

“Who Is My Neighbor?”

Matthew 25:34-35, Luke 7:36-50, Hebrews 13:2

First Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 25:34-35

³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...

Luke 7:36-50

⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “Speak.” ⁴¹“A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” ⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” ⁴⁸Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Hebrews 13:2

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Sermon

Each year as Advent nears I’m reminded of Las Posadas – a celebration that is very popular in the church in Central and Latin America. Las Posadas is a nine-night reenactment of the story of Joseph seeking shelter for his young wife, Mary, who is tired from travel and about to deliver a baby. Church members assume the identities of Mary, Joseph, and the innkeepers. The holy couple processes through the streets looking for shelter... and at every stop the same thing happens: Joseph approaches the inn... knocks on the door... and says in a loud voice, “In the name of God, we ask those who dwell here to give to some travelers lodging this evening.”

Then, from inside, a chorus of voices responds: “This is not an inn; move on... I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel.” With each successive request, the innkeepers grow angrier and more threatening. With each stop the night grows colder... and Mary and Joseph grow more exhausted. Eight days they reenact this same demoralizing scene until finally, on the ninth day... on Christmas Eve... Joseph’s plea for posada... his cry for shelter... moves the heart of an innkeeper who offers the young couple all he has left – a stable. As we know, later that night this humble place becomes the birthplace of Messiah. And in an outpouring of joy, those who gather this on Christmas Eve night celebrate the hospitality of this innkeeper with food and drink and singing and dancing... because he gave “posada” to Mary and Joseph and the child. Las Posadas is a ritual of searching and rejection and welcome - and it is an annual reminder the Biblical practice of hospitality... the grace of offering welcome to a stranger who is like them in so many ways... and who, like Mary, may be bearing gifts unknown.¹

The need for shelter... for posada... it is a fundamental human need. Whether you’re traveling to Nazareth for a census... fleeing civil war in Syria or Somalia... or your car breaks down on the interstate – the need for shelter is a basic human need. However, just as basic is our fear of strangers. Surely, it’s one of the first lessons we teach our children: “Don’t talk to strangers.” But listen, if you will, to what the Bible says:

From Leviticus:

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34)

From Romans:

Paul writes, “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” (Romans 12:13)

And perhaps most familiar, Jesus’ words from Matthew:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you... for I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matt. 25:34-35) In other words, in the Bible hospitality is not so much a choice as it is an expectation. This was certainly true in Old Testament times... according to Jonathan Sacks (England’s chief rabbi for many years) the Hebrew Bible contains only one commandment to love the neighbor, but no less than 36 commands to love the stranger. And throughout the Torah, the reason given for this moral teaching is that the Israelites themselves were once strangers. “You shall not oppress the stranger,” reads one translation, “for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”² The key here is empathy. Being able to see yourself and your loved ones in the place of those who are strangers... to think like they must think... to feel what they must feel... to experience the longing and searching and rejection and sometimes welcome as they do.

¹ Ana Maria Pineda in her essay on “Hospitality” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Dorothy C. Bass, editor (Jossey-Bass:1997), p. 29-31

² Exodus 23:9

Rev. Gavin Rogers is the associate pastor of Travis Park United Methodist Church in San Antonio, TX. Making clear that he's interested in people and not politics, he told his congregation he wanted to know the truth about the migrant caravan that is making its way from Central America through Mexico toward the border. He wanted to know the truth, so he went there and joined it. And he has been writing on Facebook about his experience and the relationships he is forming. He writes about long days of traveling with 6,000 refugees. Reaching Guadalajara, for example, involved covering 250 miles in 23 hours – traveling by foot, car... semi-trailer... truck... police truck... dump truck... bus... finally, finding shelter." On November 11, just last Sunday, he posted, "It is a long road. But life is good when you are with people filled with love and hospitality." A Mexican truck driver who volunteered to drive refugees to their next shelter site said he acted "because I'm human." The subway in Mexico City provided free rides to the traveling refugees. And he's sharing the stories the travelers tell of why they are seeking posada: Their journey, Rogers says, is "not about a better life in American terms, it's just about living... and "to be free from violence and rape and murder." Of course, Rev. Rogers knows how this will be heard by some folks back in the States... and he admits it may sound "extreme," But his firsthand knowledge – gleaned by being "willing to talk and learn," is that this is "exactly what is going on." ³

Now, I'm not saying that empathy like this will solve the challenges of homelessness in our nation or of refugees and immigrants worldwide, it won't. But it is a place to start.⁴ In fact, according to the Hebrew scriptures, it is THE place to start. In the Old Testament, hospitality...born of empathy for the stranger... it is not a choice, it is an expectation.

