

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
8/28/16—Pentecost 14C

Psalm 81:1-2, 5c-7a, 8, 10, 13, 16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

The Stranger

“Tom Long, [distinguished professor of preaching]...grew up in a small community church in rural Georgia...He remembers one Sunday morning when something happened that challenged their faith.

While they were in worship, a stranger appeared, walking in the side door. Judging from his clothes and appearance, he probably had wandered over from the railroad tracks, people figured. He was perhaps one of the drifters who rode the rails. Perhaps he was someone who had just come in off the highway, just passing through. The stranger walked in and walked past the preacher and the congregation in the middle of the Sunday sermon. The congregation all looked at the man, and he looked back at them. The preacher even stopped his sermon and looked at the man. The man did not take a seat; he was not offered a seat. The man spoke not a word and not a word was spoken to him. He simply looked out across the congregation, paused for a few moments, and walked out the door on the opposite side. The preacher collected himself, and he continued with his sermon.

But after church that day, . . . members of the congregation gathered around the base of the big oak tree out front and they discussed what had happened. For the next two or three Sundays they gathered out under the oak tree after the service and continued their discussion. They never knew who the stranger was. But they knew that God had put before them a kind of test.”

Had they flunked?

In today’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, you and I are called “to show hospitality to strangers.” When the writer penned these words, he may have been remembering the Genesis account of three mysterious strangers who visit Abraham. Abraham offers hospitality, and the three visitors announce wondrous news: A son will be born to Abraham and his wife Sarah in their old age. The author of Hebrews may have recalled the Levitical command, too: *When an alien resides among you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you . . . for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.*

Unless you and I are Native Americans, our ancestors were once aliens in *this* land, too. Or immigrants. Or strangers.

Whichever word you want to use. There was a time when hospitality and welcoming the stranger were so deeply embedded in the American consciousness, that these words were—and still are—inscribed on one of our most cherished icons, the Statue of Liberty: *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me / I lift my lamp beside the golden door.* Lady Liberty opens the door.

And we, as United Methodist Christians, call ourselves a people of “open hearts, open minds, and open doors.” We, too, are to open our doors to the stranger.

But wait a minute, Pastor. Times have changed. The world’s not like it was when many of us were kids. Back in the day, most communities were smaller. Everybody knew everybody. People didn’t even lock their doors. Parents could let their children go downtown or ride their bikes outside the confines of the neighborhood. Could let them go places and do things that wouldn’t be considered safe today. Today’s parents teach their kids about stranger-danger. Today’s world teaches us to fear strangers.

Earlier this month, I had made an evening visit in Columbia and was heading back to the parsonage. It was twilight time. Driving north on two-fifteen, I spotted a turtle ambling across the two-lane. Not wanting the turtle to get run over, I slowed down and pulled off, up the road just a bit. After making sure that the turtle was off the highway, I was walking back to the car in the gathering dusk. When a man in the southbound lane slowed his dark-colored SUV, rolled down the window, and stuck his head out. “Are you okay?” he asked. That’s all. Just “Are you okay?” After hearing that I was, the kind stranger went on his way.

Which reminds me of another story.

More than a few years ago, in the lowcountry, a church member was driving with her young daughter, trying to make her way across the Charleston peninsula on the portion of Highway seventeen known as the Crosstown. There had been torrential rain in the area. The Crosstown was flooded. In rising water, the car stalled. It wouldn’t move. It wouldn’t even start. Mother and child were stranded. Helpless. And this was before the days of cell phones.

After some time, a man saw them and stopped to help. A man this church member did not know. But when he offered them a ride, she and her daughter got into his car. And rode with this man across the old two-lane Cooper River Bridge.

Now maybe you started worrying about what was going to happen to her and her daughter as soon as you heard that she got into the car with this man. Who was a stranger to her. But let's look at this from a different perspective. From the man's perspective. This woman was a stranger to him. He didn't know who she was or anything about her. But he stopped to help her. To deliver her from a potentially dangerous situation. He invited her into his car and took her where she needed to go. Safely. And with no thought of getting anything in return. He showed hospitality to a stranger.

