

“Change the World: Welcome the Stranger”
James 2:1-9

Today we continue the “Change the World” series with a focus on the power of welcoming the stranger for the sake of accomplishing God’s dream for the world. The theme of welcoming the stranger is so prominent in the Bible and in life. Most of the key biblical stories were about people moving from one place to another, i.e., being strangers at different points on the journey. It starts with the first humans leaving their home in the garden of Eden and it ends with a vision of a new Jerusalem in Revelation where humanity is redeemed and transformed to live in peace in the city of God. Key biblical figures like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were all people who journeyed and knew firsthand what it felt like to be a stranger. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the infant Jesus and his parents became political refugees when Jesus was born, and Herod ordered the killing of all infant boys. The writer John Gardner once said, “There are only two plots in all of literature: 1. A person goes on a journey. 2. A stranger comes to town.” Being a stranger is one of the most common experiences for human beings. At one point or another we all experience being a stranger. It starts when we are born into this world and our new family welcomes us. Then we have our experiences of going to school, going to the doctor, moving, going to college, meeting the family of our friends or significant others, and finding a new job. And in each of these experiences we depend on others to help us and to welcome us. Think of when we don’t experience that welcome and inclusion. Whether it is because of fear, anger, or pain, the result is the same: We feel the sting of not being welcomed. Sometimes our lives even depend on that welcome.

Yet, fear of the stranger or the other is as old as time and sadly it keeps rearing its ugly head in our own time in so many different ways. About two weeks ago, there were fliers that were sent to people in Lewiston, NY by the KKK inviting them to meet at the Peach Festival with words: White Communities, White Schools, and White PRIDE!



Of course, this is an extreme example and yet our instinctual fear of the stranger is not always clear to us. It can be masked by justifications about safety and protection. That is why as the people of God, we have to be intentional about welcoming the stranger and seeing the image of God in our neighbors near and far.

In his book *Fear of the Other*, Bishop William Willimon describes how the stranger determines the vitality and identity of the church. In one of his former congregations, the people welcomed as a member a woman who was homeless due to her addiction. A family was assigned to lead the church in receiving the woman, Alice, as Christ would receive her. They had two years of successes and disappointments, frustrations and wonderful surprises, hard work that stretched patience and finances. When Alice had been off alcohol for a year and was thriving in a new job, Willimon thanked the woman who was instrumental in her recovery. "You should thank Alice," the woman responded. "Before she joined Trinity, we were in danger of becoming a club for sweet old folks. Alice made us a church!"

And this is what the teachings of the book of James were trying to convey to the early Christian communities of faith. James is a collection of teachings about the way Christians should live and behave. It was addressed to churches in crisis where there was discrimination and bigotry in the church that reflected the values of society and not those of the kingdom of God. The letter was concerned with practical Christianity, with "walking the walk" and not just "talking the talk." This is not just about personal piety or doing good deeds in private life. To James, the church existed to also be engaged in public life! The indication that one's faith is real is action and not speech. Anybody can talk about Jesus. But true discipleship comes from action. This action is specifically about helping those who are most needy in society. The book of James has a list of such people: the economically poor, the oppressed, the sick, the orphans, the widows and so on.

A sign of true faith is the ability to show no partiality, no preference for those who are rich or powerful. The royal law of James was about God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. We often put limits on who is our neighbor, but we have to remember Jesus' answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" It was in the story he told about the Samaritan man who fulfilled the royal law of love by helping the stranger while the religious folk failed to do so. The Samaritan who was supposed to be the enemy of the Jews, the ultimate stranger, ended up being the hero of the story in order to break down all the barriers humans put on who is to be considered a neighbor!

Mike Slaughter gives an example of a community that is welcoming the stranger. It is a church in Asheville, NC. They have created a space and a time where prejudice and fear are replaced with care and connection. Haywood Street Church brings people together every week to heal our human divides and to help people fulfill God's royal law. They are changing the world by welcoming the stranger, the downtown professionals and those who are homeless or on the edge of society. Welcoming the stranger has transformed the church, the neighborhood and our world as we know it today: <https://youtu.be/d4tyLMLbqQ4>.

Last week, I had the honor of visiting St. Anthony's Activity Night here in Batavia. I loved how a space of hospitality is created by a Christian community to bring hope and healing to a neighborhood that is often seen as "drug-infested, poor, hopeless, and violent." Seeing and experiencing the welcome that St. Anthony's extended to their neighbors were signs of God's love made visible through the power of welcoming the stranger to become friends and community.

Today I would like to invite you to consider how you are called to fulfill God's royal law by welcoming the stranger. The quest this week is to find a group in our community that welcomes the stranger and to see how we are called to participate in that welcome. We will get you started with a conversation about what you find challenging or exciting about the invitation to welcome the stranger.

We will close with some scriptures about welcoming the stranger. As you walked in, some of you received a scripture which I invite you to read at this time. I invite you to come forward and read your scripture so as to encourage all of us to live by God's vision of welcoming the stranger.

"You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Deuteronomy 10:19

"The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Leviticus 19:34

"Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Leviticus 27:19

"The Lord watches over the strangers."

Psalms 146:9a

"You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel."

Ezekiel 47:22

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."

Zechariah 7:9-10

"You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you."

Matthew 5:43-44

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Matthew 25:35

“Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me.”

Matthew 25:40

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Luke 10:27

“Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Acts 10:34

“Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

Romans 12:13

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Romans 13:8

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Romans 13:10

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

Hebrews 13:2

“Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church.”

3 John 1:5a

I pray that God will guide your feet and open your eyes and hearts to how you can be an agent of welcome in the world!

Amen.