

Welcome the Stranger

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

I am sure you're familiar with the Golden Rule which, in one form or another, is part of all world religions. But when did we last spend time with it? And what might happen if we heard it slightly differently, which I did a few weeks ago, when I heard,

“Do unto others as **they** would have you do unto **them**.”

As *they* would have me do to them? Not as I would have them do? Who's in charge here when it comes to another's needs and life?

I began to ask this question the week after George Floyd was murdered when I was wrestling, as many of us were, with where to go with this blatant example of racism and dehumanizing another.

The question rang a loud bell that I began to hear 30 years ago. At that time, as a single woman and mother, after 25 years of marriage, I unexpectedly discovered myself on the margins. Not the margins experienced by those who are born black, for as a white, middle class, very verbal, highly educated, Episcopalian I was extraordinarily privileged. Yet, with *heterosexism* alive and well, as a divorcee I was quickly seen differently and put on the margins.

However, being in divinity school at that time. I had the opportunity to examine the company I had in this place and to dig deep into the many isms that had been around me all my life but never recognized. Isms such as sexism, classism, racism, anti-Semitism, chauvinism, and so many others. Nudged by my own experience, I recognized that I had work to do. And this began with listening.

Listening, so I could become attuned to those on the margins be they persons of color; working class; undocumented; or gay, lesbian, bi, queer, trans, or gender non-conforming. The list could go on but the beginning lessons were quite simple and the question direct.

“Elizabeth, were you listening and are you now? Do you really see others as they see themselves?”

I doubt it, for as the African American theologian, Katie Geneva Cannon, reminded me in a class on Race, Sex, and Class Oppression, 90% of what I see is behind my own eyes. I needed to face that there is no value-free space and that we were not all equal.

So what was I to do with my white privilege that the feminist, anti-racist scholar, Peggy McIntosh, identified as “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”ⁱ

Feeling guilty was not/is not a useful option, so again I asked, as I do now, “What might make a difference?” And one answer I came up with was *access*. Seeing all the doors I was and still am able to seamlessly walk through, perhaps I am again being invited to offer such access to others?

I have been helped in this understanding by an African American classmate who said, “I have been pushing the wall off my back all my life. Why don’t you begin to pull it?” This demand to offer others access has never stopped. Standing in solidarity and opening doors for others deemed not to deserve the keys is something I hope to offer.

Seeing a Stranger as Other

But wait. Did you hear me now? Do I hear myself? How often do I, without realizing it, see a stranger not as a friend but as “Other?” How often do I objectify them rather than welcome them as an equal?

I bet there are some of you here today who are familiar with Martin Buber’s book, *I and Thou*, in which he explores what it means not to objectify another human being as, “He or She, a dot in the world grid of space and time,” but rather to see them as one with whom we have a relationship, a person who fills the world with their light.ⁱⁱ

Yes, with their light. You have heard me say that I believe that there is a divine spark in each one of us, how each infant brings to the world something new and full of potential. From birth, we arrive with a unique gift ready, like the seeds we plant, to be actualized into a unique being.

We welcome infants into the world no matter what color their skin or group to which they belong. No matter who they are, we instinctively offer them our love. But when they grow up, do we still feel this way if they don’t look or act like us? Speaking personally, I suspect I may see them as “other,” rather than greeting them as an equal welcomed into my life and house.

Jesus’ Welcome

This was not a problem Jesus had. Throughout his ministry, he welcomed persons of all backgrounds. They were not strangers to him. They were family whom he gathered round to share a meal.

Thinking about this reminds me of a Mobius strip. I’m sure you remember these but let me have the fun of illustrating this.

- Let’s start with a piece of paper that metaphorically represents a wide-open community.
- But then we hear that one particular group of people is not happy for they feel they deserve special privileges and power and decide to close their doors.
- So with the doors closed - metaphorically speaking – those with power are now inside of the circle while others – strangers perhaps - are on the outside, sort of like the pioneers did in circling their wagons against possible attacks
- But now ... if we open this circle again and twist the paper, there is this miracle.
- For when I begin to move around the inside where the group with power has sheltered I end up on the outside where others have been.
- And if I start moving around the outside I end up on the inside.
- The door is no longer shut.

Outsiders become insiders. Insiders experience being outsiders. Strangers become friends.

Scriptures about Welcoming Strangers

We find that the invitation to welcome the stranger exists in all world religions because, I believe, the underground river that feeds all their wells is One.

