

Protagonist Corner

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These days, “welcoming the stranger” has become a common theme in many churches and denominations. This is understandable as part of a valid and needed reaction to the growing xenophobia that seems to be gripping the nation. Too often, however, we move so quickly to our own role as do-gooders that we forget to ask the previous question, “Who is the stranger?” The answer is not that simple, for it is not just a matter of describing the stranger, but rather of determining first of all who among us is the stranger, and who the host.

Several decades ago, my own United Methodist denomination had a flourishing Latino congregation in a large city here in the Southeast. It was the time when the Interstate Highway System was being built, and since this congregation’s facilities stood on the right of way, they were taken over by the government in exchange for their fair value. As the congregation debated where to build a new church, they were approached by the denomination with a very sensible suggestion. There was a declining church nearby whose building was in need of significant repairs. If the Latino congregation would invest its money in such repairs, the two congregations would be able to share the building. This was done, and for quite some time the arrangement worked without a hitch. But eventually there were frictions between the two congregations. These grew to such a point that the bishop came to try to mediate the differences. After listening to both sides, he turned to the members of the Latino congregation and said, “I know this is difficult for you; but after all, you must remember that you are guests in this church....”

The bishop was wrong on at least two counts. First, he was obviously wrong in that he did not know his facts. He simply took for granted that he knew who were the hosts and who were the guests, who really belonged and who was a stranger. A bit of research would have been in order. But he was too busy to look into the facts, and he thought his stereotypes would suffice.

But this was not his only error. He also erred theologically. He forgot that in the church we are all guests. We are all unworthy guests who have been welcomed and continue being welcomed by the grace of God. The church does not belong to us. We may have paid for the building. We may pay the utilities and hire the pastor. My grandmother’s name may be on one of the stained-glass windows. But still, it is not *our* church. This is a fact of which we are reminded whenever we celebrate communion and say and hear the words, “This is *the Lord’s* table. Our Savior invites those who trust in him to share the feast which *he* has prepared.” The church is built around *the Lord’s* table, and it is therefore *the Lord’s* and not ours.

Thus, when we speak of “welcoming the stranger,” we must begin by acknowledging that we are *all* strangers. We may be strangers who have come to the feast a bit earlier. We may be the instruments the Lord is employing to set up the feast. But we are still strangers. The table does not belong to us, and neither does the church.

We are all latecomers to the feast. The Epistle to the Ephesians puts it bluntly: “Remember that you were once without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise” (2.12). We are all aliens to Israel,

brought to join the people of God by the gracious love of the same one who chose Israel, not because of who Israel was, but because of who God is. It is only as a result of the grace of God that the words apply to us: “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (2.19). We who by nature were aliens, by grace have been made citizens—no matter whether we have immigration papers or not! We who by nature were strangers, by grace have been made part of the family—no matter what our race, last name, or national origin!

Our reason for welcoming is not that we are nice, friendly people. It is not that we feel pity for the stranger. Our reason for welcoming is that we too have been welcomed. Paul says it quite clearly in well-known words in Romans 15: “Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you.”

But there is more. Surprisingly, the only one among us who by rights is not a stranger is the one who “was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own did not accept him.” The NRSV says, “His own *people* did not accept him.” But the Greek does not say that. The Greek actually says, “He came to what was his own, and what was own his did not accept him.” It is not merely a matter of his own Jewish people rejecting him; it is a matter of a cosmic rejection. Jesus was made a stranger in that which was his, in the world that was made through him. We are part of that creation which was his and yet received him not. We are among those who made the Lord a stranger—who constantly and repeatedly, through our sin, by our many rejections, continue making him a stranger. We are not hosts welcoming strangers. We are strangers who often refuse to acknowledge the host. And yet the Host who is repeatedly made a stranger continues inviting us to his table and into his church.

