

THE STRANGER IN OUR MIDST

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Matthew 25:31-40

Have you ever had the experience of arriving in a foreign airport and being ever so aware that you are suddenly not at home in this place, this earth that is all God's domain? It happens to me every time. The sound of the foreign language, the visual images that are unfamiliar, the signs that you cannot read and instructions that you cannot understand. They all reinforce the fact that you are a visitor and stranger on earth.

Six years ago, moving to New York, I felt a bit like a stranger, even though I had earned a graduate degree while living in this city, even though I had come here many times to see a Broadway show and enjoy a meal or attend a continuing education event.

It's one thing to live in the Elysian Fields of Brandywine Hundred in Northern Delaware, and quite another to live here, to be assaulted by hurtling taxis, brusque street etiquette, umbrella maneuvering on narrow sidewalks, and Starbucks lines where twenty people are cueing up for their lattes all at the same time. We all appear to be speaking English, but there is often a bit of translation necessary, depending on the borough and the neighborhood. And parts of our town thrive on the tourist industry harboring strangers in our midst.

The Bible has an interesting take on the stranger among us. It is embedded in Israel's identity as a people of captivity and exile. *A wandering Aramean was my father*, God reminds Moses of Moses' nomadic roots. The Bible, after all, is a desert story, a story of a people who lived near oases and wells in a land where water was scarce and no one survived without the hospitality of the Bedouins who wandered and the builders who encamped and settled cities where water sprung.

Israel's story was that of a people taken into exile. Laboring in Egypt, freed at last and wandering eventually into a promised land of milk and honey. It is the claim modern Israel makes even today that the land is a gift to it, a claim that sets the stage for conflict between strangers and settlers.

Paul advised the early Christians in Rome to "extend hospitality to strangers,"¹ and in the letter to the Hebrews we read that the early Christians were urged, "not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware."²

This urge to hospitality of which the Bible speaks is not simply etiquette, a cool glass of lemonade offered to houseguests on a hot summer afternoon, or an offer to have drinks or dinner with a friend passing through town. This is something much more essential born of the nomadic culture in which hospitality meant the difference between life and death, sustenance and starvation.

There is among Bedouin people to this day an understanding that one is to provide hospitality to the stranger who shows up at your door and that that hospitality should be offered for three days without question. After three days, one may inquire as to the business of the traveler, but not before. Such is the custom.

A desert people who survived on what little water there was, and what little food they could manage knew that without the support and help of those who had, those had not could not survive.

Add to that the common understanding that Israel as a nation was and always will be defined by its most singular identity as a people taken into captivity and given a new land, and you have the deep tap root of religious understanding from which hospitality derives.

The early church found that it was utterly dependent upon the communities of hospitality that they created to sustain one another. These were people who had left house and father and mother and children and worldly goods for the sake of the kingdom of God. So hospitality to strangers was not simply nice, it was essential for survival. Without it those early Christians could not navigate in a hostile world where Jew and Gentile were trying to create a community that was different from that community of the synagogue or the empire but a community of welcome, where old barriers were being broken down. So the church, from its earliest days, has been called to be a place of hospitality, extending a welcome to the stranger.

I have been privileged to preach twice at the Washington National Cathedral, that magnificent church in our nation's capital that serves as a house of prayer for all people, a place where all faiths are welcome. I remember talking with Dean Nathan Baxter on the first occasion of my visiting there. He told me about his vision of the Cathedral as a place of hospitality, a place that welcomes everyone and makes them feel at home. The literature of the cathedral introducing the place to visitors begins by saying, welcome to *your* cathedral. I watched as tour busses drove close to the entrance, and saw the ushers who rushed to the busses to welcome the visitors and make them feel at home. Helping with language interpretation, explaining the location of restrooms, identifying the water fountains, handing out bulletins. There was a cordiality and friendliness that immediately made you feel at home. That's the way a church should be.

I remember shaking hands at the end of the nave aisle following the service, where a member of the Cathedral staff stood with me and greeted people. He said to everyone, not "Good morning," but "Thank you for coming." I asked the priest afterward why he greeted people by thanking them for coming, and he said that since the Cathedral had no parish membership as such, everyone was a visitor no matter how often they came, and this was a way of thanking people for visiting this church which they hope might be considered everyone's spiritual oasis. *Extend hospitality to strangers*, the writer to the Hebrews said, *for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.*

Jesus makes plain the importance of caring for the sojourner when he describes that vision of a time yet to be when all the nations are gathered before the Son of Man and they are separated, the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be rewarded because they saw Jesus thirsty and gave him drink, hungry and fed him, a stranger and welcomed him. And the goats will be cast into outer darkness because they saw him and turned away. They did not feed him, or give him anything to drink, or clothe him, and they did not see him a stranger and welcome him.

This all comes as a surprise, of course, to the sheep and the goats who had no idea that Jesus was hungry or naked or thirsty or in prison or a stranger in their midst. And even more they had no idea that hospitality was of eternal weight.

It's one challenge to create a culture of hospitality in a church among acquaintances and friends where visitors are the strangers in our midst, and quite another when it comes to the macrocosm of national policy. Yet the Matthean passage today speaks of the gathering of all the nations before the throne of God, and so we know that this is not just a matter of individual goodwill but of hospitality that addresses the national interest and security.

Of course, there were no immigration laws in Israel in the time of Moses, nor in the time of Jesus. Clans and tribes, peoples and nations, empires and armies kept what law there might be among the mixing of people from one nation to another. Letters of transit and safe passage sometimes governed movement, but immigration laws as such are a more modern creation.

