

# Welcoming the Stranger (1/2)

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Romans 15:7-9. Ephesians 2:11-13, 19-22.

Since the theme for this convocation is “welcoming the stranger,” it seems fit for me to begin thanking you for welcoming this particular stranger into your midst. I am not a Lutheran. I speak with an accent. It is not even a German or a Norwegian accent! Most of you I had never met before. And yet, you have graciously invited me to be among you, and you have received me as one of you. That is indeed welcoming the stranger! I thank you for that. And I also feel humbled speaking to you on a subject you already know and experience.

On that basis, I frankly feel inclined to be silent and let your own experience and practice speak. I have little desire to bring coals to Newcastle.

But I come to speak to you on another basis. I come to speak with you as one who with you is held captive to the Word of God; as one who is judged by that Word just as much as you are; as one who with you seeks to be obedient to the Word of God.

“Welcoming the stranger.” There is no doubt that this is a crucial subject, and we do well in discussing what this means in terms both of advocacy and of the inner life of the church. But before we enter into a fuller discussion about how to welcome the stranger, there is a previous question that must be answered: Who is the stranger?

The answer is not as simple as we often think. Several decades ago, my own United Methodist denomination had a flourishing Latino congregation in a large city here in the Southeast. It was the time when the Interstate Highway System was being built, and since this congregation’s facilities stood on the right of way they were taken over by the government in exchange for their fair value. As the congregation debated where to build a new church, they were approached by the denomination with a very sensible suggestion. There was a declining church nearby whose building was in need of significant repairs. If the Latino congregation would invest its money in such repairs, the two congregations would be able to share the building.

This was done, and for quite some time the arrangement worked without a hitch. But eventually there were frictions between the two congregations. These grew to such a point that the bishop came to try to mediate the differences. After listening to both sides, he turned to the members of the Latino congregation and said, “I know this is difficult for you; but after all,

you must remember that you are guests in this church . . .”

The bishop was wrong on at least two counts. First, he was obviously wrong in that he did not know his facts. He simply took for granted that he knew who were the hosts and who were the guests, who really belonged and who was a stranger. A bit of research would have been in order. But he was too busy to look into the facts, and he thought his stereotypes would suffice.

But this was not his only error. He also erred theologically. He forgot that in the church we are all guests. We are all unworthy guests who have been welcomed and continue being welcomed by the grace of God. The church does not belong to us. We may have paid for the building. We may pay the utilities and hire the pastor. My grandmother’s name may be on one of the stained-glass windows. But still, it is not *our* church. This is a fact of which we are reminded whenever we celebrate communion, and say and hear the words: “This is *the Lord’s* table. Our Savior invites those who trust in him to share the feast which *he* has prepared.” The church is built around *the Lord’s* table, and it is therefore *the Lord’s* and not ours.

Thus, when we speak of “welcoming the stranger” we must begin by acknowledging that we

are *all* strangers. We may be strangers who have come to the feast a bit earlier. We may be the instruments the Lord is employing to set up the feast. But we are still strangers. The table does not belong to us, and neither does the church.

Our reason for welcoming is not that we are nice, friendly people. It is not that we feel pity for the stranger. Our reason for welcoming it is that we too have been welcomed. Paul says it quite clearly in well-known words in Romans 15: "Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you."

But there is more. Surprisingly, the only one among us who by rights is not a stranger is the one who "was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own did not accept him." The NRSV says "his own *people* did not accept him." But the Greek does not say that. The Greek actually says "he came to what was his own, and what was his own did not accept him." It is not merely a matter of his own Jewish people rejecting him; it is a matter of a cosmic rejection. Jesus was made a stranger in that which was his, in the world that was made through him. We are part of that creation which was his, and yet received him not. We are among those who made the Lord a

stranger—who constantly and repeatedly, through our sin, by our many rejections, continue making him a stranger. We are not hosts welcoming strangers. We are strangers who often refuse to acknowledge the host. And yet the Host who is repeatedly made a stranger continues inviting us to his table and into his church.

And then, to complicate matters there is still more, the Host gives us a chance to receive him as if we were the hosts, and he the guest. “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me . . . [for] just as you did to one of the least who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Who, then is the stranger? We must respond to that question at several different levels—levels that may seem contradictory, but are not. First, we are the strangers. We are the ones who are constantly welcomed, we are the welcomed people of God—welcomed, not because of who we are, but because of who God is. Secondly, the Lord is the stranger, the one rejected by his own, and just as it is through his death that we all live, so it is through his rejection that we are welcomed. And finally, one might even say that any stranger—no matter how bedraggled or how alien— is the Lord; the stranger is the opportunity the Lord gives us to welcome him. The way he puts it in Matthew 25, we either welcome the stranger or we reject the Lord. There is no

other option. Thus, our theme these days is not just for an inner circle of particularly committed Christians, for people who have a special interest in issues of immigration and of transcultural communication. We may have the impression that here we are preaching to the choir. And that may be true. But the message is for the entire people of God, who must heed it lest it be also true of us, that he came to his own, and we who were his own received him not.

But in the theme, “Welcoming the Stranger,” it is not only the “stranger” that needs to be redefined and clarified. We must also look at the matter of “welcoming.” If we look again at Paul’s words in Romans 15, it is clear that the welcoming to which he refers there is a welcoming after the style of Jesus Christ: “Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you.” “Just as Christ has welcomed you” does not mean only that we are to welcome others because we have been welcomed. It certainly means that; but it means much more. It also says something about the nature of *Christian* welcoming. It is a welcoming “just as Christ has welcomed us,” after the manner of his welcoming. He welcomed us who were strangers by himself becoming a stranger. Quite often welcoming is not just *receiving* a stranger, but also becoming a stranger. When the church welcomes the stranger in terms of advocacy and of seeking justice, quite often it finds itself treated as a stranger in its own community. Indeed, I

suspect that this is one of the main reasons why so many individuals and churches refuse to become involved in ministries of justice and advocacy for the stranger: their good standing in their own communities is more important to them than welcoming the stranger. This is a price they are not willing to pay.

At this point I am reminded of the words of Paulus Orosius in the fifth century. Orosius, a disciple of St. Augustine, had returned to his native Spain to find it overrun by the Germanic tribes whom the Romans called “barbarians.” Their invasions had brought much chaos and suffering. There was obviously much enmity between the former invaders, who now called themselves “Romans,” and these new “barbarian invaders”—much as today the new immigrants are resented by the descendants of the old immigrants. And yet, Orosius declared: “If the only reason why the barbarians have been sent within the confines of the Roman borders was that throughout the east and west the church of Christ will be full of Huns and Suevi, of Vandals and Burgundians, of diverse and innumerable believing peoples, then the mercy of God is to be praised and exalted, because so many people have attained a knowledge of truth that they would never have had without these events, even though it may be through our own destruction.” [*History*, VII:41]. This is what Christians mean when we speak of

“welcoming the strange!” Anything less than that is less than what the Lord requires of us today.

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.” In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

