

A Memory

I have a memory.

I'm probably ten or eleven years old, and a friend of mine invites me to go to their church with them.

Now, I had grown up in the Methodist church. I was very much at home in the Methodist church. My friend was inviting me to a very evangelical church, but I didn't know there were different kinds of churches out there. So I thought I would be walking into a setting where I would be completely comfortable.

That was not exactly what happened. As I sat down in my friend's church, I realized this was not what I was used to. It felt strange. That wasn't churchy music they were singing. Why is that guy preaching for over an hour? Why isn't the congregation praying? Why is it just one person up there praying? Why doesn't everybody pray together?

I've been thinking about experiences when I felt like a stranger, and that was one of the first I could think of from my young life: I went somewhere I thought would be familiar, and it ended up feeling strange.

Remembering Being the Stranger

So I'd like to ask you to imagine, to remember if you can, a time when you went somewhere and felt like a stranger.

Was there a time when you showed up somewhere and felt you didn't belong? Maybe it didn't last very long. Maybe you were welcomed shortly afterward. But was there a time when you showed up and wondered, "Is this place for me?" The first day at a new school or a new job. Moving into a new community. Or maybe, for you, it was that first Sunday in a new church. Or it could be as simple as walking into a room where everybody else knows each other and you are the only person who doesn't know anyone.

And how strange that feels.

Do you have that image in your mind, that time you felt like a stranger? Hold on to it.

Now hold on to a second image: what made it better. What made you stop feeling like a stranger? Or let me choose my words more carefully. *Who* made it better? Who was it at that new job who made you feel welcomed? Who was it at that new church who made you feel you truly belonged?

Hold on to the tension between those two feelings: the feeling of being the stranger, and the feeling that comes the moment you feel welcome.

What Scripture Says About the Stranger

The Bible has a great deal to say about how we are to welcome the stranger.

Go back to Leviticus, to Hebrew law. The people are instructed to treat the stranger, the sojourner, the alien, the foreigner, as one of their own. And God doesn't give this instruction willy-nilly. God gives a reason: *You do this because you remember what it felt like to be the stranger. You were strangers in Egypt. You were treated poorly as strangers in Egypt. Therefore you will live differently. You will treat the stranger well. You will treat them as your kin.*

Go back even further, into Genesis, to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is all about God bringing judgment on a people who refused to welcome strangers. The author of the letter to the Hebrews draws a direct parallel to this story when he speaks of people entertaining angels unaware. All the way back in Genesis, divine beings show up as outsiders, foreigners, and strangers, people who need to be welcomed. And some of God's harshest judgment falls on those who refuse to welcome the outsider.

Skip ahead to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul reminds us that we have all been strangers to God, and that God has welcomed us in spite of it. Paul uses a different word than *welcome*, though. Paul uses the word *adoption*. Though we were estranged from God, God has nevertheless adopted us, welcomed us.

And then we have to go to the Gospel of Luke, because Luke gives us what I think is the most beautiful image of welcoming the stranger: the road to Emmaus. Remember the story? Jesus has just died. The resurrection is still a kind of iffy, unknown thing. Two disciples are walking the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus, and on that road they meet a stranger. We know it's Christ because we are told so, but they do not recognize him until they reach their destination and offer hospitality. It is only when they welcome the stranger that they are able to see Christ in their midst.

Scripture is full of these stories, these teachings, even these laws about how we are to treat the stranger among us. And every single time, without exception, the instruction is the same: treat the stranger well, care for them, offer them dignity. Always reminding us that we, too, were once strangers. We know what it's like to feel estranged. And we also know what it feels like to be welcomed.

A Different Kind of Vulnerability

I think the interesting thing about welcoming the stranger is that it's something we can all relate to. As long as you are willing to put yourself out there in the world even a little bit, you probably know what it feels like to be in a place that feels strange. We know the

awkwardness, the unsettling feeling of not knowing what to do, which door to go in, where to sit, who we're supposed to talk to.

We know what it feels like to be the stranger.

And that's a little different from the other things Jesus names in our Matthew reading this morning. Jesus talks about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, visiting the prisoner. I have been hungry before, but I have never been *the hungry*. I have been sick before, but I have never been in a situation where I felt a desperate need for someone to come and care for me. I have never been a prisoner. I can imagine how it would feel to have no one come visit, but I have never actually been in a lot of those circumstances.

But I have been the stranger. I know what that feels like. Maybe not in the way some others have experienced it, but I know what it is to show up somewhere and feel, at least for a moment, that I don't belong.

So in this, I think Jesus invites us to get a little closer to what it feels like to be vulnerable. And I wonder if that is why scripture so often keys in on treating the stranger well. Because sometimes it takes our own experience of vulnerability to push us to see the vulnerability in someone else.

Seeing Vulnerability in Our Own Time

Does anybody follow local news? In the last couple of weeks we've had a bit of a kerfuffle over a drag performance downtown. I wonder if people would be so quick to pass judgment if they could understand the vulnerability in that community.

Does anybody follow national news? Recently, Jane Doe from Cornell has made national headlines. Particular attention has been paid to the inaction, several years ago, when she first reported the incident she experienced. And I wonder if we would be so quick to dismiss victims if we could feel the vulnerability they feel.

Being the stranger teaches us that vulnerability is universal. Nobody has a monopoly on being vulnerable. Sometimes we will be the ones on the margins, and sometimes we will be the ones trying to help. Sometimes we will be the ones who welcome and provide belonging, and other times we will be the ones wondering where to turn next. Nobody has a monopoly on being vulnerable, and Christ teaches us to care for the vulnerable in all these situations.

Because sometimes experiencing vulnerability pushes us to see the vulnerability in someone else.

One Final Thought: Caring Up Close

I do have one final thought. It doesn't tie in neatly with everything else, but I wanted to make sure I included it, because it kept coming back to me this past week.

Of all the things Jesus names, I think we have done our best at the ones that keep us farthest away. Let me explain.

Jesus talks about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and clothing the naked. A lot of us have become very comfortable doing those things at a distance. We feed the hungry from a distance by supporting our local soup kitchens and food banks. We give water to the thirsty by supporting policies that establish clean drinking water for everyone. We clothe the naked by donating our old, worn clothes to charities. Those are things that are very easy to do from a distance, and I think they're the things we've gotten best at.

But then Jesus talks about the things you *can't* do at a distance: visiting the prisoner, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger. Those are things you can only do by being involved in someone else's life. You can't just hold a nebulous idea of a vulnerable person and try to help out that idea. You have to get involved in the life of someone who is sick, or imprisoned, or a stranger.

So here is the final thought. The instructions to welcome the stranger, to care for the sick, to visit the prisoner are the ones that remind us we actually have to get involved in other people's lives. We can't just come into church and feel good about all the good things we've done. We have to do the legwork. We have to be in other people's lives. We have to build those relationships of care.

Because it is in those relationships that we see vulnerability up close and personal, that we recognize our own vulnerabilities, and that we discover our gift to care.

And what a gift that is. Caring done up close, when so often we would be much more comfortable caring from a respectable distance. What a gift it is to be instructed by Jesus Christ to be a people who care. And to know that in caring, we see the image of Christ in our neighbor.

Prayer

Friends, let us be in an attitude of prayer for a moment.

Holy God, we have been the stranger. And I pray that we have been the one who welcomes as well. We have known the vulnerability, but we have also known the healing.

Holy God, remind us again and again that in those moments when we offer hospitality and kindness, when we offer a word of hope in a life of so much despair, we see your face. We

see the living presence of our God: a God who chose to live among the most vulnerable of this world, and who chooses still to be seen in them.

I pray in Christ's name.

Amen.