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STRANGERS IN OUR MIDST

A few weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I stopped to talk to an elderly neighbor while out on a walk. Inevitably, it seemed in those days, our conversation quickly turned to the war.

Terrible times, we agreed, and – as my neighbor was a bit eccentric and not very tolerant, I waited patiently for him to go off on a tirade. I held my breath, however, as he gestured across the street toward the home of another neighbor and announced that in the wake of the attacks, he'd gotten several phone calls from friends inquiring about "that girl" over there – wondering if she was anyone to worry about.

"That girl," a 20-something woman with warm brown skin and a flawless Midwestern accent, rented the house with her very Caucasian husband. She used to apologize to me when her husband fired up his lawn mower early in the morning to beat the summer heat.

"I told them to mind their own business," my elderly neighbor said. "She works and, besides, she's from India." Well, *that* was a relief. After all, what if she had been unemployed and Arab? Or a destitute widow from Moab? Or a leper from Samaria? Or a homeless, Jewish street-preacher from Palestine?

Now, I'm sure all of us here are much too sophisticated to engage in racial stereotyping, and we certainly wouldn't act on it if we did. I mean, how many of us have assaulted anyone over the past six years since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? I didn't think so.

And yet, I wonder if anyone else here felt even the tiniest bit uncomfortable listening to today's readings.

Take Ruth, for example – an ancestor not only of King David but of Jesus of Nazareth. In a time and a place where women were pretty much nothing without husbands, here's a relatively young – and presumeably attractive, if you read the rest of the story – widow offering to give up a chance to find a new husband among her own people. Instead she insists on following her elderly, widowed mother-in-law to a country where Ruth will be viewed not as exotic but as abomination because she's not native. Naomi tries to explain this to Ruth, but Ruth refuses to desert her and even calls down a curse upon herself if her loyalty ever falters.

Fast forward a few hundred years to the Samaritan leper. Jesus himself wonders that of the ten people he heals that day, only the foreigner – doubly abominable as a Samaritan *and* a leper – bothers to stop to thank Jesus for giving him back his life. Jesus makes it clear that in acting rudely toward their healer, the others not only have offended a simple carpenter-turned-wonder-worker but their very God in heaven.

Why does it make me squirm a bit when I realize that in both readings it is foreigners – Ruth the Moabite widow and the unnamed Samaritan leper – who act decently? After all, I certainly haven't beat up on any foreigners lately. Some of my best friends are foreigners. Heck, my own mother's a foreigner.

So why *does* it make me squirm?

Maybe it's because when I look up the word "foreign" in the dictionary, I realize that its meaning goes way beyond national boundaries and ethnic origin. Sure, Webster defines

“foreign” in relatively neutral terms like “not of the country in which one resides.” But the dictionary also suggests words like “alien,” “extraneous,” “not our own,” “remote,” “not belonging,” “not connected.” “*Irrelevant.*”

Are you squirming yet?

If you are, maybe it’s because, like me, you can think of more than one time when your attitude and actions have reflected more the second set of meanings than the first.

No, I probably wouldn’t tell people of another generation that they’re out of touch with reality, but I wonder if I always take the time to understand where they’re coming from. At times I fear that I’ve made it clear by my lack of interest that their ideas are extraneous. Irrelevant.

No, I probably wouldn’t brand as a heretic someone who interprets the Bible differently than I do, but I wonder how respectfully I listen to that person. At times, I fear that I’ve made it clear by my remoteness that I not only can’t connect with such ideas, but I struggle to connect with such people as brothers and sisters in Christ.

No, I haven’t burned a cross on anyone’s lawn lately, but I can’t help but wonder if I did as much as I could have done to make our church a place where all people felt that they could greet one another in the peace of the Lord. At times, I fear that I’ve made it clear by my inaction and silence that some people just don’t belong among “our kind.”

No, you and I may not be prepared to start a new denomination or a new community or a new country because we disagree about how to run things, but I wonder if we always hold each other as gently and patiently as God holds us. At times, we have made it clear by our roughness and impatience that *we* really are the ones who are aliens in the kingdom of God.

I’m reminded of an African woman I once knew who sadly told me that there were white people in the church we attended who refused to shake hands with her during the exchange of the peace. I’m reminded of a large, progressive, predominantly European-American parish – much like this one, as a matter of fact – that had only a handful of people of color among its members. When I asked the senior clergyman for his thoughts about that, he replied that it saddened him too but that his congregation’s high-church style of worship just didn’t have anything to offer “those people.”

Are you squirming with me yet? If so, good. Because, to paraphrase the advice of a friend of mine about prayer, if someone says or does or simply *is* something that causes you to squirm, maybe you should pay heed to that person because God may be trying to catch your attention. And, in my view, it is particularly important for us to pay heed at *this* time and in *this* place, for we are in a perfect storm of transition that presents not only challenge but opportunity. As St. Matthew’s searches for an interim rector and delegates prepare for the diocesan Synod in the weeks to come, as our nation moves into a seventh year of war and an election year that seems to be shaping up as a free-for-all, I believe that it is incumbent upon each of us to *pay attention* to the voices of those we see as strangers.

Timothy Sedgwick, whom I’ve quoted before and who used to teach ethics up at Seabury seminary, describes as “strangers” all the people we often are tempted to treat as outsiders. Sedgwick argues that how we treat these others says a lot about ourselves and our own character. “Love is not a matter of the survival and prosperity of the individual or community,” he writes. “Instead, love is a matter of being drawn out from ourselves in caring for those beyond us... We are not fulfilled or reconciled in being completed but in being emptied of ourselves and drawn beyond ourselves... Love is know in its essence, at its heart for what it is, in the embrace of the poor and stranger” (*The Christian Moral Life*, 88-89).

The God-Man that we call the Christ may sit enthroned as a king in many of our images, but in his day he was the ultimate stranger. It's not just that he was homeless or unemployed or even the son of an unwed mother. He also was the descendent of foreigners who had a thing or two to say about compassion and loyalty, and the friend of some of society's most unwelcome characters. So, if you're looking for him in these fearful times, don't look for someone with a crown. Look for the Moabite widow. Or the Samaritan. Or any of the other strangers in our midst.