Even so, it was the perspective of God that all people were a part of the one Creation that was made and that Israel was bound to a code of fair treatment and hospitality to the stranger in its midst. So God announces to Israel in the words of Deuteronomy, "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, mighty and awesome, executing justice for the orphan and the widow, and loving strangers, providing them food and clothing. And you also shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Israel's hospitality is embedded in its history. Because it was once a stranger and sojourner, immigrant to a Promised Land. But now that it is settled, it too must be kindly and welcoming of strangers and sojourners.

In 1886 Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi's statue of a woman holding a torch and a tablet was placed in New York's harbor, and Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus" was emblazoned on its inscription,

"Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless tempest
tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

The world made its way to New York. And four years later in 1890, the ambivalence of Americans about this noble dream was expressed when Congress passed the first immigration restrictions in American history, specifically excluding in the words of the law, "paupers, ex-convicts, mental defectives and Chinese." 18 Million new citizens came to these shores, and created what came to be viewed as the melting pot of humanity.

More than one in ten U.S. citizens today are immigrants, the highest share since the 1930's. But still below the high of 15% in 1890 and 1910. Most of the new immigrants come from Latin America and Asia, but we remain ambivalent about how to treat them.

September 11th didn't help much with the problem of immigration ambivalence. It introduced the fear that cells of Middle Eastern terrorists might be slipping into the country the way Mexican immigrants do every day, or that a short paddle in a canoe

across a wooded lake from Canada to the U.S. might provide just the porous accessibility that would leave us most vulnerable. After all, if a lawyer with a life threatening form of Tuberculosis can slip past the Canadian border, what might a terrorist do with a suitcase sized dirty bomb?

And for all of the President's attempts to reform immigration and respond to the need for change, he has not been able to garner enough support in Congress to do so. In the meantime, abuses abound. We were all shocked to hear this week of the situation of Sandra Kenley who had returned from a visit to her native Barbados and was locked up because of two misdemeanor drug convictions. A permanent legal resident, she died in a rural Virginia jail after not receiving her blood pressure medication.

And Abdoulai Sall, an auto mechanic, had no criminal record, but was still seized during an immigration interview. He had a severe kidney ailment, and he, too, died after not receiving his medication last December. Sixty-two immigrants have died in secret detention centers, private prisons and local jails in the last three years. Something is wrong with this picture.

"...the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, mighty and awesome, executing justice for the orphan and the widow, and loving strangers, providing them food and clothing. And you also shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." So say our scriptures.

And yet, our immigration laws are now separating families. A father supporting children and a wife in this country can be deported and his family left behind. The reports of injustice and abuse abound.

A new sanctuary movement is taking root in churches to draw attention to these abuses, which affect individual lives and divide families and nations. Some of our neighboring churches have become involved in that concern and your pastors have discussed whether this is something the Session should be considering.

I'm not an expert on immigration. In fact I find that the whole debate about immigration is so nuanced, so confusing, so complex that I cannot understand it. Torn between the need to do justly, to protect the common safety of the nation; and recognizing that economics and racism and xenophobia are a part of the equation shaping the discussion, I have felt intellectually and politically paralyzed. Into that void, politicians have filled the need for understanding and intelligent debate with noise and rhetoric. There is not much I hear that offers more light, only more heat.

Unable then to draw any conclusions about the specifics of the debate, I am left to wonder if there is anything that my faith has to say to the matter. I take as good advice the warning of Reinhold Niebuhr that personal ethics do not necessarily have direct applications in the international relations. But nonetheless, perhaps there are a few broad strokes worth mentioning.

We are by faith called to be generous and compassionate toward the stranger in our midst. We are invited to feed, clothe, offer drink and nourishment, and provide a welcome to those who are strangers among us, for in doing so, we minister to Christ himself. We are to be, like Israel, a people that does not forget that we too were immigrants once, our forebears and ancestors came here from somewhere else. My

great-great grandfather Holland came here to this country Roman Catholic from Ireland. My great-great-grandfather way back when on the Walton side, came as a Quaker from England in the 1700's. And all of our families, if we trace the line back far enough, have come here from somewhere else. We are a nation of immigrants and foreigners, a melting pot of people who are engaged in a noble experiment, to see if all these people can live together in peace as neighbors and friends, one nation of differing faiths and colors and languages and origins.

It has never been easy, and we as a nation have made a mess of it at times. We have selected from time to time this group and then that to be the recipients of our ire and fear and discrimination. But the dream, the hope, the prayer persists, that we may have borders open enough, like arms outstretched, to receive the huddled masses of the world yearning to breathe free, and have arms strong enough to protect from harm those who would seek refuge here.

On this weekend before the fourth of July, we have much to be thankful for in this land, and much for which to be troubled. The world is deeply divided, and we are not yet clear how to make things better. We build our virtual fences in the Arizona desert and round up the migrant workers huddled in trailer trucks near San Diego. We search every swarthy Middle Easterner passing through airport security, pat down every woman wearing a burka, and wish we didn't have to live like this, yet suspect that in our lifetime we may always have to.

We are uneasy this Fourth of July, and part of dis-ease is that we are haunted by phrases of our faith that we don't yet know how to implement... "...the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, mighty and awesome, executing justice... and loving strangers, providing them food and clothing. And you also shall love the stranger, for you once were strangers in the land of Egypt."

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¹ Romans 12:13

² Hebrews 13:2