

Preaching that Welcomes the Stranger

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“Preaching that welcomes the stranger”? The very fact of being asked to write on this subject is already an indictment on our preaching. What is the gospel, if not the good news that, even though strangers, we are all welcomed by God? Ephesians puts it bluntly: “Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise. . . . But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:12-13). At the Lord’s Table—and therefore always in the church—we are never hosts, but always guests. The church whose worship is built around such a table never belongs to its congregation, to its board of trustees, or to any other governing body. It belongs to the Lord by whose gracious hospitality we are received as welcome even though we are unworthy guests. Thus, all preaching must welcome the stranger, because otherwise there is no place in the church for any of us—not even for the preacher.

Preaching on this basis is not an easy matter. After all, the congregation raised the money, did the necessary work to have the building built, the rooms furnished, the staff hired. Of course there is a sense that this is “our church.” Several decades ago, a white, Anglo Methodist church in Miami had such a building, but the membership was elderly and dwindling, and the building needed a lot of repairs the congregation could not afford. Nearby was an ethnic minority congregation of the same denomination that had a church too small for its rapidly expanding numbers. By agreement, this congregation sold its building, joined the older group, and used the money to make the necessary repairs. A few years later, there were conflicts between the two groups. Much to the chagrin of the minority group, when the bishop came to try to settle the dispute, he began by reminding them that they were guests of the original congregation in the building. The bishop was wrong on two counts. First, he did not know the history of the merger, that both congregations had invested in the building, but simply allowed his stereotypes to determine his agenda. But much more important, he forgot that both congregations were guests of the true owner of the church. There is no possibility of a congregation truly welcoming the stranger unless its members have divested themselves of any thought that the church is theirs. Romans 15:7 reads: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” To view ourselves as the hosts and not as guests destroys the very foundation of the church and its mission. Making sure that this is understood is the first task of the preacher.

In the Old Testament, Israel was commanded to love and respect the alien on the basis of Israel’s own history of being aliens: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:30). The very land of the promise does not belong to Israel, but to God, and Israel is permanently an alien in it: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev. 25:23). The people of God are always aliens repeatedly welcomed by a hospitable God. Israel is an alien in the land of promise, and all Christians are aliens and strangers even in the

church in which they worship regularly and in the places of worship they have built and now support. We are all aliens, but aliens welcomed by God. We are therefore no different than the strangers we seek to incorporate into our membership.

Therefore, for Christians as for Jews, remembering that we are God's guests, that our place in the community of faith is God's doing, and that the others who are strangers to us are not strangers to God, means that a look backwards into our own history is necessary for our present openness to the strangers now in our midst. Both Israel and the church are instructed to remember that they were once aliens. Remembering is essential in order to go forward into the present.

Remembering the past is only the beginning, however. In the present we must be clear about the actual identity of the strangers who could be in our midst. The first question must be: What in our congregation would make others feel like strangers? It is easy to jump immediately to the obvious: culture, language, etc. But there are subtler and more insidious ways in which we, often quite unwittingly, make others feel unwelcome. A student recently told us of her visit to a church when she moved to a new city to attend seminary. People greeted her in a very friendly manner, as they did all other visitors. She had attended services for several weeks when the church began a large capital-funds campaign, and the pastor declared that he knew that every family in the church could contribute at least five thousand dollars to the campaign. To this particular student, struggling with covering the expenses for her studies, this clearly meant that she could never belong there. She left and never went back.

It is not always the obvious that makes our churches places where strangers do not feel welcome. It is often more subtle matters. We deceive ourselves if we believe that, because we shake hands with everyone at the door, or because we greet one another when passing the peace, we are a welcoming church. There may already be some in the congregation who do not feel welcomed because of social or economic distinctions of which we are not sufficiently cognizant. It would be a helpful exercise for a pastor to list what he or she believes to be characteristics of members of the congregation: income and education levels, types of work, family structure, medical issues, etc., and then think about how many in the congregation do not fit that pattern. Perhaps the single mother or the older bachelor does not feel included in the kind of examples the preacher uses or the problems the pastor discusses. If the "strangers" already in the congregation do not really feel welcome, it is not likely that those outside of the fold will feel welcome.

What else, then, does all of this mean for our preaching? It means, first of all, that the theological points made above must always be part of our preaching. We must preach the gospel of grace, the gospel of our being received into the people and the household of God, not because of who we are, but because of who God is. We need to hold before the congregation who is truly the Lord of the church, and therefore on what basis we are included and others are invited. We may say at the communion table that this is the Lord's Table and not the church's, and therefore all are welcome; but that is true of everything in the church, not only the Table.

