



The Church We're Called to Be:
"WELCOMING STRANGERS AND ALIENS!"

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Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" – a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

When I was a college freshman I drove from Michigan to New York City with two of my friends. Our mission was to locate the father of one of my friends. My friend's mom and dad were divorced years before, his dad had moved to New York, and his kids had lost touch with him. So on Spring Break we took off in my parents' truck. We got to upstate New York, in the Finger Lakes, and found ourselves driving in what was then called the worst blizzard in New York state history. I can't verify that, really, but when a huge semitrailer truck jack-knifed after heading the wrong way on the interstate, the police forced us off the highway and into the little town of Canandaigua.

My friends were panicked as we slipped and slid through that little town. It was far too cold to sleep in the cab in the back of the truck. We certainly had no funds to stay in a hotel and they were all full with stranded travelers anyway. So they were saying, “What are we going to do?” And I told them, “Do Not Panic. I know precisely what to do.” We stopped at the first pay phone we found – yes, this was in the last millennium, but you’ve seen them in classic movies – and I got out in the wind and the driving snow, found the phone book, and I called the number in the Yellow Pages for the local United Methodist pastor. His wife answered the phone at the parsonage. I described our plight and she gave me directions and said, “Come right on over!”

When we arrived, she had bedrooms prepared for us, hot baths, and soon hot food on the table. Naturally my friends were amazed. “Gary, you mean you can do this wherever you are and they’ll put you up?” “Of course,” I said, “Methodist preachers are always willing to do this!” I don’t know how I came up with that notion. I must have heard it somewhere. Someone must have told me this, probably at church camp. I’ve found hotel rooms for many people through my ministry, but I still keep waiting for the payback for this bravado: for someone to knock on my door in the middle of the night needing shelter. And through the years, this preacher’s wife has been a symbol for me for the hospitality of Christ’s Church. She was a Saint. She didn’t pause or ask her husband if she could do this. She simply responded to our need out of her Christian love.

I will confess to you that the times I have felt closest to God have been those times when others have taken me in, picked me up from the side of the road, provided me with a bed when I had none, and given me shelter in some very bad storms. I probably would not be in the church today had it not been for saints such as these who brought me in, who embodied the gracious love of Jesus Christ.

It is good for us to remember who we are, and whose we are, and who we are called to be as the church of Jesus Christ. We are called – no, actually charged – to be God’s saints by breaking down the barriers that divide us, creating peace, welcoming those who are strangers and aliens to us.

This is what the early Church, those closest to Christ, did. They were a group of people who had every reason to be afraid of who might appear at their door. Until the middle of the fourth century, they were a forbidden group, outlawed by the Romans – and the Romans ruled everywhere that the church existed. Nevertheless, every household of Christ’s followers quietly kept three little things at the ready. They would be sure to keep a little stub of a candle, a piece of hard bread, and an extra bedroll in case Christ should return in the person of a stranger. Christ, they knew, comes incognito, in disguise, in the one you don’t expect.

Christ comes in the person of the least, the last and the lost. Christ comes in the form of three frozen, shaggy boys looking for shelter in the storm. Christ comes in the form of the stranger. This belief was so strong, the writer of Hebrews wrote, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” And so a candle stub, a piece of bread, an extra bedroll were always kept ready.

Early Christians knew very well what it was like to be strangers and aliens. The early church was given birth as a community of strangers, rejected by the dominant religion of Israel. Paul reminds

them, “You were Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision.’ Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens excluded from the community of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

Jesus lived in a highly polarized and conflicted time, much as we do. The Pharisees hated the Sadducees, the Sadducees hated the Zealots, the Zealots hated the Iscarii, the Iscarii hated the Herodians, the Jews hated the Romans – they were all divided up. And the Jews had all types of peculiar laws that rubbed up against other people: dietary laws which prevented them for sharing a table with others; Sabbath laws that prevented commerce; purity laws that created even more distance; not to mention religious beliefs which couldn’t be harmonized even with the easy-going Roman system of religious observance. It was nearly impossible to break into this group; they threw up walls everywhere. Their laws were designed to keep people out!

And into this environment, Jesus came. Jesus taught them, saying, “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” Many Jews and Gentiles were attracted by what he taught and by the amazing impact he had on them.

And a very scary thing happened: barriers began to be broken down. Jesus destroyed the boundaries by including people. He became their peace. He wouldn’t let a single soul be left out or disregarded. Christ welcomed all into God’s family.

