Kamran was his equal, to say the least, and he treated my aunt Nelopher just the same as my uncle Waleed. Nelopher means lily in Dari; my daughter is named for her.

Afghanistan has always been a strategic prize for bigger powers, and in 1978 the Soviets backed an ill-fated coup d'état. Ersatz revolutionaries killed the king, and began to round up those who served him. Kamran was a Turkish diplomat, she fled the revolution with the children; Faiz stayed behind so as not to raise suspicions. For the better part of a year, Faiz's family did not know if he was dead or alive. He remained trapped in Afghanistan, beaten, interrogated, and threatened with torture.

Faiz was, luckily, a man of the world; he had friends beyond the Durand line. After months of terror, he made good his escape. Disguising himself as a peasant, he was secreted in the trunk of a car deep into the tribal areas, through which he fled overland and into Pakistan. He was met by friends in Peshawar, who conveyed him to Germany to reunite with his family. Then, onward, to America, and political asylum.

In the United States, friends and colleagues opened their homes, their wallets, and their Rolodexes. They did everything they could to keep Faiz and his family safe, to make sure they had what they needed. Even with this largesse, it was difficult; Faiz went from riding in limousines to driving them.

This is the part of the story that brings me here to you today. I have watched the news, like all of you, with a sense of horror, and dread, and profound helplessness. It has broken my heart. I have not known what to do, but I have been seized by a sense that I must find some way to do something.

Afghans are an extraordinarily hospitable, generous people. Like many who make their homes in unsparing conditions, their generosity has been a part of their survival. Faiz's friends who came to the rescue were Americans, but the welcome they offered him was decidedly Afghan in spirit. They gave of themselves, sheltered and sustained my family.

Without the grace of people like this, I would never have known my grandfather, my aunt and uncle. Lily would have a different name.

I do not come to you today with a specific request; I would not know what to ask, not yet. What I do know is that the airport is open, and our government has been called to its moral duty to rescue those Afghans who wish to flee the mess we have made of their country. The Taliban are profoundly traumatized, mostly illiterate boys with guns. When last they took Afghanistan, they set about to destroy all the art and books my grandfather devoted his life to protecting. A country in their hands can only fall to brutality and madness. It will be a catastrophe; it already is.

This week, I have been thinking of the story of the Danish Jews in World War II. Denmark's early surrender to the Nazis bought concessions, but by the autumn of 1943 these concessions had run out. The Danish Jews were to be rounded up, packed into trains and sent to their deaths. So that autumn, Christian Danes came to the aid of their Jewish fellows. They walked the streets, looking for people wearing yellow Stars of David. They pressed keys to apartments and farmhouses into their hands. They raised an armada of fishing boats, dinghies, sailboats, and canoes, and secreted thousands across the Baltic Sea under cover of night. They came to the rescue.

I believe that we are called, by duty or by God or both, to come to the rescue of my people—not with tanks and missiles and naïve geopolitics, but with airplane tickets and spare bedrooms and hot meals and our unrelenting, screaming demands for justice and mercy. We may be part of their rescue through our hospitality and our grace. We may be part of their rescue by heeding Hebrews 13:2—*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* Our welcome may be a rescue.

I know Ashfield can do this because it has done it for me and my family. We started looking at homes here in summer of 2019. We were reluctant, frankly, before we came to visit—it was much too far, and we didn't know anyone, and I was nervous to be one of just a handful of people of color in a white community. Nonetheless, we wanted a farm, and there were farms here, so we came to see.

Driving up Route 116 from down valley, we wound our way into the center of town, and on our right we passed a church. Hanging from its wall was a banner that read "Immigrants and Refugees Welcome Here." I was surprised to see such a thing, I confess. It made me feel safer here; it made me feel that a place like this could be home. We went to see the old Lesure farm, with its beautiful views of bony hayfields held in a farming trust that meant we could essentially never sell it. We would have to be here forever, we knew, and farm it for real; we made an offer that week.

Ashfield has made itself a home to us, one wave and bundt cake and sympathetic ear at a time. In our hours of need—which, as Judy can attest, have been rather numerous—Ashfield has been here for us. We have been grateful, and eager to repay the favor as we are able. We are blessed that this has become our home.

I am a social worker; not an expert in Afghanistan, nor in politics, nor in refugee resettlement. I do not know what will come next. My hope, indeed my plea, is that as a community we should begin to prepare ourselves for what may come. If our help is needed, we should be ready to offer it. Had my grandfather's American friends not made themselves ready to help him, and his children, I would never have known him at all.

Thank you—for this morning, for everything Ashfield has given to me, and for everything it may yet give to my people.