And then, to complicate matters still more, the Host gives us a chance to receive him as if we were the hosts, and he the guest. “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me . . . [for] just as you did to one of the least who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Who, then is the stranger? We must respond to that question at several different levels—levels that may seem contradictory, but are not. First, we are the strangers. We are the ones who are constantly welcomed; we are the welcomed people of God—welcomed, not because of who we are, but because of who God is. Secondly, the Lord is the stranger, the one rejected by his own, and just as it is through his death that we all live, so it is through his rejection that we are welcomed. And finally, one might even say that any stranger—no matter how bedraggled or how alien— is the Lord; the stranger is the opportunity the Lord gives us to welcome him. The way he puts it in Matthew 25, we either welcome the stranger or we reject the Lord. There is no other option.

But in the phrase “welcoming the Stranger,” it is not only the “stranger” that needs to be redefined and clarified. We must also look at the matter of “welcoming.” If we look again at Paul’s words in Romans 15, it is clear that the welcoming to which he refers there is a welcoming after the style of Jesus Christ: “Welcome one another . . . *just as* Christ has welcomed you.” “*Just as* Christ has welcomed you” does not mean only that we are to welcome others because we have been welcomed. It certainly means that, but it means much more. It also says something about the nature of *Christian* welcoming. It is a welcoming “*just as* Christ has welcomed us,”

after the manner of his welcoming. He welcomed us who were strangers by himself becoming a stranger. Quite often welcoming is not just *receiving* a stranger, but also *becoming* a stranger. When the church welcomes the stranger in terms of advocacy and of seeking justice for those whom society considers strangers and aliens, quite often it finds itself treated as a stranger and an alien in its own community. Indeed, I suspect that this is one of the main reasons why so many individuals and churches refuse to become involved in ministries of justice and advocacy for the stranger: their good standing in their own communities is more important to them than welcoming the stranger.

Some years ago, my wife Catherine and I were visiting at a Sunday school class where the subject was evangelism, and the guest speaker was a distinguished Presbyterian theologian. The first thing he told us was that the Presbyterian form of government is so well developed and so refined that one has to be at least a second or third generation Presbyterian before one could fully understand it and see its beauty. Clearly unintentionally, but in fact, he was calling his hearers to go out and invite people to join a church in which perhaps their children, but more likely, their grandchildren, will finally fit!

I suspect this was something of an exaggeration. But to the degree where it may be true of any Christian body, welcoming the stranger may well require some adjustments in our system of government, in our worship, in our entire way of doing things. Welcoming is not simply saying, "Here we are. We think we have something good to offer you. Come and enjoy it. But do it on our terms. Become one of us, and then you will be welcome."

This is not easy or cheap. It was not easy or cheap for Jesus to become a stranger so that we might become citizens. To become a stranger for the sake of welcoming the stranger will require different things in different settings, but none of them is really easy. When it comes to issues of justice and advocacy, it may well imply going against the grain of commonly held opinions and values. It may even require going against the grain of the law. When it comes to issues of welcoming the stranger into the church in which we ourselves are no more than welcomed strangers, it implies placing mission ahead of polity and faithfulness ahead of prestige. Placing mission ahead of polity means that if at any point our polity hinders our mission, it is the polity, and not the mission, that must give way. And placing faithfulness ahead of prestige means that we must not treat our name as Methodists, or as Presbyterians or as Lutherans, as if it were a brand name to be protected, but as a blessing to be shared—and transformed in the very process of that sharing.

A church that is afraid of change or of failure will not have the imagination necessary to view a future shared with the supposed "stranger," and it will not endorse anything whose success is not fairly well assured. A church that allows polity to limit mission also allows polity to limit imagination and precedent to limit creativity: if something has not been done before, or if it risks failure, it should not be done. If it is not in the Discipline or our Book of Order, it cannot be done. Nor should it be done until the budget is assured.

But in so doing we forget that we are to welcome the stranger *just as* Christ has welcomed us—that same Jesus Christ who put the need of the sick ahead of the Sabbath laws and whose victory came through the utter failure of the cross. Again, and finally, "Welcome one another . . . *just as* Christ has welcomed you."