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Foreigners

Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf

I've taken a lot of mission trips in my twenty years of ministry, most at my previous church and most with youth groups. These trips were not trips meant to evangelize, but were usually to other Christian communities where we could offer our resources and labor to help them. We would usually stay in a community center or church. The people of the community would work alongside us, arrange our meals and we would worship together. We often also spent time with children of the community who would come for a simple kind of Sunday school with us.

Obviously we took these trips with the intention of sharing our resources with communities facing poverty and limited material means. But these trips also offered much more to the youth and adults who went, as those of you who have been on such trips know. These trips allowed us to build relationships with people from different places and cultures, people we could learn from and feel connected to. They helped us see poverty up close, giving faces and names to those who might otherwise remain abstract statistics, and prompting deeper questions about why poverty exists in similar and different ways across the world—and even how our own affluence may be connected to it. And they gave many participants a firsthand experience of physical labor, offering insight into both the challenges and the rewards of work they might never otherwise do.

One of the best things that can happen on a mission trip is the opportunity to grow our empathy for what it is like to be a foreigner – whether literally a foreigner in a foreign land, or the even more common experience of being a stranger or outsider. And with the experience of being a foreigner also comes the experience of needing to rely on others to welcome you and offer you hospitality.

We may be able to get a bit of this if we just travel to new places on vacation, but on a vacation we are typically in places set up to receive foreigners – hotels and tourist spots who have people available who speak English and offer food Americans are used to and have someone to explain different traditions and maps available to guide us. On a mission trip though we were immersed in a community, so the feeling of being a foreigner is much more pronounced.

Many of the trips I took were to Spanish speaking countries, so one of the first things we would experience would be the challenge of being a foreigner in a place with a different language. Undoubtedly, it would cause things like speaking slower and lots of charades

and less helpful tactics, like speaking louder (that usually doesn't help any). While we often did have someone who could translate and we had some youth who had reasonable high school Spanish skills, there were plenty of moments where it just took a lot of work and patience to understand each other. This has many consequences, including that everything takes longer. Our partners always made food they thought we would like but it was certainly a different diet than we were used to. And rather than maps, GPS and public transportation we were often following local directions that included things like turn left by the pink house or there will be a woman dressed in blue sitting on the front porch.

Every trip, we also had many opportunities to experience homegrown hospitality. Our hosts did everything they possibly could to make us comfortable, which didn't mean we always were, but never for lack of their generosity. One example that has always stuck with me is how in the Dominican Republic, where I took 8 trips, the women would get up at 4am to make sure breakfast was ready and there was enough for all of us, which included hand squeezing enough oranges for all 30 of us to have a glass of orange juice with breakfast. Do you know how many oranges that takes? A pile about waist high.

I don't want to diminish the good things we helped to build and do while we were on these trips, but I know we left the richer ones. Our eyes were always opened to new ways of doing things, new God sightings, new friends, new ideas and a new sense of gratitude and appreciation for what coming together as two communities gave us.

I bring all this up today because while the story of the three kings coming from a faraway land (we think probably modern day Iraq) and the holy family escaping to Egypt have unique aspects to them: like a star of wonder and a king found in a manger, they are actually very common human stories. The magi are foreigners who have come to a place very different from their home; they've brought gifts, in this case literal gifts, to share across cultures; and what they find is very different from what they expected. And the holy family became refugees – foreigners in a foreign land because they were in danger and could not return home.

And these are the kinds of stories we find all over the bible. Scripture is full of stories about what it means either to be the stranger or foreigner or the ones who offer hospitality to strangers or foreigners.

There are at least two reasons the Bible is so full of these stories.

One, because of just how common it is throughout all of human history for people to leave home or lose their home, either for a time or for forever. Occasionally, people strike out to find a new home just out of a sense of adventure or seeking new opportunities. But, most people throughout history, and still today, who leave or lose their homes, do so because they have to, and with that comes a lot of trauma. Having to

leave home because of natural disasters or violent conflict or threat of starvation or danger to one's family all come with a great deal of fear and trepidation.

The bible stories offer a comforting assurance to those who find themselves leaving home that they are not alone. Not alone because there are so many others who have experienced something similar, and not alone because in every story of foreigners and refugees, God is with them. And these stories remind us that no matter how settled we are in our homes, this upheaval may very well happen to us. So how we treat others when they are foreigners in our land, may have a direct correlation to how we might find ourselves welcomed, or not, if it happens to us.