Secondly, it means that, even though our preaching must be concrete and deal with the specific issues of our community and congregation, it must also be catholic, constantly reminding us that we are part of a larger body spread throughout the world. Concretely, preaching that welcomes the stranger must always be preaching as in the presence of the absent stranger. If one would not say something in the presence of a

multicultural congregation, one should not say it in the presence of a monocultural congregation. If one would not say on a Cherokee reservation that God took away the surrounding land from their ancestors and gave it to its present owners, one should not imply it in a Thanksgiving service in downtown Atlanta. And the preacher should be up-front about this, constantly reminding the congregation that the people of God includes people of different cultures, nationalities, political persuasions, educational backgrounds, etc. A congregation that repeatedly hears this from the pulpit and comes to appreciate the preacher's sensitivity for the world-wide church will be ready to be more open and welcoming when that world-wide community appears at its doorstep.

Thirdly, preaching that welcomes the stranger affirms the particularity of peoples and cultures and then relates that particularity to other similar particularities. It is not a matter of forgetting about our culture or of saying that our culture is of no particular value. Those who cannot appreciate their own culture cannot appreciate other cultures. It is rather a matter of appreciating and affirming who we are and yet doing it in a manner that appreciates and affirms who others are. Recently we attended a service at a Presbyterian church whose congregation includes a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The highlight of the service was the "kirking of the tartans." It was a beautiful and moving event, with bagpipes, kilts, and the like. People marched in, each carrying the tartan of their ancestors. One could feel their pride in such ancestors. In marched the McClouds, the Campbells, and the McDavids, and we all stood and greeted them. Still, for those of us who were not of Scottish descent, something was missing. It was not that there was no González tartan—one could hardly expect that! It was rather that there was no acknowledgment that, just as the McDavids have elements in their culture and traditions which have made an important contribution to the church and to who we are, so have the Gonzálezes and the Kims and the Changs. Nor was there anything about the history of oppression in the midst of which the church in Scotland had been a strength and resource, pointing to the parallels in the history of Christians in other cultures. A very brief word would have sufficed. But that word was never spoken, and we were left looking in from the outside at what is without doubt a beautiful tradition, but not ours.

It is possible to affirm the value of different cultures and traditions without undervaluing others. When this happens, all gain something. Some years ago, in a Catholic church in Appalachia that was having great difficulties negotiating the tensions resulting from the influx of immigrants from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, a Vietnamese member declared that a certain traditional hymn in the Mass was particularly meaningful to him, because that was the last hymn he heard his father sing before he was taken away by force, never to be seen again. Deeply moved, the congregation learned the words in Vietnamese. When they sang these words that they did not even understand, the hymn itself gained new meaning for the entire congregation. They welcomed the stranger, not by condescending to him, nor even by telling him, "you are as good as we are," but by sharing his pain and by accepting and celebrating his contribution to the life of the whole.

Fourthly, preaching must be supported by the whole of worship. The entire service must be an act of welcoming the stranger—even of welcoming the stranger who for the present is absent. A crucial place where this can be done is in prayers of intercession. For whom do we pray in church? Do we pray only for our ill and our bereaved? Or do we pray for the entire church, catholic, present, and absent, and for

all of God's creation? Recently, we were at a service in a Disciples church in Puerto Rico. When the time came for the prayers of intercession, the pastor led us in prayer not only for his congregation, but also for every other church in the community, Catholic, Pentecostal, and Independent. We prayed for any who might be visiting the church for the first time, and we prayed for ourselves, that we might know how to receive them in our midst and show them the love of Christ. In an island where tensions between Catholics and Protestants have been intense, this church was teaching itself how to welcome the stranger.

A congregation that is concerned about welcoming the strangers that are in the neighborhood needs to undertake a study of who is actually there. A look at the census tracts, at the school population, at the clerks in stores as well as the customers, could begin to tell us who are the newcomers in our midst. Then we could see what needs these new neighbors have—help with English, transportation, tutoring for children, legal services, help with governmental agencies, etc. Are there resources in the congregation that could assist? Are these new neighbors Christians? Do they need a place for worship in their own language, or would they like to participate in our worship? Do they need pastoral care (which could be provided by more than the pastor)? And, equally as important, what will they bring with themselves—beyond numbers and perhaps money—that would enrich the life of our congregation? What is God offering us through them? By asking these questions we become ready to receive them with true hospitality, without condescension or patronizing. Only after some clear awareness of who the strangers are that we wish to welcome can concrete plans be made. Often it is by a chance encounter of a member with someone who is part of the new population in the community that contact is begun, but the preaching can be the cause of that member's openness to seeing the new neighbors and bringing their concerns to the congregation.

