

Welcoming the Stranger

Ministry to the People on the Move by a Chaplain to Seafarers

Who are people on the move? They could be immigrants, vacationers, people displaced by conflict or disaster or those whose profession demands it: seafarers, truck drivers, pilots, or even circus or entertainment people.

People ask why I have chosen the particular ministry that I do at the Seafarers Center. The simple answer is that I have come to love it and that it was an accident of being at the right place and time that introduced me to this work in 1968.

Since those first days I have begun to reflect how closely this ministry is found in my Judeo-Christian roots. How many times have I noticed how commanding is our scriptures and history to have a ministry to the stranger, the alien, the foreigner?

In the Jewish testament in the time of Abraham, we see the importance of hospitality. In the harsh environment of the area we see the great hospitality of Abraham to the three strangers: Gen. 18: 1-4: by whom he learns that he and Sara will have a child. "Sirs, please do not pass my home without stopping. I am here to serve you."

Dt. 10:19 "So then show love for those foreigners because you were once a foreigner in Egypt."

Dt. 27:19 "...Gods curse on anyone who deprives foreigners, orphans and widows of their rights."

In the current Passover celebration there is a wine cup set for the stranger.

As I become more introspective of why I was doing the ministry I had chosen, I wondered if people whose job requires them to be away from home for an extended period of time are different from those who basically stay in the same local? I have concluded that from a spiritual point of view that there are positive and negative effects to being a

stranger in a strange land. Some of the negative effects are loneliness, anxiety with the unfamiliar, temptation resulting from being away from the social and family constraints of one's own culture and no easy access to one's faith community. Serving these needs has formed the basis of much of my ministry. We take a promise not to proselytize. I have arranged a Buddhist funeral, called an imam to give an Islamic blessing on a ship for a deceased person, and arranged for a Russian Jehovah's Witness to attend a service in Houston.

Positive aspects of being a person on the move or a stranger in foreign lands is the opportunity to experience different cultures which could lead to a broader understanding of faith, developing a tolerance of different faith expressions and even the time to reflect on God through personal reading and reflection.

What really surprised me in my rereading of the Gospels and the study of Jesus' teachings seen through the eyes of a ministry to the stranger, was the emphasis that it is the stranger to whom he (Jesus) directs the main thrust of

his ministry. With this reflection I would like to distinguish two types of the term "stranger."

There is the traditional understanding of the stranger as one from a foreign land and a second more powerful definition as one who is foreign to the accepted culture, a rejected person. This would include the tax collector, prostitutes, lepers, those possessed by demons, and criminals.

Even more of a revelation to me was that Jesus made himself a stranger and commanded his followers to do the same to minister to these strangers. He became unattached from the authorities, religious and civil, and became a critic of the mainstream which resulted in his ultimate death.

Mt. 8-20: "Jesus replied 'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.'"

Lk. 10: 1-2: After this the Lord chose another seventy-two men to go ahead of him to every town and place.

Examples of ministry to the "stranger" as foreigner are found in the experiences of the woman at the well, the cure of the Roman Centurian's daughter, the healing of the daughter of the Cananite woman (Mt. 15:21-28: "Lord even the dogs get the leftovers that fall from the master's table) and his travel outside the traditional boundaries of home territory. One of the most powerful parables Jesus offered is that of the "good Samaritan." Here an outsider who showed compassion is modeled as the true neighbor over traditional people of respect in Jewish society.

How should we the church of the twenty-first century react to the example of Jesus the stranger ministering to strangers as the primary thrust of his ministry? My own experience is that in the Roman Catholic Church it is that our money and our main interest lies in making our parishes better and more supportive of the main stream establishment. While most Christian churches are seeking converts, outside of that, our ministry to the stranger is marginal at best.

America is considered a Christian Nation but at the present the U. S. seems to have a xenophobic reaction to

immigrants and foreigners, especially in view of the 9/11 attack. In the maritime industry where I work, the laws permitting seafarers to have shore leave have become very restrictive so that seafarers that previously would have been given shore leave are now prisoners aboard ship.

The phenomenon of the "minute men" patrolling our border to restrict the undocumented from coming into our land is a contradiction to the Christian tradition of welcoming the stranger. The recent passage of a house rule in Congress (H. R. 4437) makes it a criminal offense to be an undocumented immigrant and a criminal offense for any individual or agency to help any such person. This type of legislation is coming from those who claim in be fighting for moral values. Even though there is genuine opposition in our denominations, including my own, it has been very ineffective in changing the opinion of the "moral majority." We still tell our children "don't talk to strangers."

No doubt each of you can cite wonderful people in your churches who are a contradiction to this mentality, but it seems they are the exceptions, not the rule, which is why they are so notable. In a country dominated by Christians

we have done a poor job of getting this idea of welcoming the stranger expressed in national policy and even as a priority in our church policies. We advocate such, but our money is not where our mouth is.

I often reflect that Jesus would be considered as much of a threat with his radical ideas today as he was to the established faith and society of his own time.

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