

The Stranger and His Scandals

Genesis 26:1-11
Matthew 25:31-46

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The Visitor

The youth group was meeting on a Sunday evening. The program was a short story in movie form entitled, *The Visitor*. The lead character was a proprietor of a general store in a small community. In his spiritual meditation, he believed that Jesus promised to come and visit the store on a certain day. He anticipated the visit with great joy. The day arrived. The gentleman went about the business of the day, constantly expecting to see Jesus. The day was normal, and late at night, the store owner complained in his prayers that the promise of Jesus' appearance had not happened.

Then came the answer. He'd heard the voice of Jesus say, "Do you recall when the lady in the walker arrived in the store, and you assisted her and gave particular kindness in gathering her groceries and helping her to the car? I was there. I was that woman."

Jesus continued, "Do you recall the gentleman that came into the store and, in the midst of the cold of winter, he needed to have his car jumped because the battery was dead? You closed the store for a short time so you could assist him. I was that gentleman.

"Then, do you recall the mother with the child who was causing her to be distracted in her shopping, and you sat in talked with the child so the mother could be unencumbered as she moved through the store? I was there. Yes, in all of these people I was a stranger, and you took me in."

Matthew 25

The Scripture lesson is familiar. We hear about the separation of the sheep and the goats. Allow me to remind you of four basic realities in this scripture lesson.

- 1) The stranger is Jesus. Very directly Jesus said, "I was a stranger, and you took me in."
- 2) There is the gathering of all nations. The implication is that there are believers and faithful followers of Jesus in all nations. There is no geographical limitation.

- 3) The division happens between the sheep and the goats. Neither the sheep or the goats know why they were placed in a particular category. The stranger is the only one who knows.
- 4) The assumption is made that those who received the stranger showed a capacity of love that went beyond their own selfish interests. The decision as to who is accepted is left to one, and that is the stranger, Jesus.

Judgments

Over my lifetime, and possibly it's true for you as well, all the time I have spent on judging, trying to decide who the sheep are and who the goats are, has not been productive. It has enhanced the prejudices that I have held. It has made me feel more comfortable about being an insider and deciding who the outsiders are, however, I must say in no way has any judgment enhanced my capacity to love. In fact, it has done the opposite.

The Scripture lesson does make it clear that we are not the ones who will decide. We are simply called to love and show kindness to the stranger, for Jesus said, "I was a stranger, and you took me in." Implied is this conclusion: We are called to grow in our capacity to love, and this is pleasing to the stranger.

Jesus refuses to be defined by our limited boundaries and our desire to domesticate Jesus so that he fits comfortably into the values, mores, and societal norms that are familiar to us.

So God becomes our patron saint, and we quote him in such a way to affirm our beliefs, our desires, and there is the assumption that God hates those that we hate and loves those that we love. Such a domestication of Jesus cannot be supported in any way by Scripture. Jesus is the stranger who comes, and scandals surround him.

The Hans Kung quote printed in the bulletin is for your edification at a later time. Suffice it to say when I began my theological training I did not assume that Roman Catholic theologians would have a whole lot to say to me. However, I have grown to love their theological thinking, their priestly contemplation and their challenges to me and my limited viewpoints.

Barbara Brown Taylor makes the same point in the following paragraph:

Jesus is terrible at meeting people's expectations of him. He engages the sorts of people he should ignore and ignores the sorts of people he should engage. He accepts the wrong dinner invitations. He is rude to respect religious leaders. He scolds his own disciples, while he praises the faith of a Roman soldier. Is this a man you want teaching at Grace Presbyterian

Church? He is impossible to manage. He will not stay in role. Every time his handlers think they have him handled, he vanishes from their midst.

From our own Presbyterian history, John Calvin ruled with an iron fist in Geneva. It was obvious that Calvin and his followers knew exactly who should be inside and who should be outside. It's not one of our highest moments in Presbyterianism. As quoted in William Manchester's records, and used by Philip Yancey, the following diversions were forbidden, and penalties were swift:

Feasting, dancing, singing, pictures, statues, relics, church bells, organs, altar candles; "indecent or irreligious" songs, staging or attending theatrical plays; wearing rough, jewelry, lace or "immodest" dress; speaking disrespectfully of your betters; extravagant entertainment, swearing, gambling, playing cards, hunting, drunkenness; naming children after anyone but figures in the Old Testament; reading "immoral or irreligious" books.

A father who christened his son Claude, a name not found in the Old Testament, spent four days in jail, as did a woman whose hairdo reached in "immoral" height. The consistory beheaded a child who struck his parents. They drowned any single woman found pregnant. In separate incidents, Calvin's stepson and daughter-in-law were executed when found in bed with their lovers. (I see God's tears in such self-righteousness.