We have spoken of the need to look to the past, to remind ourselves that we are all guests, aliens brought into the People of God through Christ. We have seen the need to look around us in the present, to make the congregation open to see these new neighbors and how we can welcome them. That leaves the future, the ultimate future of the city of God, as the rationale, the cause of our behavior toward the stranger now. It is not at all difficult to find such a rationale. Think of the words of Jesus, that in the future people will come from east and west and north and south to sit at table in the kingdom (Luke 13:29). In the vision of John of Patmos, repeatedly the future city is to be populated by people from every tribe and language. If the future for which we hope, the kingdom whose coming we ask for in the Lord's Prayer, is to be such a multicultural place, then surely we should begin to practice for our future abode by experiencing a multicultural church to the degree which is possible in the present.

When we look at today's events in the light of God's promised future, we might even view the present enormous migration of peoples, tragic as it is in so many cases, as an opportunity we have been given to experience even now the future God has for us all. In fifth-century Spain, at the time of the Germanic invasions, which threatened much of what he cherished, Christian writer Paulus Orosius declared that, if through this means God was bringing Goths and Vandals, Suevi and Alani, into the household of faith, and thus giving the church a glimpse of its truly catholic calling, this was reason to praise the mercy of God! Our situation is different than that of the fifth century. Many of our new neighbors are Christians, and the reason they are here is not

their strength and our weakness, but rather the poverty and oppression in other parts of the world and the relative abundance and freedom here. But the sentiment can be the same. Civil wars, famines, poverty, lack of opportunity even for basic survival have led to the greatest displacement of peoples that history has seen. The reasons for these migrations are not good. In fact, they show the fallenness and evil in the world. Yet God is able to bring something good, something that is a foretaste of the final goal of history, out of that evil. And because of that, we and other Christians around the world have the opportunity to experience a foretaste of that final banquet in the City of God for which we pray.

The future for which we hope and out of which we must live puts both our past and our present under a different light. Our past is not just the glorious deeds—and egregious errors—of our ancestors. It is also the manner in which God welcomed them and us, our culture and our traditions, strangers though we were. The present is not just the moment in which we happen to live—good or bad as such a moment may seem to us. It is also the opportunity God gives us to witness to the promised future and to catch a glimpse of it.

In this season of Pentecost, we must see the outpouring of the Spirit as God's gracious act of welcoming the stranger and preparing the church to be equally welcoming. Part of what happens in Acts 2 is that strangers are welcomed in an unexpected, unexplainable way, and this happens by the power of the Spirit. Parthians and Medes, Elamites and all the rest, hear "about God's deeds of power" in their own tongues. The "great deeds of power" are told amidst a miracle of communication that is in itself a great deed of power. This is one side of the coin. The other side is that the Spirit empowers the small community of the disciples to be welcoming in ways that would enrich their faith and experience, but would also change the church forever. The language of the disciples would now share its place with many other languages. This is something the disciples could not have done on their own. Furthermore, probably if asked, at least some of them would have preferred to keep things as they were, neat and tidy—decently and in order. But the presence and power of the Spirit enables both the original disciples and the latecoming Medes and Elamites to hear and share in the same great deeds of God. Eventually, others would hear and praise in English and in Swahili and in countless other tongues and other ways. And all of this, by the power of the same Spirit.

Finally, returning to our first comments on the theological grounding for all of this, it may be well to capitalize our theme in a way that makes it clear who the stranger is whom we really welcome: "Preaching that welcomes *the Stranger*." Our preaching and our church life must welcome this Stranger who is none other than the One who said, "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me"! It is in welcoming the stranger that Christ comes into our worship service. He is there, both as the Lord of the church and as the stranger whom the congregation truly welcomes. He is the one who is hungry and thirsty, but also the one who is in need of help adapting to a new and different culture, the one whose children need help in school or help negotiating the many bureaucracies that govern our life. In the stranger that comes to our door, our loving God gives us a glimpse of the Stranger who one day will say to us, the great multitude of believers from all tribes and nations, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, for I was a stranger and you welcomed me."