

I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me 2

Old Testament Lesson Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:33-35; Deuteronomy 10:14

Gospel Lesson Luke 10:25-37

God's Torah specified how the people of Israel were to treat foreigners. Since foreigners were vulnerable in the land they could have been subjects of abuse and exploitation. God forbade all mistreatment of foreigners reminding Israel that they too had experienced oppression as foreigners in the land of Egypt. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan in which a despised foreigner did the will of God in reaching out with compassion on a Jew victimized in his own land. This sermon examines several Old Testament texts wherein God instructs Israel to demonstrate compassion on the foreigners.

When Stephanie and I landed in Taiwan in 2003 we began testing the waters of international living in a new cultural context. We experienced what it means to be a stranger in a strange land. We had to learn a whole new set of living skills that came so easily back in the USA.

The language was different; the signs were all in Mandarin. How do you get on a bus? Hail a taxi? Board the MRT? Order a meal at a restaurant? Everything is different, strange, threatening. Driving was chaotic. Why do motorists in the left lane turn right? Why do motorists in the right lane turn left? Simple things appear difficult. Ask directions and someone trying to be helpful may confuse you. We saw people burning money in front of shops, banks and business establishments. What does that mean? We saw food displayed on the tables in front of the shops. Are those free samples? Come to find out it was a Taoist practice to offer sacrificial offerings of money and food to the ancestors. Those were strange practices for us Westerners.

Stef and I attended the missionary training in Atlanta in 1992 in preparation for our work abroad. About a dozen Americans and Canadians trained with us. However, the Korean Methodist Church did not have a similar training for their missionary candidates. So they networked with the United Methodist Church and sent about twelve additional Korean missionaries-in-training to join us. Well, I was right at home in Atlanta. I had returned to my brier patch. But the Koreans, who barely spoke English, were going through culture shock. We spent about four months together. One Korean complained, "I feel like a child." They could not communicate their needs clearly. Simply things proved difficult. Getting around Atlanta was a challenge, especially without a car. The Koreans experienced a lot of anxiety and frustration. I felt for their dilemma. But we all would face similar frustrations as, after the training, we were dispersed to our various mission stations all over the globe.

I met with that cultural disorientation when my family and I began our lives in East Africa. Our command of the language was meager at best. We depended on kind people to assist us. We needed instructions and directions. It was frustrating to be reduced to a child in our knowledge of another culture.

You may get a feel of that kind of frustration when you try to work your television or air-conditioning unit with the remote control when it is all written in Chinese? I means, how many of you can program your VCR to record when you are not there? If you can please see me after the service!

Simple things a child knew we didn't know, like how to use the bathroom when it was just a hole. In Taiwan most toilets were squat toilets. A Westerner asked me, "Do you use the squat toilets?"

I mean, sometimes a little instructions are helpful, right? I found out that in Africa you are not supposed to eat with your left hand. That was a problem for me as I am left-handed. There was a reason for the rule.

We learned to greet older people with "Shikamo" and a little bow. The reply was "Marahaba". Respect for elders played a paramount role in Africa.

Often as foreigners we found that we were vulnerable to people cheating us as we didn't quite understand the currency. We didn't know the proper charge for taxis. I ordered a taxi and agreed upon a price that I later found out was exorbitant and grossly inflated to go a short distance.

One time a fellow missionary and I were in Nairobi. We spotted a fast food burger place names *Wimpy's* (A British fast food chain, I think). I sent my colleague in buy our burgers as I watched the car. There were no parking spaces available in the busy Nairobi business district. He came back shaking his head and laughing at himself. "What happened?" I asked. "Well, the sign said that a burger basket was 200 shillings. I gave the man 500 and he returned 250 to me. I said, "Hey the burger basket was only 200. I should get 300 in change. He said "No sir, the burger basket in 250, not 200." I pointed to the sign overhead and said, "But look, the sign says the burger basket is 250." He said "O sir, you should *not* believe that sign!"

We felt vulnerable in the market place. We felt vulnerable on the road. We made bad blunders with the language. We tried to use the Swahili we were learning whenever we could. Once we addressed a small church gathering in a village in Kiswahili. It was our first time there. Twelve people had been prepared for baptism by the lay preacher. The Lay leader introduced Stef and me to the congregation. Stef and I greeted the people with what we thought was a standard Swahili greeting: "We are so happy for this opportunity to pray together with you." In the worship service the congregation sang with gusto. The choir offered several special songs for the occasion. I preached and we all prayed. Then came the time for the celebration of Christian baptism. Only eight souls stepped forward. I administered the vows and the water. After the service the lay evangelist told us that what we actually said to the congregation in our initial greeting. We had greeted them with, "We are so happy for this opportunity to be *circumcised* together with you! My admiration for those eight brave souls who stepped forward went up. I could also understand the other four who may have thought they'd rather watch a Methodist baptism first before committing to it! That was embarrassing!

As foreigners, we felt vulnerable and in need of genuine care we could trust. Many of you will experience that sense of dependency, that feeling of uncertainty and vulnerability when they come to a new community, even a place like Burlington. The Bible people were no different. In fact, God specifically addressed this problem in the ancient world.

God specifically required Israel to love foreigners.

He did not mean that they had to conjure up good feelings about them. He did not mean whipping up sentiments of kind emotions. The commandments were radical in the OT times.

Foreigners were often enemies and could be spies. (2 spies in Jericho) Foreigners were different. You can't trust them. They may pose a threat. Yet the Torah taught,

Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Exodus 22:21 In another place it reads, *When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. Leviticus 19:33-35*

God's law specifically addressed treatment of the foreigners among God's people. They are to love and care for them. God is the God of all people, not just Israel.