And turning to the New Testament, it was the way the early Christians practiced hospitality that really set them apart from everyone else. The non-Christians around them were fairly hospitable people, as long as you were family or friend or had the means to reciprocate. Christians, on the other hand, were notoriously indiscriminate with their welcome. In Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek... whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to Jesus... do unto others as you would have them do unto you... perfect love cast out fear. Whereas Greek hospitality was culturally acceptable... the Christian version was about as counter-cultural as you could get.⁵ And as with every radical expression of Biblical faith, that kind of hospitality found its source in God – in the One who has claimed us in love and who has never stopped reminding us that we all were once immigrants... we all were once refugees. So that the first reason we offer hospitality to others is that this is who God is... this is what God has offered it to us.

Yet, there's another reason we welcome the stranger – We heard it in this one verse from Hebrews – it is that the guest we receive, even a strange one, may just be an angel of God.

³ https://churchleaders.com/news/337415-caravan-in-mexico-pastor-wanted-know-truth-about-migrant-caravan-so-he-joined-it.html?fbclid=IwAR3XVMiGhPELCSshch8WI41oFDdgB7ZK9xb0CSANM_NtPdDuXyu_LHUyGNY8

⁴ See James Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible*, (Crossway, 2009). Hoffmeier notes that there are different rules for those "aliens" who have been given permission to reside in Israel and those who had not.

⁵ Mark Ralls in his essay entitled "The Other 'H' Word," in *Christian Century*, January 11, 2005, p.16.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” the writer of Hebrews proclaims, “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” You may already know the backstory of that verse: three strangers approach Abraham and Sarah’s tent. According to custom, Abraham and Sarah welcome them. They don’t know them and it’s entirely possible that the strangers mean them harm... still they feed them lavishly... give them water... and provide them a safe place to rest from their journey. And what happens next is a lesson for us all – because as these strangers are leaving, one of them reveals the astounding news that Sarah, (in her ripe old age) will bear a child just as God promised. Little did Abraham and Sarah know... when they were sheltering them and caring for their animals... that they were entertaining angels. Well, this notion that any stranger we encounter just might be God in the flesh really kind of makes you stop and ponder, doesn’t it? As Katherine read earlier, Jesus said: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food... I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink... I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” What that means is that Christlike hospitality is more than being nice and doing nice things to folks... although that is good to do. Hospitality in the way of Jesus recognizes the very image of God... the likeness of Christ in those who seem strangers to us... knowing that they might just come into our lives bearing God’s gifts. An ancient Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended, and the day was on its way back. “Could it be,” asked one student, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?” “No,” the Rabbi answered. “Could it be,” asked another, “when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?” “No,” said the Rabbi. “Well, then what is it?” his pupils demanded. “How can you tell when the night is over, and the day is on its way back?” “It is when you look on the face of any person and can see your brother or sister. Because if you cannot do this, then no matter what time it is it is still night.”

We heard the story earlier: a Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to dinner one day showing that Jesus didn’t ONLY eat with tax collectors and sinners... he was an equal opportunity dinner guest. They were reclining at the table when suddenly a “woman of the city” walked in. She stood behind Jesus... at his feet... and she was weeping so much that his feet were bathed in her tears and she is drying them with her hair. She kept kissing his feet and anointing them with ointment. Well, you can guess what Simon is thinking... and that’s precisely what Jesus does. “I have something to say to you, Simon.” “Speak,” It’s simple: a creditor has two debtors; one owes five hundred and the other fifty... neither can pay... and the creditor cancels both debts. Which one will love him more?” “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt,” “You’re absolutely right, Simon!” “Now, do you see this woman? Do you SEE this woman? She has shown me BIG love... very big love. And you... you have shown LITTLE love... very little love. She knows she’s a sinner, Simon. You are too... only you don’t know it. And because she knows who she is, she has welcomed me. You, on the other hand, haven’t even shown me common courtesy. Well, whether Simon got the point or not, I feel sure this woman did... because Jesus, seeing her great love – a love so great it could only come from a someone who had been forgiven a great debt – Jesus simply made it official: Woman, your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” The only question left is where she will go. Where does one go when told by Christ, “Go in peace”? The price of her past behavior is steep – she has burned all her bridges... she has been removed from all the people and all the institutions that could ever restore her to full life in the community. So that the one place she is still welcome is the street... among people like herself.

What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. She needs a community of people who remember that they, too, were once strangers... outsiders... aliens. What she needs is a church. My friends, the story screams the need for a church... not just any church but one that says, "You are welcome here."⁶

⁶ Fred C. Craddock, *Interpretation Series Commentary on Luke* (WJK,1990), p.104-106.