

On doors and shores and sides of roads

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I stared at the headline for a while in mute silence: “[Austrian police say up to 50 migrants’ bodies found in truck.](#)” It’s the kind of headline that you read and think, “Whatever awful realities will unfold underneath those words, they surely shouldn’t be nicely filed there on the side bar of a website, right underneath news of Celine Dion returning to perform in Las Vegas or Apple’s latest “media event” or the latest round of lies promises being served up by politicians on the election trail today. They shouldn’t be nicely filed anywhere.

But there they are. And the story is every bit as awful as the headline portends. Worse, actually. In the day since I first saw the headline, [the number of dead has risen to 71](#). And there have been arrests made—human smugglers who apparently cared so little about their “cargo” that they allowed them to suffocate, agonizingly, in the back of a truck on the side of an Austrian road. Children, women, men, whose last memory on this earth will be of gasping for air and pounding on the side of a truck box. Of nobody hearing, nobody listening, nobody caring.

More headlines today: “[Up to 200 feared drowned off coast of Libya.](#)” More desperate people fleeing from war, more children, women, men for whom, apparently, the prospect of a long, arduous journey over treacherous seas, and the likelihood of more closed doors should they ever reach land was more palatable than the lives they were fleeing in Syria. Or Iraq. Or Libya. Or some other chunk of land ravaged by war and poverty, some other place where the thought of staying is so awful that even boats and trucks piloted by the smugglers seems preferable. How awful must a situation be to contemplate such things? How bleak must a future seem to put a child on a boat? In a truck?

The refugee crisis worsens by the day. Europe doesn’t know what to do. Canada, where I live, mostly sits idly by, choosing its words carefully, cloaking inactivity in the vagaries of “matters of security” and unmet promises to resettle comparatively paltry numbers of refugees in our nation by 2014 ... or 2015 ... or 2017. And there are times when the response is at least partly understandable—at least for Europe.

How do they accommodate so many refugees? How do nations like Greece, Macedonia, and Italy deal with the daily arrival of people—so *many* people!—with nothing, relying simply on the mercy of strangers? What do they do when their own economies are already lying in ruins? How can they care for tens and hundreds of thousands of hungry desperate people, when they already have so many problems of their own?

And beyond these questions loom larger, seemingly intractable ones. What can be done in and for the places these people are fleeing so that the boats and trucks of human smugglers no longer seem preferable to staying? But that's kind of like saying, "How can we make wars stop?" Or, "How can we stop bad people from being bad?" It's so easy to look at the areas these people are coming from and feel nothing but despair and weary resignation.

I am not a politician or a policy maker. I am not the head of an NGO or a refugee worker or an expert on much of anything. These problems seem impossibly huge to me. And it's easy—so easy—to read the headlines and fear for the future. It's easy to see the backlash coming against all these refugees showing up at the doors of the relatively rich, this "plague of feral humans" as one British writer incredibly described them recently. It's easy to imagine a future of political instability, racism, religious intolerance, and more war. It's easy to imagine the need stretching far beyond the reach of our (often meager) reserves of compassion and good will.

As I said, I'm not an expert on politics. But I do read and tell stories for a living because I am convinced that good stories are our best teachers. And one of the best and most difficult stories that I often read was [told by Jesus](#). There was a man lying on the side of a road, broken and bleeding, desperate for help. Jesus doesn't tell us what sort of man he was—maybe he was a shady character, maybe he had committed a crime, maybe he was one of those "feral humans" that's always causing problems for the "civilized" folks. Maybe he was a refugee. We don't know. All we know is that he was lying on the side of the road. And that a couple of religious people passed right on by. And that it was, in the end, a *Samaritan* of all people—a dirty half-breed, an idolatrous piece of trash, according to many good religious types—who bandaged his wounds, found him somewhere to stay, and paid the bill.

*But Jesus, we protest, that's one guy! What if there were hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of people lying in the ditch? We don't have the infrastructure. ... We*

*don't know how they would fit in. ... They're so different from us. ... We can't do it, we can't be responsible for them. ... They need their own countries to deal with them. ... Who's going to pay the bill?*

And what would Jesus say? I don't know, exactly. Jesus can be unpredictable, hard to figure out at times. But I'm willing to bet that whatever his response sounded like, words like *neighbor* and *mercy* would feature prominently. And probably something to the effect of "go and do likewise."

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