

**Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation**

The Threat and Mystery of the Stranger

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10 November 2008

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

You have just heard a text from the Book of Deuteronomy that for a long time has intrigued me. It is a command to love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. In Jewish tradition we are commanded to love only two. We are commanded to love God with all our heart, strength and might and to love the stranger. Here's the question. Why does the stranger carry such weight in both Jewish and Christian tradition? This is my gift to you today. This is a question that is worth pondering at a time when the word "diversity" is thrown around so casually as if it were an easy thing to "love the stranger." But it's not easy. That's why, in the bible, it is commanded. For the old Rabbis who wrote their stories and opinions in the Talmud, the stranger was both threat and mystery.

First the threat:

The student's name was Ingrid. She was a senior Religion major. She had never taken a class from me. But one day she stopped by my office. We talked about graduate schools and Ingrid asked me for my recommendations. As she was about to leave she said, "You know I was really scared to come and talk to you." I asked her why? She hesitated but then went on, "Well, you're different, you're Jewish, and you're from the east coast, and I guess I was intimidated." She was honest and she was right. There is something about the stranger that frightens or threatens.

The Rabbis tell us that real strangers are a threat! Strangers are "different". They look different. They talk different. They ask different questions. They scare us. They wear different glasses than we do. They look at the world differently than we do. They have a different religion that they think is as true to them as ours is to us. The word "diversity" is quite popular these days. We act like we just discovered it. But there has always been diversity. The problem is not realizing there are differences. The problem is realizing that we can disagree with respect and integrity. So it is not enough to say, "Can't we all just get along?" You need a command. "Love the stranger, remember you were strangers in the land of Egypt. It's just not that easy.

Some years ago now, at Our Saviors Lutheran Church, where my wife I attended quite regularly, they instituted a radical practice that had never been done in that Church. They called it "sharing the peace." It meant that during a certain time of the service the Pastor would turn to the congregation and say, "the peace of the Lord be with you" and the congregation would answer "and also with you." No problem. But then came the radical part. The people were asked to shake hands with the people around them and wish them peace as well. This may not strike you as very radical these days but back then the practice required a congregational vote at the annual

meeting. It passed by only 3 votes. Weeks before the congregation was warned that on the first Sunday of next month, we would begin the practice. There was a great deal of anxiety among some people. During the sermon that day, the Pastor assured the people that they could do this, that it was quite in concert with Lutheran theology and that other Christians were also doing this. Finally, the moment arrived. It was listed in the bulletin as “sharing the peace.” The pastor wished us peace and we wished him peace as well. Then I turned and shook my wife’s hand. And she shook mine. When I was done there was still time. So I tapped the elderly gentleman’s shoulder in front of me and as he turned around I reached out my hand. He looked at me, surprised, and said, “I already shook.”

Strangers are a threat because you are not sure who they are and if they are going to hurt you or not. So loving the stranger does not come natural us. Fear is much more at our core. Hence, we are commanded to “love the stranger.”

But the stranger is also a mystery.

In the bible and the Talmud strangers are considered to be holy. In some strange and mysterious way the stranger connotes the presence of God. In Hebrew the word for stranger is “æger.” And the word “æger” refers to the stranger, the outsider, the alien that lives among you. And of course there are always aliens. There is always an us and a them. You know them, don’t you? All through the books of Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy the Jewish people are told: “you, love the stranger, remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” If you remember that you were strangers then you will not be indifferent to other strangers. And the bible is full of these mysterious, holy strangers: Abraham was a stranger, Moses was a stranger, and of course Jesus was a stranger. And the Bible has still other strangers whom we even yet do not know very well. Tamar is a stranger, Hagar is a stranger, Dinah is a stranger, Bethsheba is a stranger, and the woman who poured oil over Jesus head, in whose memory the Gospel was to be preached all over the world but whose name we do not know. She too is a stranger. Yet we are told, You, love the stranger, remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

And, arguably, the most famous of Jesus’ stories is about a stranger who is beset by robbers, bleeding on the ground, passed by religious leaders but helped by a Samaritan. Jesus commands his followers, “Go and do likewise.”

But we have still not really answered the question. Why is this loving of strangers so important that we must hear it as a command?

The Rabbis teach us that the secret resides in the eyes. The stranger is a mystery because although an outsider, he may see what we are unable to see, point out to us that we are wrong, or that we are blind, or that we are not thinking or believing with clarity. The outsider may have come from outside but he or she may see more clearly than the insider. Hence that note on my door, “Think that you may be wrong.” is a note to myself to remember that as sure as I am about what I believe, I could be wrong or you could be wrong. This saying is all about idolatry. Sometimes you can believe in what you believe so strongly that you turn your religious beliefs into an idol. And anyone who disagrees with you is wrong.