Two, we find these stories all throughout scripture because offering hospitality to strangers is a hard thing to do. Welcoming the foreigner, the stranger, the outsider is not usually our first instinct. Whether out of fear, stereotypes, a dislike of change, or just because it takes us out of our comfort zone, we more often tend to close ranks and not be welcoming to newcomers. It is hard to stay open, to offer hospitality, to open ourselves up to the confusion or challenges that come with when you put new people together. The bible reminds us over and over again to offer hospitality precisely because it is hard to do, we don't necessarily want to do it, and it really is something you only get good at if you practice. We practice hospitality again and again to keep reminding ourselves of what can be gained when we don't let fear, stereotypes, change or comfort keep us from allowing new people in. We practice hospitality so we remember how to imagine things from another point of view and to think about what would make someone feel truly welcome. God invites us, encourages us to because God knows how much richer and fuller our lives will be if we do.

So what do all these ancient stories about being a foreigner and offering hospitality mean for us as Christians today?

Well, we can think about what it is to be a foreigner in a global sense around what it means to have cities all over the world where people from different countries and cultures and languages live together. There are good questions to be asked about how people live together through both finding things to hold in common while also preserving valuable and important diversity. When new people come to live in a new country, what happens to their traditions, rituals, language and customs?

Or, we can think about what it means for our country to have foreigners come to live with us. Right now, we are doing a particularly bad job of this, though we have always struggled to welcome immigrants – at least immigrants from certain places. But we've made it way harder than it should be. Undoubtedly, people of faith can faithfully disagree about policies, but we need to find a middle ground where we can have both: standards for how people cross our borders, as well as functioning, accessible ways for

people to seek legal immigration. And, once people do immigrate, our faith reminds us to practice hospitality and welcome them.

If you are interested in thinking more about this aspect, I will recommend you come on Sunday Feb 8 and stay after worship for a presentation by Dr. Stephanie Mitchell (who you know from her singing sometimes in worship and sitting in the balcony), but who is also a professor of Latin American history at Carthage. I attended the presentation she will give here when she gave it to a statewide group. Her talk really helped me to learn a great deal I didn't already know about how we have come to this particular place with immigration in the United States. Stephanie is also an active part of the Racine Interfaith Coalition's Immigration Legal Clinic which informs her presentation as well. So, come on Feb 8.

But another way we can think about what it is to be a stranger or foreigner is here at church. How do we welcome new people when they come to Covenant? How do we invite new people to come to Covenant? When do we get out of our comfort zone to leave our building and go be with new people? And how do we challenge ourselves to experience being a stranger or foreigner sometimes so we are reminded of the difficulties and rewards?

And we can think of what it means to be a foreigner or stranger in our personal everyday lives. When was the last time you were a stranger or outsider somewhere? What was it like? What did you learn? What did the experience change for you? And how are you practicing hospitality and welcome in your life? Especially the kind that gets you out of your comfort zone or asks you to welcome someone you don't usually spend time with?

Today, we are celebrating Epiphany. Epiphany is the day we celebrate the light of Christ coming into the world – a new revelation of God's love in the world. And inviting Christ into our hearts, as we do through the celebration of Christmas, should lead to some epiphanies of our own.

So perhaps one of the epiphanies we are invited into today is this: that the light of Christ does not only shine in places that feel familiar or comfortable or safe. In Matthew's story, that light appears to foreigners following a star, and to a vulnerable family on the run, crossing borders in the middle of the night. The revelation of God's love comes not through power or certainty, but through movement, risk, and hospitality.

And when we welcome Christ into our hearts, it changes how we see others. It gives us eyes to recognize God's presence in people who are different from us. It softens our fear. It stretches our compassion. It invites us to practice welcome—not because it is easy, but because it is holy.

So as we leave this place today, may we carry that light with us. May we notice who feels like a stranger. May we remember what it is like to need directions, patience, translation, and grace. And may we choose, again and again, to open ourselves—to new people, new stories, new ways of seeing—trusting that when we do, we just might find that Christ has already gone ahead of us, waiting to be revealed. Amen.