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigners residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:17-19

God's love is all-inclusive. This was deep in the Hebrew mindset, yet often forgotten or neglected. One story told by the Rabbis concerned Abraham. On night Abraham found an old man travelling alone. He was out in the bitter desert cold. Abraham asked him to stay with him in his tent and prepared a meal for the old wanderer. They talked for a long time around the fire. Abraham finally said to him. "I worship El Shaddai, the Almighty and Most High God who made all things. Do you worship El Shaddai also?" The old man poked a stick in the fire, spat, and said, "No, I worship only the fire." Abraham was enraged and in his righteous indignation threw the man out of his tent and sent him out to face the bitter cold and darkness. He went back inside the tent. God spoke to Abraham. "Abraham, where is the traveler?" "I expelled him from my tent, O Lord. He doesn't worship you. He is a blasphemer and worships only the fire." "Abraham, Abraham, for seventy-six years I have put up with him patiently and showed him my mercy. Could you not endure him for one night?"

Israel had suffered under the Egyptians. They had a bitter experience of Egyptian exploitation. The Egyptians reduced them to slavery and treated them like cattle to serve Pharaoh's production-consumption system. They provided cheap labor with little or no benefits, no relief, no retirement.

They were exploited; used like draft animals.

I think of a story from the US of a large department store chain. The manager hired illegal aliens. They worked for him for about a month, but just before payday he fired them all and reported them to the immigration for deportation. Granted they were *illegals*, but isn't there something wrong about that? What about justice as fairness and compassion?

God called on Israel's deep memory to remind them of their own bitter experience of exploitation. They should not treat aliens among them that way. Why? God reminded them that as a people they had experienced that kind of vulnerability and exploitation. It was part of their historical experience. Israel's own experience of poor treatment at the hands of Egyptians served to remind them that they should not treat others that way. God evokes memory, *remember... "...for you were foreigners in Egypt."*

Yes, there have been taxi cab drivers who cheat those who don't know the system, the culture, the language. On the other hand, I have experienced wonderful blessings from those who wished to go out of their way to assist a foreigner in difficulty.

Now of the four Gospels, Luke's focused most on those who were different, the excluded. Stories of the hated tax collectors, women, foreigners, Samaritans, sinners, and Gentiles fill the pages of Luke's Gospel. The writer of Luke was sensitive to the question about those, 'who are in and who are out'. In an increasingly divided world of hate and exclusion, we experience the polarization; we taste bitter bile of hate and know the lines of demarcation and boundaries dividing people.

The divide grows between

Democrats vs Republicans,

Conservatives vs Liberals,

the rich and the poor,

the illegal immigrants,

the growing threat of religious bigotry and fanaticism,

the ugliness of racial tensions,

hatred of gays, etc.

Ours is a world filled with hate born of fear and exclusion. Some of it, sadly, done in the name of the Prince of Peace. It is a divided world caught up in a spiral of violence and retaliation. Dread of

the other and fear of the stranger plagues our lives. But not so Jesus.

Jesus includes the marginalized, the outsiders, and the vulnerable, as those to whom we should extend hospitality and from whom we accept hospitality. Jesus illustrated God's care for the excluded by accepting their hospitality and by offering them hospitality. He ate with those deemed the outcasts by the "serious Bible scholars" and the religious leaders. For this he drew the indignation of the religious leaders. Jesus ate with those with whom the religious and holy would not be caught dead fellowshiping. He met with rejection and hostility because of his practice of open hospitality. He weathered their censure and endured their criticism because, as the serious Bible scholars charged, "This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them." Luke 15:2TEV

Jesus told a parable intended to provoke thought outside the box. The Good Samaritan, the excluded stranger, showed kindness to a Jewish traveler who met with misfortune among thieves who beat him and left him half dead.

Once when I was in the Philippines, I was to speak at a school in Pangasinan several hours north of Manila. I was supposed to offer a graduation message to students in a school. On my way to Pangasinan I was winding through the mountains in a very unreliable car all by myself. On a steep incline the car came to a halt. It just stopped moving forward. The engine ran but nothing happened. No forward motion. I got out of the vehicle and offered a prayer. I was miles out of any village or town, alone and on the side of the road. After about fifteen minutes two Filipinos came by on a motorcycle with a side car. They inquired, "Sir, do you need some help?" I explained the problem with the car. They asked for nothing but said they would help. They turned around and headed back to the nearest town back down the hill. After a few little while they returned with a mechanic on board. He examined the car and tinkered around a bit. After a few minutes he concluded that the clutch was worn out beyond adjustment or repair. There was nothing he could do. I would have to get a new one. The two guys took him back to the village below and returned this time with a Jeepney (a Jeep-like passenger vehicle used widely in the Philippines for public transportation) following them. We hitched my car to the back and this driver, accompanied by the two motorcycle guys, towed me some fourteen kilometers forward to another town. They deposited me in garage where I could get me car fitted with a new clutch. They showed me how to take a bus to my destination. I was able to make my destination, deliver my message. The next day and return to the garage with a bus. The new clutch was installed at a very low cost and I was on my way home. These two young men, the mechanic, and Jeepney owner had all chipped in to assist a foreigner in distress. They asked for nothing. They simply showed Christ like kindness to a foreigner in need. I like to think that God sent those angels of mercy to assist me on the mountainside in the Philippines. They were my Good Samaritans. Thanks be to God.