

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. the Stranger

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Deuteronomy 10:14-22 (focus verses: 10:17-19)

Philippians 3:4b -8, 12-14

I am learning a lot from kids lately. It is a tragic side effect of parenting... You know the part where you have to always be learning too. Often it is the hard truths and instilled knowledge. The way they can call you on just about anything and sometimes I (*and it is really unfortunate when this happens*). I witness my own words coming out of their little mouths....

At a recent well child exam for the twins we were asked the typical questions... How many servings of fruits and vegetables does your child get a day, what kind of water does your child drink: well, city, bottled? This questions is not as easy as you think... Are we talking at home, school, church or daycare?? umm all the waters? they drink all the waters. We were quizzed on their type of car seats (*My husband is a stickler there so we are good*) and overall we had validation that we are doing around average as parents....until we were asked about strangers.

"*What are strangers?*" the provider asked the twins... One responds with: Bad guys! His sister with "people we don't know,".... and then the follow up question: Okay twins, *how should we respond to strangers?*

Ruby looked at us as if to rescue her but then Finn took one for the team and enthusiastically responded that, "*when we see a stranger, we need to set a trap. Then the stranger will get sucked into a net and pulled up to dangle from a tree.*" The provider, less amused then us by Finn's story telling turns to us and asked:

Well... How do your kids actually respond to strangers... that too is a complicated question. "*I serve a church down the road. These are Pastors kids... they are fast friends with most everyone they meet.*" The provider responded by saying, "*well... you may want to consider discussing this with them in more detail so that they will discern good and safe people should they be in an uncomfortable situation.*" "Yes," I said, I completely understand. You mean like...start making traps to capture them correct?

Now I am of course being playful here, but I do respect what the provider was asking of us as a family. Relationships are complicated aren't they? They are not simple. They are certainly not all healthy. There are of course all types of people in this world and not all of them will approach my kids with the same love and support you all show them week after week.

In some ways it felt like what our provider was asking us to teach our kids was how to sort people. Which to some degree we will have to do and probably have done already. It is crazy, but we are often being asked to draw lines and distinctions between "our people" and "not our people." For example: Vikings fans... our people. Packers fans... not our people.

These are the people who know where we live,
These are the people who know our names...

With my older kids: These are the people who's cars you can ride in. These are the people with whom to share the hard and scary things with. These people over here.. these are the ones that would drop everything to be where you were if you needed them.

So in reflecting about "respecting the stranger", I think its helpful to pause... set aside what might be privilege or ignorance, or naiveté and acknowledge that in someone else's house... with someone else's kids... I am a stranger. My skin color, my day job... my background check or experience doesn't really matter. I am a stranger.

One of my older kids got a small taste of this recently . He has a group of friends he runs around with after school, most of which are kids that look very different from him. He was once asked to wait on the sidewalk while the other boys ran into the house to grab a snack because his parents would not be impressed by my son being in their company.

Perhaps it is helpful to remember that each of us have probably had the experience of being a stranger or in a strange land ourselves. We have all likely been new to a group or community. found ourselves in scenarios where we felt out of place. Perhaps there was a time when we didn't fit in. Visited a new country or culture. We often think our role in any equation is to be the one welcoming, the one offering our resources but sometimes we are simply be the stranger. And it doesn't always have to be fear inducing, sometimes its surprising and delightful. Dislocation can be uncomfortable and it can also be an enriching experience where growth occurs.

Jesus himself reminds us... that he too is a stranger. We see it throughout the scriptures:

Hebrews 13: 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have "entertained angels without knowing it."

Matthew 25: 35-36 " 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Luke 24:13-35 on the The Road to Emmaus: Two disciples walk toward Emmaus after the crucifixion and conversed with a resurrected Jesus, but their eyes are prevented from recognizing him. He acts as an unrecognized traveler before revealing his identity in the breaking of the bread

Both, the stories of our time and those in the Bible are full of stories of reorientation, stories that invite us to view life from a different lens or perspective.

Now I don't know how many of you have ever preached a sermon before, but something that happens is that throughout the week you just interpret most everything that happens in your life through the lens of that Sunday's scripture reading. You hear news stories differently, you associate different thoughts and feelings with the everyday and ordinary experiences... Every event, every conversation, all goes through the lens of what needs to be understood to some degree and articulated the following Sunday in worship. For better or worse..

So, in yet another installment of The Holy Spirit has a sense of humor, we are in the car on the way to school. The car being a place my family spends a good chunk of our time. We are all minding our own business when Finn shouted from the back seat,

"Mom, How did God make us?"

I will give you a minute to think about how you might answer this question... perhaps you have tackled it in your parenting journey already, perhaps it is a question you yourself are having for the first or 15th time this year.... How did God make us and feel free to text or e mail me your answer.