Having said that I must add that the most difficult stranger to deal with is the religious stranger. The stranger from another religion may be nice but his or her sheer existence among you raises questions about the meaning of life, the nature of faith and the will of God. I can be habituated into shaking hands, into appreciating that people vote for different candidates, have varying appetites for varying foods, have different cultural practices. I can be taught to be tolerant. But in the area of religion, where we are talking about God and truth, is there such a as thing as being too tolerant? Maybe there are some views about which I should be intolerant? How can I love the stranger when the religious truth the stranger asserts contradicts the heart and soul of the truth given to me and my tradition by God?

The Rabbis respond and teach us an important truth. God is not Jewish. God is God. The Rabbis say that one does not have to be Jewish to be loved by God. They say that any religious tradition that teaches its followers to love God and the stranger is to be respected. “Love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

You see the religious stranger in your midst is both threat and mystery. Of course that means that we are all here potentially threat and mystery to each other. We are all insiders and outsiders. We all feel at home and alien. We all want desperately to belong and not sure we do. I hear the command to love the stranger but how do I do that and still maintain the truth and integrity of my own tradition? How do we look into e by getting too close?

To love God with all your heart and soul is a risk of faith, a hope against hope that there really is something out there and right here that cares about us. To love the stranger is also a risk of trust that the stranger will enrich rather than harm us. It seems to me that we strangers can and should, each of us, stubbornly hold on to the religious truths of our tradition and respectfully disagree with the other. The command to love the stranger may be a way of saying to us that life is a constant meeting of strangers, particularly religious strangers. And some are stranger than others. Fear the threat. Stand in awe before the mystery. For as the old Christian text says some have encountered God under the guise of the stranger. Love the stranger for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt.

If you notice, I have not yet really answered the question. I circled around it. I made a few comments. And now I give it to you, as a gift, my fellow strangers. Look at me as I look at you, face to face, other to other. And wrestle a bit with the question, “Why is it so important, why are we commanded to love the stranger?”

MORNING WORSHIP

Monday, November 10, 2008

Prelude *“Holy God We Praise Your Name”* Emma Lou Diemer

Welcome/announcements

Call to worship [based on Psalm 118]

P: Give thanks to God, for God is good.

C: God’s steadfast love endures forever!

P: Let Israel say,

C: God’s steadfast love endures forever!

P: Let all who fear the Lord say

C: God’s steadfast love endures forever!

P: Let all who give thanks to God say,

C: God’s steadfast love endures forever!

Prayer

Hymn *“Let Streams of Living Justice”* ELW #710

Scripture Deuteronomy 10: 17-19

Sermon *“The Threat and Mystery of Loving the Stranger”* Murray Haar
Dept. of Religion

Prayer

Hymn *“Light Dawns on a Weary World”* ELW #726

Dismissal

Postlude *“Holy God We Praise Your Name”* Emma Lou Diemer

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

KOINONIA - Tuesday, November 11 at 10 am--the

preseminary/church vocations group will learn the numbers of degrees available at seminary [MA, MDiv, MSM, Mth, etc] and the difference between seminary/divinity school application and church endorsement or candidacy. Vital information for anyone considering study of theology OR ministry! Anyone considering work in the church [ordained, youth ministry, parish or academic education] is welcome!

NEW YORK SERVICE TRIP - Wednesday (12th) - 3:00 pm -
Conversation with Pr. Paul about the service trip to NYC over J-term break....chapel office.

MILLENIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL #8 - Create a Global Partnership for Development - One of the ways that we are showing a partnership with the global community is to support the Guatemalan Gift Market which will be on **Wed. and Thurs., Nov. 19th and 20th**. The sale will be located by the dining room entrance from **10:30 am - 3:00 pm** on those two days. The proceeds of the sale go back as sustainable income to the individual women to create the craft items.

SERVICE TRAVEL - New York, El Paso/Juarez, and Taize, France -
Sign up now for service in soup kitchens of New York City over J-term break, OR be immersed in community and service along the Texas/Mexico border at Spring break, OR pray with young adults from all across the world at Taize' France in June. Details and registration in the chapel office.

Chapel Schedule

Tuesday (11 th)	Koinonia, 10 am
Wednesday (12 th)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr. Paul
Friday (14 th)	Worship, 10 am - Seth Nelson, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (16 th)	Worship, 11 am - Jennifer Falkenstein '09
Monday (17 th)	Worship, 10 am - Rich Bowman, Reli.
Tuesday (18 th)	Chair of Moral Values Discussion- 3-1 rm-10 am