

“Hospitality to the Stranger”

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Scripture:

From Genesis to Revelations

Sermon:

“First of all, we ain’t got nothing on them!”

Having traveled a bit, to nearly every continent in our world, I must admit we in the USA know very little about real hospitality.

Africans, Palestinians, Philipinos, Bolivians and Salvadorans, just to name a few, have been incredibly welcoming to me. They define for me the meaning of true hospitality.

But hospitality is as old as human existence. And hospitality, especially to the stranger, is a key element in our Holy Scriptures.

From beginning to end, Genesis to Revelations, nothing else, except maybe the steadfast promise of God’s presence, provision and love is so prominent.

This I believe is intentional because once we have experienced the latter from a generous God we are then better able to share that abundance with all of our neighbors.

And within a framework of abundance. it really doesn’t matter where that neighbor may have come from.

And in the end it will also not matter if they are citizen or alien, similar or different, or even a friend or an enemy!

But what really matters is that we are commanded to show hospitality to all, everyone! Which of course means NO EXCEPTIONS!

Scripture is pretty clear on what constitutes hospitality. In the New Testament epistles the Greek words used are; philoxenos and piloxenia which literally mean a “love for the foreigner.” As the following passages point out,

Romans 12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

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

1Tim 3:2 Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher...

1 Peter 4:9 Be hospitable to one another without complaining.

Our English word is similarly derived from the Latin, hospitalis which was a room set aside for a guest, and of course it shares the same root as hostis, meaning enemy.

Now the religious concept of “sanctuary” is also ancient going all the way back to the story of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain soon after the creation in Genesis. God we are told “marked” Cain so that no one would harm him in spite of the fact that Cain was guilty of premeditated murder. A strange act of mercy to be sure on the part of a God who believes so strongly in justice!

Later this practice, to protect not the innocent, but the guilty was codified in the Torah with the establishment of what were called, “Cities of Refuge.” where those guilty of manslaughter could flee to, to escape retribution and await a fair trial.

Numbers 35:9 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 10 Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, 11 then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, so that a slayer who kills a person without intent may flee there. 12 The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, so that the slayer may not die until there is a trial before the congregation... 15 These six cities shall serve as refuge for the Israelites, for the resident or transient alien among them, so that anyone who kills a person without intent may flee there.

Using this understanding of biblical sanctuary, the excuse that immigrants are violating the law and thus are “illegal” is null and void!

As members of a nation that is refusing sanctuary we must take seriously the fact that even if those fleeing into America are guilty ... as some say, “of breaking the law,” how much more should we then be actually extending true hospitality to those who are actual victims of violence, especially the overwhelming majority who are fleeing the consequences of our nation’s economic exploitation of their homelands?

Add to this, the fact that the scriptures throughout are abundantly clear about which victims are particularly near to the heart of God, ie; the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

Psalms 146:9 The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Deuteronomy 14:28 Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; 29 the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

Deuteronomy 24:17 You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. 18 Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. 19 When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. 20 When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 22 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

And I am certain, that it is not lost upon any of you, that our current policies on the southern border is not only targeted at “the stranger,” but that we have also intentionally created nearly 3,000 orphans!

And we know that the treatment of these same groups, during Israel’s own experiment with self government, became the source of harsh indictments by those Godly prosecutors, the prophets, as they continually reminded Israel that the health of a nation is determined on how the poor are cared for.

Jeremiah 7:5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place... then I will dwell with you in this place...

Jeremiah 22:2 Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. 3 Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.

Zechariah 7:8 The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying: 9 Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; 10 do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Malachi 3:5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against... those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. 6 For I the Lord do not change...

But not only are God’s people called to show hospitality to the stranger, but they are to remember that they are strangers as well.

Scripture is abundantly clear that God too comes into our world in the guise of an undocumented stranger in need of hospitality.

One of the earliest examples of this was the visit by “three strangers” to Abraham and Sarah, who we must remember were also immigrants living on the fringe of and many times were in conflict with, the local Canaanite governing authorities of their day.

This is also a classic story of the importance of showing hospitality to strangers in the Bible.

Genesis 18:1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Genesis 21:33 Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. 34 And Abraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the Philistines.

Genesis 23:3 Abraham rose up from beside his dead (wife), and said to the Hittites, 4 "I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.

Another key theological understanding of God in the Old Testament was the fact that God was consistently portrayed as "stateless" and thus "undocumented."

All other deities of the time however, resided comfortably within the temples and palaces secure behind high city walls. Each tribe and nation had their own idols of wood and precious stone and of course, the truest of Gods belonged to those nations who, with the deity's blessing managed to subdue their neighbors. But in Exodus, Yahweh dwelt outside the walls and borders of nations in the wilderness and without even a name let alone any "papers!"

Exodus 3:13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.' "

An equally correct rendering could also be, "I will be whoever I will be!"

