

I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me

Genesis 18:1-8 (9-15); Hebrews 13:1-3; Matthew 25:31-40

Easter 5 May 22, 2011

What is it like to visit a church for the first time?

Can you remember the first time you visited a new church? Maybe the first time you came to Broad Street UMC? What were some of your first impressions? Can you remember? How were you welcomed your first Sunday here? Were people friendly? Did someone greet you with a smile? Did someone show you where to go? Did they and put you at ease? People come to church for the first time hesitant, not knowing where the rooms are, what the 'rules' are. Can children come into the service? Must children go out? Can we take communion? Can children take communion with us? Must we stand? Where are the children's rooms? What is the congregation is like?

Sometimes we Christians do a good job at making newcomers feel welcomed. Sometimes we don't. I spent a few weeks in the summertime each year for vacation. I get to go to various churches. I enjoy observing how people in the congregation react to a new face. Is there a welcoming atmosphere? Can I sense love? Are the people shy around newcomers? Are they hesitant to engage in conversation? Do people put you at ease or ignore you?

I went to a church in Tennessee, entered the service and sat down. The service was good; the sermon fine. I enjoyed the liturgy and the hymns. But after the final benediction and closing words the members flooded into the main aisle and headed for the door. I stood around waiting for someone to speak to me. I decided to not speak to anyone and see if anyone reached out to me a stranger. No one did. Not one soul made eye contact. I was a stranger and they did not welcome me. As I stood there, no one spoke with me. No one wanted to know if I was new in town and possibly looking for a church home. I finally got in line and filed past the pastor, shook his hand and got a "God bless you." That was all.

I wonder, "What if Jesus paid a visit to that church?" Would he have found a place of welcome? Would he be comfortable there? Would anyone meet and greet Christ the stranger?

I served as a pastor in several congregations in New Jersey before going abroad. The congregation celebrated their 150th anniversary while I was their pastor. About 100 people could sit comfortably. The congregation was loving, friendly; many "salt of the earth folks" attended and had been lifelong members. Most of the members were older, white haired senior citizens. However, they were not always welcoming to newcomers. I mean, they *wanted* to welcome people but were not sure how. Welcoming is a learned skill. They got a laugh out of telling one story from their past.

One day a middle-aged man named Jim came to the church for the first time. He entered, received a bulletin, and sat down in a pew. After a few moments someone came to him and said, "Excuse

me, you are in our seats”. He was a good-natured chap. Jim apologized and moved to another pew. A few moments later another church member approached Jim and said, “Um...I am sorry, but this is where our family usually sit.” Again Jim apologized and moved out of that pew into the aisle. He spotted two older ladies, sisters in fact, Rose and Ruth. Beside them was an empty seat. He thought it best to inquire as it seemed as though everyone had assigned seats in this little church. “Excuse me, but may I sit in that seat?” Jim asked. Rose and Ruth looked at each other and finally concluded, “Well, that was Charlie’s seat, but he died. Yes, you can sit here.” Folks...that is high-powered evangelism!

Now let me be quick to point out that a church can go over the top. When my family and I first arrived in the Philippines we began visiting different churches in our area looking for a home church. One congregation was very keen on newcomers. I was glad for the energy and effort. However, I’d say that their method proved off-putting. They met you at the door and labeled you with a visitor badge. Then in the worship service they made every visitor stand. Now I don’t usually mind standing or even giving my name, but they insisted that all the visitors remain standing as the whole congregation sang a welcome song. It wasn’t short either.

I felt my face flush. I felt singled out and embarrassed. My family and I were spectacles as the song went on and on. It was too intense. I appreciate the motive, but it made me squirm in discomfort. We didn’t go back.

There must be a happy medium we can reach between ignoring newcomers and looping them in until they feel themselves a spectacle. I ask WWJD? What Would Jesus Do? How Would Jesus greet the newcomers? How would Jesus have newcomers feel welcome?

People of faith practice hospitality

In the Bible, people of faith practiced hospitality. It was a key virtue, a practice that marked Christian discipleship. In an ancient Christian sermon that we call Hebrews, some first century preacher urged the flock to demonstrate their faith through hospitality. This writer encouraged Christians to *“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”* Notice, some have ministered to angels of God without knowing it. Many of us have heard the tale told by Leo Tolstoy about Martin the cobbler who welcomed into his home and shoe shop several people in distress only to find that each one was a different form of Christ. They were Christ incognito. In showing kindness to strangers, he had in fact ministered and entertained the Lord.