Throughout the world's religions, "[w]hether they confess faith in the same creator-God, they agree that the truth of their teaching hinges on how people treat one another: with partiality or justice, with dishonor or dignity, with cruelty or compassion."ⁱⁱⁱ

Within the Abrahamic religions, the mandate to welcome the wayfarer and stranger appears throughout their scriptures. For example, in the *Hebrew Scriptures* we read:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exod 23:9)

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, ... (Lev. 19:33-34:)

There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. You and the stranger shall be alike before the LORD; the same ritual and the same rule shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you. (Num. 15:15-16)^{iv}

And now I hear another bell whose inscription is often being quoted today, namely our country's Liberty Bell on which we find, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." Did those 18th century colonists, striving for their own independence from England, know that the verse they chose from Leviticus 25 refers to the Year of Jubilee when slaves were to be set free in accordance with Hebrew tradition? I didn't.

But certainly, as a Jew, Jesus would have known this. Just as he knew that, for him, those on the margins were to be welcomed.

In the *New Testament* there are numerous stories of Jesus honoring those on the margins who were not members of his group. The Gospels are full of these persons: the Canaanite woman who, though not a Jew, calls Jesus "Son of David," which means she believes that he is the anointed king of Israel foretold by the prophets; the Samaritan leper who showed him what true gratitude looked like; the Roman Centurion who in recognizing him as the Son of God illustrated more faith than those of his own tribe. To the Jews of the 1st century all these persons would have been seen as "other" but to Jesus they were as welcome as his own family might have been.

These outsiders significantly impacted Jesus' ideas on where one might find faith.^v And, according to his understanding, being privileged did not give one a sure path to the Kingdom. Rather, as we heard in today's scripture, *access* would be given to the ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, and welcomed the stranger.

This, today, is our invitation and challenge.

To quote the theologian Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and retired seminary professor,

However you define the problematic present-day stranger-the religious stranger, the cultural stranger, the transgendered stranger, the homeless stranger – scripture's wildly impractical solution is to love the stranger as the self. You are to offer the stranger food and clothing, to guarantee the stranger justice, to treat the stranger like one of your own citizens, to welcome the stranger as Christ in disguise.^{vi}

Strangers as Christ in Disguise

"Strangers as Christ in disguise." I came across one of these beautiful souls only a few days after George Floyd's death. While I was waiting dutifully in the COVID-19 line ready to leave a package at the UPS store, a white male came dashing by with two packages and stepping into the front of the line, said, "I will only be a minute." Attuned to what had just happened in Minneapolis, my instinctive response was outrage. What white male privilege was this? So my least charitable self told him that we were all in line and to wait his turn. He didn't understand. In fact, it turned out he had never waited in a COVID-19 line nor had he been to UPS. Did I give him a chance to explain? No, not I. But the gracious, young, African American woman behind me did, saying, "It's just fine. None of us is in a hurry. And this is how we do it now." He was embarrassed. I'd received another wake-up call. And I saw her, a stranger, as Christ in disguise.

"We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we see ourselves."^{vii} My voice is not more important than that of those I've not yet met. In fact, I expect it is less important. Human diversity is here to stay and our challenge, invitation if you will, is to embrace the wonder of it and to welcome strangers as neighbors and friends.

"The same God who came to the world in the body of Jesus comes to [us] now in the bodies of [our] neighbors ...and the real physical presence of [our] neighbors" demands that we listen to their truth, their story, rather than ours or the one we have assumed to be theirs.^{viii}

"Do unto others as ***they*** would have you do unto ***them***."

Striving for this is why, I think, rather than staying safely within my group, I keep putting myself into situations that are uncomfortable, so that I am forced once again to listen. I can't claim to be multilingual and speak a stranger's language nor to walk in their shoes, but I do want to hear their stories and try to see through their eyes. I resonate with Barbara Brown Taylor saying,

My sole hope is to give God one more chance to work on me, by coming to me in the guise of a stranger who does not speak my language, asking me questions I cannot answers.

Greeting the Stranger as Friend

The key to building a strong community is to open doors of welcome and then listen to those who, having been placed on the margins and treated as strangers, are belatedly to be greeted as friend. The invitation is to risk being authentically present with those we may not know for, to quote Martin Buber once more, “God is not in me, and God is not in you, but God is what is between us When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”^{ix}

Hope is now embedded in closing the distance between self and other, in welcoming stranger as friend. Amen.

ⁱ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," The National SEED Project, 1989. <https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>.

ⁱⁱ Martin Buber, *Martin Buber Quotes*, online June 13, 2020, <https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, (New York:HarperOne, 2019), 177.

^{iv} For a compilation of passages pertaining to strangers see Yale Divinity School's, "Biblical Texts on Immigration, Refugees, and the Stranger." Online 6/11/20: https://divinity.yale.edu/sites/default/files/news-file-uploads/bible_immigration_baden_yds_013117.pdf

^v Taylor, 196.

^{vi} Taylor, 110-111.

^{vii} Buber

^{viii} Taylor, 194.

^{ix} Buber,

Scripture Reading for June 14, 2020

Matthew 25:34-40 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'