

Welcoming the Stranger

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The Biblical book of Genesis, literally meaning *how we came to be*, teaches through a series of stories, many of which are improbable, and the rest often misunderstood. Chapter 17 opens with Abram, now 99 years old, making a covenant with God about right behavior, resulting in the success of his multitude of future offspring, with his 90 year old wife giving birth to their first child as a sign of God's good faith. We are told that Sarah laughed at God, but Abram becomes Abraham, and his sons Ishmael and Isaac become fathers of Palestinians and the Israelites. That some participants in these stories are named as the ancestors of different Palestinian tribes of this region perhaps suggests part of what these stories meant to the people who first told them, and what they didn't mean. When God appeared to Abraham, in the form of three strangers walking to Abraham's tent in the midday heat, Abraham immediately jumped up to wash their feet, bring them bread, prepare a fatted calf so they could eat. After Sarah denied her laughter, God's angels set out to destroy Sodom, but God felt a need to mention this to Abraham, since Abraham's nephew Lot lived in Sodom, along with Lot's wife and daughters. Abraham famously negotiated with God to save Sodom if there were 50 righteous men living there, or even 45, or 40; Abraham is a good negotiator and God seeks to be righteous, and so God agrees that if there are at least 30, or 20, or even 10 righteous, then the city will not be destroyed by angels. Divinity appearing in person, or as angel messengers, and being open to negotiation, suggests a very interesting view of divinity by these people of some 4000 years ago.

The two angels find Lot sitting at the entrance to Sodom, and knowing like his uncle how to welcome strangers, Lot invites them back to his house to wash their feet, have some bread, eat and rest until the morning comes. However the rest of Sodom doesn't welcome strangers, so they come to Lot's door demanding that the two men be brought forth that they may bugger them, and this is why the act of sodomy is forever attached to Sodom, but Lot refuses them. He offers the mob instead his married daughters to do what they will, but he will not violate his duty to strangers. The mob turns ugly, and turns on Lot, but the angels grab him back inside and blind the mob so that they cannot find the doorway. The angels decide to rain fire and sulfur down upon Sodom and Gomorrah, but they first give Lot the chance to flee with his wife, his daughters, and his sons-in-law. His sons-in-law just laugh when Lot urges them to flee the wrath of God, so Lot lingers, but the angels seize Lot and force him to go. So Lot, his wife and two daughters flee leaving everyone else to be destroyed. Unfortunately his wife looked back and so became a pillar of salt. Then when they were alone in a desert cave, having seen the destruction of all they knew, Lot's daughters became anxious that Lot may be the last man alive, so they got him drunk and had him impregnate them, and we are told they thereby became mothers of the tribes of Moab and Ammon. As I said, these are fascinating stories, improbable even, and yet still with something there to think about in terms of our welcoming the stranger, far more so than about sodomy.

Perhaps these stories tell us that it is alright to laugh at or negotiate with God as long as we are confident that we have found favor in God's sight. Otherwise it may prove somewhat risky to

rely too much upon God's sense of humor. But with all their sex and violence, it is hard to tell these Biblical stories today and still maintain a PG-13 rating on your sermon! I am pretty sure that the people who first told this story were not trying to say anything about same sex marriage, despite some fundamentalist claims to that effect, but were trying to say something important about welcoming strangers. In 1980, the year after Loretta and I married, we traveled to Egypt and Israel on a bus tour. We stopped one day outside the supposed remains of Sodom and Gomorrah, and our Aramaic guide even gleefully pointed out the pillar of salt that had been Lot's wife. When I asked him if the stories were true, he took a long pause, and said "I cannot attest to their truthfulness, however people here always told them in this way." What were they trying to tell us about welcoming the stranger? Today we may need this lesson.

We have all arrived at one time or another as a stranger. We had doubts, at least initially, if these were our people and whether we would come to feel that we belong here. If we were greeted as an individual, a person of value in and of ourselves, perhaps we came in time to know that we had a place here. Perhaps in time we found our own ways to express our unique identity within community. But if we were welcomed instead as an old person, a young person, a person of color, or white, a rich person, or a poor person, perhaps we knew early that these were not our people. None of us exist solely to represent some class of people. As Abraham and Lot knew, you welcome strangers as if they are already an important part of your own tribe, perhaps one you haven't even met yet, rather than as a representative of some other group, even a desired group of others. Few of us look for communities in which we can be the "other", but rather we are on a lifelong mammalian search for those places where we belong, for communities that welcome us as an end in ourselves, rather than seeing us as some means to their own ends. How do we welcome strangers here?