Angels are messengers of God. We can be fairly sure that the writer of Hebrews had in mind that magnificent story we heard read from the Old Testament today. Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of faith showed their faith through their reception of strangers.

Abraham, Sarah and the three strangers

Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers. One hot day Abraham sat in the opening of his tent when he spotted three travelers. He could have ignored them and hoped they would pass by. But Abraham was alert to reach out to people. As a man who ordered his life around faith in God, Abraham opted to draw these pilgrims into his fellowship. What lessons do we learn from the ancient father and mother of faith?

Welcomers take the *initiative*

Abraham and Sarah worked as a hospitality team. Notice what they did. Abraham ran to them. He made the first move. He greeted the three strangers and demonstrated the honor that was customary in that culture, he bowed deeply.

Welcomers attend to *immediate* needs

Next he invited them into the cool shade for a rest and washed their feet. I recall something in the Gospel of John where Jesus taught us about washing one another's feet. Abraham attended to the physical comfort of these travelers. He turned into honored guests. He wanted to refresh them.

Welcomers *invite* to share meals together

That was not all. He hurried to the tent to alert Sarah of their special guests. This called for a celebration and meal. Sarah he set to kneading dough and baking bread. Abraham ran to select a tender calf for the main course. Now this was no fast food dish. This took *time* to prepare. You don't whip up a calf stew in a jiffy in the microwave.

Welcomers accept *inconvenience* to show Christ's love

Abraham and Sarah accepted inconvenience. They diverted their own plans to reach out to these strangers. Abraham and Sarah gave not only the gift of water and food, but they offered quality time. Abraham conversed with the travelers. He had no idea that he was entertaining divine messengers. He was clueless that this was a divine appointment, but it was. God wanted to meet with Abraham as a friend. God wanted to disclose some plans to Abraham as friend with friend.

When I was 18 years old I left home and travelled about like a hippie nomad. I left in a '63 Chevy II and drove eleven thousand, seven hundred and sixty miles across America and Canada. I slept in my car or on the ground in a sleeping bag. I lived on canned food, beans mostly. I was on a spiritual quest. In California I was as far away from home as I had ever been. I was lonely and somewhat aimless. I decided to go to a church to which someone had directed me. It was called Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. It was a Wednesday night, I believe. I came in as a stranger and sat near the back. I enjoyed the music and a leader gave a kind of Bible study. After the service I figured I'd return to my car, drive to a wayside park along the highway, and catch some sleep. I was about to go when, a young man about my age greeted me warmly and asked my name and

where I was from. He showed genuine interest. "What are you doing in these parts?" "I'm traveling, just going here and there." "Where are you staying? You have a place to stay?" "Well, I'm OK. I stay in my car mostly." He said, "Wait, how about staying with us tonight?" He went to ask his Mom and Dad and they were glad to welcome me into their home. I followed them home in my '63 Chevy II. I got the first shower I'd had in a while. They washed my clothes. They called me to the dinner we all shared a huge pizza. That night I slept in a bed with clean sheets for the first time in weeks of being on the road. Not wanting to be a bother the next morning after breakfast I thanked them and left to continue on my journey. They begged me to stay with them longer, but my parents had trained me to not become a nuisance and I did not wish to wear out my welcome. I so appreciate how that blessed family treated me as though I was Jesus Christ come to their home. I was just a kid, 18, long hair, dirty from travel and dressed in a tee shirt and cut off blue jeans with sandaled feet.

Why did this family take me in like that? What motivated them? I think I know. I think you know. *"Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."* (TNIV)

Treat others as we would Jesus Christ

Over the next several weeks, new people will come to Broad Street UMC. Some will be here for the first time, unsure of what kind of church this is. What is a Methodist anyway? Some will be in need. Some may have been hurt by church and are shy about committing to anything ever again. Some are looking for a little love, a little sign that they can be loved. Our job is to treat them as we would Jesus Christ. We should welcome them as Christ welcomes them. Christ welcomed all. He turns no one away. He said, *All whom the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.* John 6:37

Christ welcomes all (and so should we)

Christ invites all, the wise and simple, the rich and poor, the religious and the sinner, The Pharisees and the tax collector, the faithful church-goers and those who find the church a strange and alien place, those full of faith those who struggle with doubt, the conservative and the liberal, the gay and the straight. We hear across the ages the generous invitation from Jesus Christ, *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* Matthew 11:28-30