

Proper 18 B 2021  
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Fr. Jim Cook

*“The Stranger in Our Midst.”*

A few years ago, I received a birthday card from my sister-in-law and her husband. On the cover, it read:

“Two guys your age are at a bar after 10 o’clock on a Saturday night. One of the guys has six beers, the other has three beers and two shots of Jack. Who’s going to get hammered first?”

And when you open the card, inside it read:

“It’s a trick question. Guys your age are never out after 10 o’clock.”

Good card! And to be completely honest, it has nothing to do with the rest of my sermon; I just thought it was funny, and maybe y'all could use a good laugh. Even at my expense. Because tomorrow is my birthday, and that's my birthday gift to you all. You're welcome.

Okay, so, when I looked at today's gospel reading, I didn't see anything really remarkable. It's comprised of two healing stories. In the first one, Jesus heals the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, which he does. And in the second, two men from the Decapolis ask Jesus to heal their friend, which he does. And they're probably somewhat familiar stories, and there's no real surprise in either.

And that's what I thought, until something remarkable occurred to me: in both stories, Jesus has left Israel proper, and has ventured into Gentile territory. In other words, in each of these healing stories,

Jesus is the foreigner.

Jesus, is the outsider. And,

Jesus, is the stranger.

And for reasons that will become clear in a few moments, that got me to thinking about "How do we treat the stranger in our midst."

This past week, Peggy and I were walking the neighborhood, and talking about my thoughts about this morning's gospel reading, and especially about that question about how we are to treat the stranger in our midst. And Peggy was reminded about the story of Abraham in Genesis 18.

One day, Abraham is sitting by his tent when, all of a sudden, he sees three strangers nearby. Abraham immediately hops to his feet and persuades the strangers to linger long enough for him to provide them with refreshments, and food for their journey ahead. At some point in the story we're told that Abraham unknowingly was entertaining — in one interpretation — angels unaware, or — in another interpretation — God himself.

Whichever interpretation you prefer — whether Abraham was playing host to angels, or to God, or simply to three random strangers who happened to be traveling nearby Abraham's encampment — the question still remains, "Why? Why did Abraham feel compelled to provide sustenance for three individuals he had never met?"

Scholars of scripture, might suggest that he was simply following the customs and mores of his culture. That is, in those days, when life was hard, and travel was risky, the followers of God were expected to show hospitality to whomever happened to be wandering by.

But I think there was a more compelling reason for Abraham to behave as he did. In Deuteronomy 10: 18, God says this to his people:

“You shall ... love the stranger” (Deuteronomy 10:18a).

In truth, the English translation doesn't do justice to the original Hebrew text. For in the original Hebrew, the text has more the meaning of:

“You shall act in ways that are beneficial to those around you who are not native to your land.”

“Love the stranger.” Or, if you prefer, “act in ways that are beneficial to those around you who are not native to your land.” That is the command of God.

Now, the natural question that arises from all this, is this: “Why? Why would God issue this command to love the stranger?” And the answer comes from the second half of that same verse. In Deuteronomy 10:18b, we find this:

“...for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (10:18b).

In other words, God was reminding his people that there was a time when there was a famine in the land they called home. And there was no life any more for them there. But they were welcomed into Egypt, where they were provided with everything they needed. And they established a new home for themselves there. God was reminding them that, when they were foreigners, when they were outsiders, when they were strangers, they were welcomed by the Egyptians, and given the opportunity to establish a new home for themselves.

Here's the thing: In the last two weeks or so, I've been thinking of the tens of thousands of refugees who'll be coming to America from Afghanistan. And, what sort of welcome will they be receiving when they get here? And, what does God expect of us as regards those refugees?

In the early 1990's, St. Francis Episcopal Church in San Antonio, hosted a family from Viet Nam. My recollection is that it was a very positive experience for everyone involved. In the early 2000's, St. John's Episcopal Church in Wichita, Kansas, hosted a family from Poland. And that, too, was a very positive experience for all involved. (In fact, my in-laws are still close to that family, even though nearly twenty years have passed.) Will a family from Afghanistan try to settle in Lindale or Tyler? I don't know. But this I do know: God's expectations of us will be the same as always:

“You shall ... love the stranger” (Deuteronomy 10:18a).

That is, God expects us to act in way that are beneficial to those who are no native to this country ... even if they're from

Afghanistan. And why that may, be is distinct from what I said earlier:

For the United States was created by, and is made up of, people who came here from many different countries, and from many more different cultures.

In fact, and unless you're a full-blooded American Indian, you are either an immigrant to America, or you are descended from immigrants to America. There are no other options available.

But that's alright, because, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, we are all dwellers in a land *that isn't ours, but God's* — that all good gifts are from God, even this country — and that we linger here for a short time, but not as permanent residents; for we desire, we look forward to, as Hebrews described it, a “better country, that is, a heavenly one.”

Now, the reality of the situation is this: any Afghans who come to this country, do so for the same reasons our ancestors did: to escape tyranny; or to find a better life for their families; or

simply to get a fresh start at a new life. Or, in other words, they came here for the exact same reason our ancestors came to America. And as our ancestors were welcomed, so much we welcome those who come here after us.

For, when we welcome them, we also welcome the God who has been watching over them.

Let us pray: O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.