None of this was lost on the Apostle Paul. Now, it would have been far easier for Paul to create new barriers. It would have come naturally to a former Pharisee who was used to straining after every jot and tittle of the Law. It’s always easier to be controlled by fear. Fear of the stranger. Of the alien. Of Ebola. Of whatever can be used as a tool to threatens us. And so we divide our world into “Us” and “Them.” And we think it’s fine to hate the “them,” the stranger, the alien, the ones different from “us.”

A mountain climber was traversing a perilous cliff when he heard a panicked shout. It seems another climber had become trapped in a cleft down below, and needed someone to rescue him. “Just a minute,” said his rescuer, “I’ll throw you a rope.” “Thank the Lord you came along!” came the reply. “Oh, you’re a Christian?” the rescuer said, throwing him the rope. “That’s great, so am I! Catholic or Protestant?” “Protestant!” he answered, tying the rope round his waist. “That’s great, so am I!” said the rescuer, as he began to pull the man up the slope. “Methodist or Baptist?” “Baptist!” the fellow answered.

“That’s great, so am I! General Baptist or Particular Baptist?” “Particular Baptist,” he answered. “That’s great, so am I! Particular Baptist Eastern Confession or Particular Baptist Western Confession?” “Western Confession,” the fellow answered as he got near the top. “That’s great, so am I! Particular Baptist Western Confession Reform of ’87 or Particular Baptist Western Confession Reform of ’95?” “Reform of ’95,” he answered. “Die, you crazy heretic!” said the rescuer, and he let go of the rope!

Loving is great – in principle. It's loving people who we think are strange, are wrong, are different that always trips us up. It's that "Love those who hate you so you can be children of your heavenly Father" that is so hard for us to swallow. But Paul was faithful, not fearful, because Paul had been changed by Christ. Christ had broken down the walls inside him. He wrote: "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

In fact, Paul saw Christ breaking down the most entrenched barriers of his time: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

You and I are called to be "citizens with the saints." We do that by eliminating barriers to the proverbial stranger and alien. It was one of the great distinctives of the early Church. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who died an untimely death, said it succinctly: "God comes to us in the midst of life. First, God comes to us in Scripture. Secondly, God comes to us inside ourselves. And thirdly, God comes to us in the face of the stranger."

Dr. Fred Craddock tells the story about a stranger, an elderly woman he met on a train in Germany back in his days as a student. His German was poor, but on this long train ride he did his best to visit with a woman in the same compartment who turned out to be a Christian from East Germany, which was still under communist domination at the time. He learned they had let her travel to West Germany because she was so old. "Who cares if you don't come back?" they told her. "You're just an old woman." She asked what it was like to be a Christian in America and he asked what it was like to be a Christian in East Germany. She had an old music box that played "Silent Night," and they sang it together in German. He had a sandwich he had bought, made with that hard German bread, so he had a tough time breaking it in two. She had an orange, which she peeled and halved. They shared half a sandwich and half an orange. Craddock says "It tasted a little like wine and bread – communion with a sister in Christ." Then their train arrived, and she was on her way back to Rostach in East Germany. "God go with you," they each said and went their way.

Craddock shared this story in worship in Springfield, Missouri, several years later. "I thought of her tonight," he said. "We were different, so very different from one another. In fact, I got to thinking how far it is from here to Rostach, Germany. Do you have any idea how far that is, how many hundreds, how many thousands of miles it is? I checked the atlas. It's across that table, Christ's Table. That's how far it is."

Think of that. Do you know how far it is from downtown Detroit to the Risen Christ in our stained glass window here on your right? When we are one in Christ, it's just across this Table.

Do you know how far it is from where we are to our Christian brothers and sisters on the theological left and right wings of the church, from the richest among us to the poorest among us, from the most accomplished to the least well known? When Christ is our peace, it's really just across this Table.

Do you know how far it is from here to our Christian brothers and sisters in Panama where our mission team will soon go, or from here to the Czech Republic, or to Cuba or the Philippines? It's really just across this Table – for Christ has made us one. Christ seeks to break down the dividing wall of hostility. For remember: once we were strangers and aliens who now are grafted into Christ's body.

All those years ago, I don't think that pastor and his wife looked at me and my shaggy, frozen friends as embodiments of Christ when we called upon them. But those saints most assuredly became Christ for us. For they didn't shut us out. We were as alien as we could be to those good people – and they offered us Christ's peace and welcomed us into their family.

The church is called to be the Love of God by welcoming those who are strangers to Christ's family. It is the way of Christ and it is the church we are called to be. I pray that in some way, you and I might keep the stub of a candle, the piece of bread and the spare bedroll near at hand – and ready. For Christ has broken down the dividing wall of fear and hostility, creating in himself one new humanity, and thus making *peace*.