It was this nameless and "feral" Deity that called to Moses from the burning bush into a conspiracy alone in the desert far from the power centers of Pharaoh and his Gods who resided along side the largest military force in the world on the verdant shores of the Nile in Egypt.

And Moses did conspire with God to lead a rag tag group of enslaved former aliens into direct disobedience of that empire which resulted not only in their freedom from bondage

but which made them once again aliens as they immigrated,
once again undocumented, to a land of wondrous promise.

Exodus 12:49 there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you. 50 All the Israelites did just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron. 51 That very day the Lord brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt...

But, as we know, Israel failed, more often than not,
to fulfill its part of their bargain with God.
And as each prophet came and went each one however claimed their
authority from that same stateless "God of the wilderness"
while avoiding any desire for the authority of Kings or nations.
Yahweh continued to refuse to be domesticated even by Israel.

"I am a wandering Aramean like my Father."

And then along comes our transient Lord and Savior, Jesus.
He hits the road early as a religious and political refugee
who was smuggled, by his parents, into Egypt.
Many of you have likely seen the image on the internet of the holy family
in a wire cage that was set up by an Episcopal church in Indianapolis.
But as powerful as this image is they are not, unfortunately,
completely accurate in their contemporary depiction
since current protocol would require the separation
of the infant Jesus from both of his parents at the border!

As an adult Jesus continued his wandering ways,
roaming from town to town mostly to avoid arrest
as he "couch surfed" his way throughout militarily occupied Palestine.
(the term our resident theologian John Carlson has coined)

Luke 9:57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."
58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has
nowhere to lay his head."

And according to Jesus' own words he too, like his father in Heaven,
was likely undocumented as well as stateless.

John 18:36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world,
my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom
is not from here."

And as a couch surfer he too relied continually on the hospitality of others,
even inviting himself into the homes of strangers on occasion.

Luke 19:1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a
chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he
could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him,
because he was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him,

"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

Talk about "chutzpah!" Moreover, Jesus insisted that his disciples embrace his lifestyle of dependency as transient missionaries who must search for him hidden amongst the poor and dispossessed.

Mark 6:7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place..."

And of course he spoke of this in his iconic teachings on
"When you have done it to the least of these you have done it to me."

"But Christ emptied himself..."

The Apostle Paul clearly took this example to heart as he too became a transient itinerant throughout the Roman world spreading a message of Christ's redeeming power. And like Jesus he too had the same expectation of his followers.

Philippians 2:1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Romans 15:7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

And Paul, as an itinerant evangelist would have also relied on the hospitality of "open doors" for his ministry to survive.

The hospitality shown him by Ananias in Damascus was certainly an example of the most riskiest form of hospitality. Not only did Ananias and his fellow believers in Damascus welcome this one who was actually coming to arrest them, but they too were not above breaking legal precedent when they smuggled him across the border in the dead of night so that Paul could escape the backlash he too would have suffered as one who had turned his coat inside out to become a follower of Christ.

"I am the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega."

Finally at the close of our scriptural canon, John in Revelations, he himself a political prisoner living in exile, provides us a powerful portrait of Christ in the guise of a stranger,

seeking shelter, and “standing at the door” of the church, knocking. Christ, the transient alien if you please, promises to “come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” if only we open the door.

Now for most of my life I have understood this passage on a purely personal level as Jesus knocking on the door of my heart in a particular moment of decision or conversion.

But this vision of Christ does not fit the context of the larger passage which comes at the culmination of John’s seven letters to specific churches spread out in Asia Minor.

In the larger passage John has addressed each church by name addressing their particular situations and his concerns. The last city addressed, Laodicea, was a fortress town that functioned as a “guard or door keeper” on the strategic road from Ephesus to Syria. Kind of like the predecessor of Ft Collins, Camp Collins, on what was then called the “Overland Trail.”

For John, a central challenge to the churches in Asia Minor was whether they would dare open their doors to share a meal with Christ the stranger, until the day when the New Jerusalem dawned as a city whose gates never closed?

Revelation 3:14 "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: 15 "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. 20 Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

“All who wander are not lost.”

And so from beginning to end, literally from Genesis to Revelations, the Bible has had particular concern for the traveller, the transient, the alien and the stranger who is in our midst. And perhaps more importantly God, Jesus and God’s people are both that stranger as well as the one’s called to love the alien transient in our midst.

And it is certainly incontrovertibly more than a mere spiritual metaphor!
It must be fleshed out!
It is a call to specific and real time actions and behaviors.
And it will also, at times, be implicitly risky!

But, I might add, as one who has experienced genuine hospitality
and as one who has shared the joy of being in the presence
of some really strange folks who are, thank God,
not at all like me,
it is nothing less than a foretaste of heaven!

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