The stranger keeps calling us to grow in our capacity to love, not our capacity to alienate, build barriers and condemn those who disagree with us.

Bishop Leonard Kelly, the African-American bishop of the United Methodist Church, says, "If you want people to stay where they are put, don't tell them about Jesus."

So it is with all of us. If we just want to stay put, then we best stop talking about Jesus, because implied in the very nature of the biblical text and message is, "followers of Jesus change, they grow in their capacity to love." That means that they love outsiders and the outsiders become insiders.

Suffice it to say that often it is the stranger, the outsider, who calls us to grow in our capacity to love. Permit me to give you a quick overview of the Scriptural journey from Genesis to the New Testament:

- 1) In Genesis 12 there is the Covenant. God says he will bless these people and make of them a great nation so that they will be a blessing to all people and all nations. There is no isolationism in this covenant.
- 2) In our Scripture lesson this morning from Genesis, notice that it was Abimelech, a non-believing king who called Isaac to account for lying about his wife and calling her his sister. Abimelech says, "We could have made a

great moral misjudgment because of your lying." The outsider calls the insider to account.

- 3) Jonah. The whole story centers on God calling Jonah to change his hateful attitude and be more compassionate in reaching out in love to those Ninevites who were non-Jews. The story has interesting implications because the non-believers find Jonah sleeping and ask him to pray to his God. Later the non-believers pray to the God in whom Jonah said he believed, and it said they became believers. The outsiders are calling Jonah to expand his capacity to love.
- 4) Ruth. Naomi an Israelite brought her daughter-in-law, Ruth, a Moabitess, back to Israel. Ruth's husband had died in Moab. Scripture says no Moabites could be a part of the lineage of the Israelite people. We trace the genealogy of Jesus through King David and back to Ruth, the Moabite. The outsider is bringing the message of God's love to all of us.
- 5) The Gospels tell us constantly of the stranger, Jesus, who is calling us to move beyond our limited boundaries and to realize that his love goes far beyond our wildest expectations. Those we would exclude are included. He calls us to grow in our capacity to love.
- 6) The Book of Acts introduces us to the expansive nature of the church, from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the world. It tells us the story of Phillip meeting the Ethiopian eunuch, a black gentleman from Africa who is baptized. He is received into the Christian church even though the Old Testament says no eunuch will ever be a part of the Kingdom of God.
- 7) Paul, who was first named Saul, and called by God from the persecution of Christians to be the missionary advocate of including you and me as Gentiles into God's plan. God chooses an outsider named Ananias, a stranger, to convey his message to Paul.
- 8) Peter, the Rock, is given the vision to break down his barriers, and a Roman, Gentile centurion is the stranger's ambassador to tell Peter not to call anything unclean that God, through Christ, declares clean.

You and I could tell our stories and give our testimonies as to how God has come to us through strangers. Through circumstances in our lives where we were closed, God called us to open up the gates of our hearts so that his love might flow in. Each of our testimonies, I believe, would reflect that as our capacity to love Jesus Christ, the stranger, increases, people that we had excluded are included. We realize they have a message of love, just as much as we have love to share with them.

As the passage from Matthew declares: No one but Jesus, the stranger, knows who are the goats and who are the sheep. That's not our business. Our business is to grow in our capacity to love and be faithful to the one who loves us.

The challenge

So what is the challenge for us on this summer Sunday? I think it is best expressed in the statement from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from letters he wrote while incarcerated in the Birmingham city jail:

Was not the reformer Martin Luther an extremist? "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist? "I will stay in jail until the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist? "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremist will we be? Will we be an extremist for hate, or will we be an extremist for love?

I don't know exactly where God through Christ, the stranger, is calling you to grow and become extremists in our capacity to love. You know that, just as I do, in the inmost part of our hearts.

So let me give you this challenge. Make a promise to the stranger, Jesus, that next week when you return to this sanctuary you will have grown in your capacity to love. You will not stay put. When you return next week, you will be able to say, "Dear Jesus, I have grown in my capacity to love like you, in your life, your work and your spirit have commanded us to do."

Then I believe you will hear the stranger, Jesus, say to you, "I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink." You will feel a new energy to love as you have been loved.

Then, next week I promise you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that you will meet the stranger who will love you, challenge you, break bread with you and say to you, "When you did it to the least of these you did it unto me." Till then, be an extremist in loving, because of God, in Christ, first loved you. Amen.