

“Howdy, Stranger!”

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September 17, 2017

[Deuteronomy 10:17-19](#)

[Matthew 22:34-40](#)

I grew up in Tennessee. Before moving to Illinois in 2013, I had never lived outside of Tennessee. When we moved here, I definitely felt like a stranger in a strange land. The culture is different, the people speak differently, they look at me funny when I say “y’all,” and it’s a toss-up if a restaurant will have my beloved sweet tea or not. All in all, though, I’ve adapted to my new state, and feel at home here.

Then I became one of your pastors here at First Pres, and felt like a bit of a stranger again, learning names and faces – though I still haven’t got all of those sorted out, learning procedures and customs. And I was a stranger to many of you, as well. Yet again, I’ve acclimated – I am no longer a stranger, and you are not strangers to me.

Years ago, I started my first semester as a student at Memphis Theological Seminary. Even though I had spent a couple years working on the staff of MTS, enrolling in classes was a new and strange experience. I sat down in classrooms with strangers, not really knowing what to expect from the classes. At the end of my seminary career, I often knew every student in a given class. I knew how certain professors were going to teach and what they were going to expect. In short, seminary became not nearly as strange as it had been when I first started, and I was no longer a stranger.

I can name other experiences like these – experiences of going from being a stranger to being a part of the group. If you think about it, I’m sure you all can recall these times in your own lives, though it gets harder and harder to do so. The longer we are part of something, the harder it is to remember what it felt like to be a stranger. Sometimes, it’s just plain impossible. For example, I’ve always been a Presbyterian, of one form or another. And if I’m honest, I have to admit that’s a comfortable feeling. It’s comfortable to be part of something my whole life. My examples of being a stranger are really quite minor. I’ve honestly never been *that* much of a stranger, and so it is difficult to put myself into that place, mentally. I can only recall the experiences that I have had, though small, of being a stranger.

However, God calls me to do that remembering. In the text that we read this morning, God calls the Israelites to remember what it was like to be a stranger. They are told to love the stranger, for they themselves were strangers in Egypt. It’s almost a reversal of the Golden Rule. Instead of *do unto others what you would have them do unto you*, it’s ***don’t do what was done to you when you were a stranger***. The Golden Rule looks forward; this rule looks backward for perspective, and then forward. You were a stranger—remember that, remember how that feels, and then treat strangers with love *because* you know what it feels like to be a stranger.

But do we remember? Are you like me, with few deep memories of being a stranger? Can we recall what it is like to be the stranger? Do we try to remember?

Chances are, we don’t. It’s not a great feeling, being the stranger. It’s not comfortable to be the one on the outside, looking in. No matter how well you are received, you are generally still the outsider. Most of us have had *some* experiences of being outsiders, and God is calling us to remember what that feels like, so that we treat the strangers in our lives with love.

The culture around us is telling us to fear the stranger, to distrust others, to be protective and insular. In the face of this, the Presbyterian Church adopted a slogan: “We Choose Welcome.”

We respond to fear, hatred, and anxiety, with love and welcome, knowing that we are *all* children of one God.

This idea of loving and welcoming the stranger permeates scripture, and it's not just about our churches – it's about where we live. Just a few places: Exodus and Leviticus have parallels to the Deuteronomy passage we read: Exodus 23:19: "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Leviticus 19: "33When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. 34The 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..." Hebrews 13:1-2: "Let mutual love continue. 2Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Romans 12.13: "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

This hospitality should not be just for those who come to worship or to those we encounter in places that we live and work. This hospitality to strangers goes beyond that. We are called to go out of our way to care for the stranger. Jesus made this clear in Matthew 25 verses 31-46, a passage which we might like to pretend isn't in our Bibles. Jesus said that when we give the hungry person food, when we give the thirsty person a drink, when we give the naked person clothing, when we take care of those who are sick, when we visit the imprisoned, we are doing all of that *to Him*. Oh wait, I missed one – He also said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." There it is again. This business about welcoming strangers is a big deal for us. It really is something we are called to do.

And the remarkable thing is that it is difficult to remain a stranger for long. Whatever side of the hospitality we are on, we do not remain strangers long – which is another Biblical lesson for us. Ephesians 2 mentions just this very thing. "9So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." Through Jesus

Christ, the walls that divide us are torn down. Through Jesus Christ, we are no longer strangers to the covenant. Through Jesus Christ, we are no longer strangers to each other.

We need to remember what it feels like to be a stranger, and then to remember what it feels like to no longer be strangers. We need to go into the world, making friends out of strangers, extending hospitality to the least of these, as Jesus told us. We must open our doors to those who are strangers, whether from this land or another land. Our lives are not meant to be lived in fear of the other, but to instead be open to others. Jesus told us that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love neighbor.

We need to connect with those who are now strangers for so many reasons. We've got to be less closed-up and insular. We need to expand our all-too limited worlds by honestly looking to see how both sides benefit from the interaction with the stranger. When we go to do volunteer work with others, it shouldn't be with an attitude that we are to do all the giving and they are to do all the receiving. We need to look to what God can teach us through the other. I have a small sign in my office which quotes an Indigenous Australian activist named Lilla Watson. It reads "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." We reach out to the stranger, as they reach out to us, knowing that we are all linked together. As Dr. King wrote, we are all "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Be open to the holiness of the encounter with another. Don't assume that you know just why this person is in whatever state they are in. Instead, listen for their story. Be open to what their experience of God has taught them and how it might teach us. Welcome the stranger!

Spend some time seeking out the stranger. And then spend some time being the stranger yourself. Going to places that are not our home is an excellent way to remember what it is like to

be the stranger. I think that we need to be more willing to go to those places where *we* are the stranger, those places where we don't feel at home. To experience – not just to remember – but to *experience* being the stranger. It's helpful to step outside of our comfort zones, to be the stranger, to not assume that we have all the answers, to take nothing for granted, but instead to go, listen, and see. We need to interact with people outside our everyday circumstances, to recognize our inter-connectedness with our fellow brothers and sisters, to walk hand-in-hand with those who start out as strangers, but soon become friends. We need to do it for their sake and we need to do it for our sake, for when we do we will find that Christ does indeed come to us in the stranger's guise. Amen.