I want you to know that I did, what any "good mother" would do... I took a deep breath.... and said, *"Well Finn... That would be a great question for your Auntie Leah!"*

But because he's five, and we are trapped in the car, I say well... God made us in God's image. So God made us to be like God.

Some of our best qualities are those of God's. When we love, when we share, when we are kind to others we are like God.

See pal, we have the very important job of living in this world... and we have the awesome responsibility of helping others to see and know God by how we live our lives. By how we speak, act and live... And because God didn't just make some of us in Gods image, we get see all people as children of God. Now, I haven't given too much thought to what our pediatrician would say about this answer but Finn seemed fine with it.

Our scripture readings today both illustrated the foundation of God's law and nature: Those being that of unconditional love and justice. As I said before, many of our texts model specific

ways we are to live together and treat the stranger: “with dignity, with empathy, without partiality, and by advocating on one another's behalf.”

Through Jesus, God includes more and more people in the work of showing the world who God is through word, through sacrament, through how we live our faith out. This is the work I shared with Finn and the work I share with you, that we are called to today.

God is calling us to remember that our first and primary relationship is not to our race, or gender, our political affiliation but to God. That our primary identity isn't in what we wear, who we know, but in the fact that to God we all belong and by God we are loved fiercely and deeply. Unlike us, God doesn't play favorites.

Multiple times a week we will be tempted, told even to see our identity in somebody else perspective. Think like Junior High where it seems like there is an unlimited amount of voices trying to shape and tell you who to be, but at our core, we are called to remember that our primary identity is in God through Jesus.

And if we waver...

or are convinced or being actively persuaded to think otherwise...

we need to recall our core identity as children of God. We have to remember that scripture is FILLED with not passive, but authoritative language on how we are to treat the stranger. supporting refugees and immigrants, insisting on justice. Leading with empathy, compassion, kindness.

This is a text that could be used to justify an “us” vs. “them”... “chosen” versus “un-chosen mentality. But hear in this verse that *“God is not partial and brings justice and love to all.* And God knows us well friends, God knows we forget.... God is so aware that we would be so easily distracted and get it wrong so many times that we were provided with laws and rules to remind us how to live and act as people of God. But faith in this instance is working to keep this idea at the forefront. In Eugene Peterson's “The Message” translation of this particular passage it says “cut away the thick calluses from your head.” We are easily distracted from what is at the core of how God made us and who God calls us to be.

To be reminded that all people, all things are created by God and that how we live: our actions, words or deeds reveal to others a bit more of God's true character. And let me be clear, I want us, The people of Love First United Methodist Church to be the voice of this message. There is an awful lot of poor representations of God's Character out there, lots of statements about what makes a Christian are getting a heck of a lot more screen time that you and I are. But I want

God's actual message, and Jesus' literal teachings to be how we define what it means to be a follower of Christ. I want all to be welcomed here, I want all to be known here, I want seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Which brings us back to the important work we do here, in this space with one another. Whether it means we are welcoming the stranger or feeling like one ourselves. I invite us to bring our focus back to this space and the words that are spoken around this table. This Sunday might feel like most of the others, but today we celebrate what we call World Communion Sunday. And it matters so much.

Today we remember that this faith we call ours is much bigger than this congregation, this denomination, this country, or even our own particular way of understanding God. Today we imagine the table, this table, God's table stretching across borders and languages, across cultures and traditions, across places of privilege and places of struggle. We remember Christians gathering around tables in every corner of the world. And suddenly, the stranger doesn't seem quite so strange.

The person who worships differently, speaks another language, comes from another country, carries a different story, or understands God in a way we have yet to consider becomes something more than a stranger. They become part of the great human family and the story that God has been inviting us in to all along.

Deuteronomy reminds us that God is not impressed by our ability to draw lines around who belongs. Instead, we are told that God "loves the stranger," and then gives us the extraordinary invitation to be one and learn from those around us. This is what communion asks of us. Not simply to come forward and receive bread and cup, but to allow the table to change the way we see one another.

At this table, there is room for the stranger.

There is room for the person whose story we do not yet know.

There is room for the person who sees the world differently.

There is room for the people whose lives are connected to ours by nothing more than the fact that we are all beloved by God.

There is room at the table for me

There is room at the table for you.

And so, on this World Communion Sunday, we come to the table remembering that God's table has always been bigger than we imagined. We come not because we all agree, or because we all understand God in exactly the same way, but because Christ's invitation is wider than our boundaries and our sorting. May the bread remind us that we belong to one another. May the cup remind us that love crosses every border we try to create. And may we leave this table with the courage to look again at the stranger among us and within us. And God loves us.