When we show hospitality to a stranger, we show it to Jesus. For he has said that when we welcome a stranger who is one of the least of these who are members of his family, we welcome him. A stranger named Jesus.

Jesus comes as a stranger. For a long time, even his twelve closest friends don't know who he is. His own people reject him. To many, he *still* seems strange. He teaches an ethic that seems

odd in this post-modern era. In today's gospel reading and, indeed, all through this Gospel according to Luke, we're told that the reign of Jesus will usher in an order different from the one that first-century people—and twenty-first century people!—are accustomed to. Even before Jesus is born, his mother prophesies that he will bring about radical change and strange reversals of the status quo. Mary sings that *He [will bring] down the powerful from their thrones, and [lift] up the lowly.*

In this Sunday's gospel reading, we see Jesus having dinner with a gathering of Pharisees, an influential sect of religious scholars who are scrutinizing his every move. They see him as a threat to their standing as persons of position and power. In their culture, meals are significant occasions reflecting hierarchy and importance. But this upstart rabbi actually dares to tell them where to sit at table! Dares to tell them to take the lowest place instead of the highest.

That's not the way of the world. Their world, or ours either. The world's way—then and now—is to seek honor and prestige. The world's way—then and now—is to grab what's best and hang onto it. Tightly. Every man for himself. Every woman for herself.

But this stranger, this Jesus, says *no* to the ways of the world. He comes to turn this upside-down world right-side up! Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be exalted.

God speaks in the psalmist's song and through Jesus himself, calling you and me to walk in God's ways. And to leave the ways of the world behind.

The world's way is to give so one can get something in return. So that there'll be reciprocity and repayment. You know how it works. If the Smiths are interested in keeping up with the Joneses, they invite the Joneses to dinner, hoping that the Joneses will reciprocate and invite them back. But Jesus teaches values that sound strange to our ears. *Show kindness*, he says. *Share what you have: your possessions, your table, with people who won't ever be able to pay you back. Invite the poor, the oppressed, the homeless. Seat them at the best places in your dining room. In this new way of living, the least will be greatest. The last will be first. A diametrical change!*

Someone once said that the only thing that's certain in this life is change. All around us we see change. Our own bodies change. Other people change. And so do our relationships with

them and their relationships with one another. Landscapes change. Trends, styles and fashions change. In the comics, Blondie informs Dagwood that the new dress she just bought is “guaranteed not to go out of style for at least thirty days”!

Technology changes, too. Indeed, the electronic devices you purchased last year or even last month might now be considered obsolete. Laws change. The powers and the principalities change. Today’s twenty-four hour news cycle is different from yesterday’s. And tomorrow’s will be different from today’s. Change is everywhere.

But, beloved, when it feels like this topsy-turvy world is spinning out of control, when we have exhausted our ability to deal with all the changes—with everything life hurls at us—that’s when God in Christ Jesus is sure to show up. In ways and in places and in persons we would never have expected. You can depend on it.

Because: just as reliable as the certainty that everything else *will* change is the truth that Jesus Christ does *not* change. He is the one unchanging constant you and I can count on. He is the One who will never leave us or forsake us. He is the One we trust. He *is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

He is the steadfast One. The One who has gone out in search of us. He has gone out to find us strangers. Sin-damaged, flawed, broken strangers. To all of us strangers, he shows hospitality. To all of us strangers, he offers a precious gift. To all of us strangers, he offers the gift of himself, a gift for which we can never repay him. He receives us. He welcomes us. With measureless grace, he draws us into relationship.

Through the grace of Jesus Christ, we're learning about his deep, deep love. Through that grace, we're learning to love as he loves us. Through that grace, we're getting to know him. Through that grace, we're discovering that he's not a stranger at all!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.