The UU Allies for Racial Equity have developed a six level continuum for explaining where UU congregations may be on this spiritual journey. The first level, which may have defined this congregation 200 years ago, is a group that is entirely homogeneous in terms of race, economic class and culture. The second level, which we perhaps resembled as recently as 50 years ago, is more diverse but still functions similar to an exclusive club. Members felt safe here because the fears and stresses of dealing with people from different racial, cultural or economic groups were not apparent; people in the congregation that identified itself as other than the dominant group behaved for all practical purposes like members of the dominant group. The third level intentionally includes substantial racial, economic, and multicultural diversity. Yet decisions are made following the cultural norms of the dominant group, perhaps marginalizing the interests or concerns of minority groups within the congregation, and this systematic bias goes on largely unrecognized. Newcomers, and other strangers, are welcome as long as they worship and participate in the community's existing ways of governing itself and of worshipping together. As UU's, we are progressives, used to being at relatively high levels of personal and communal development. If there are six levels, we might assume we must be at least at level five or six, or else what does it mean to be progressive? However the UU Allies for Racial Equity suggest that most American religious congregations are today at levels one or two on this continuum, so that we can legitimately take some pride in having already reached level three. However I believe we can do better.

As a congregation, we may now be ready to embark upon the fourth level where issues of institutional racism can be systematically addressed. My friend, UU minister Rev. Bill Gardner says at this level “the leaders of the institution begin to understand power in systemic terms and begin to make use of a systemic analysis of racism. The members have a new consciousness of institutional white power and privilege. Out of this awareness members of the congregation work to develop anti-racist identities and practice.” But that is just the beginning. Bill Gardner says that to reach the fifth level the lay leaders of a congregation must then “take steps to redefine and restructure the institution using an anti-racist lens. Work is done to reshape the mission, bylaws, and policies of the institution. Steps are taken to ensure the full participation of [people who are very different], including their worldviews, cultures and lifestyles.” The existing power structure must be open to adapting itself to the needs and interests of those who have arrived from very different backgrounds and hence with very different perspectives. The sixth level is only achieved when the “institution is fully inclusive. Here diversity is understood to be an asset. The use of power and decision-making reflect the contributions of the diverse peoples and their worldviews. This is where we achieve the vision of beloved community.” Can we move beyond level three to gradually encompass levels four, five and six as a community? I think it will take a lot of intentional work over at least two to three years, but I think we can.

We already have one very important ingredient; we are generous people who wish to welcome the stranger. To compare us to the Biblical story, we are way ahead of Sodom and Gomorrah, thank goodness, and in fact ahead of most American religious congregations. However there are communities, here and elsewhere, that are more generous to strangers than we are, at least today. The May 19, 2009 *Christian Century* magazine has a long article about the generous people of Fortin de las Flores Mexico. The 20,000 residents in this poor agricultural valley, surrounded by mountains in the state of Veracruz, are visited daily by a steady stream of migrants passing through seeking employment and a better life across the border in America. Benita Juarez, one 84 year old grand mother, “sees pregnant women, women nursing babies, and children younger than her youngest grandchild. She sees people whose lips are parched and cracked from lack of water, and people who are poorly dressed for a trip that will take them into the Eje Volcanico Transversal Mountains, where the nights will be bitter cold. She sees people who have been beaten, robbed and raped. Hundreds of thousands of economic refugees have passed through Fortin de las Flores. Sometimes, if the train slows down, Juarez sends a grandchild to the train with a packet of food to pass up to the migrants, or a plastic bag filled with water to toss up. Her gestures are not extraordinary in this town of around 20,000... When fruit is in season, the residents share their oranges, pineapples, guavas, mangos, avocados and coconuts... Hugo Perez takes a bag of oranges down to the tracks and talks with the migrants, asking them where they’re from and where they’re going... Residents of Fortin have few possessions and, at the same time, fewer restrictions on their generosity. They respond directly and immediately to those in need, as if, through the migrants, God is communicating with them.” These Mexicans really know how to welcome the stranger in their midst.

If we could learn how to welcome every stranger better, not just for their sake but rather for our sake, then this diverse and growing community would explode with new life and opportunities for us to grow in deeper and richer ways as we learned how to make them feel at home here as well. We are collectively on a spiritual journey, and one primary aspect of that journey is learning together how to truly welcome the stranger in our midst. This has always been a central

part of Jewish practice, and was central to being Christian from the very beginning. For example, in the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is describing what Christians call “the Great Judgment”, he says: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” For Jesus, divinity arrives in our midst in the form of the stranger, and we learn to welcome it in.

Why else are we told that Jesus spent his last night before his arrest, trial, and death teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? Of all the wisdom teachings he could have chosen to impart in his final hours, Jesus chose to demonstrate by his actions this one final truth. This spiritual practice is engaging another human being, in something as intimate yet mundane as foot washing or sharing a common meal, with someone fundamentally different from ourselves, while actively entertaining the possibility that they incarnate the divine. Jesus engaged this kind of intimate encounter with Roman soldiers, Samaritan lepers, a Syro-Phoenician woman, and hostile Pharisees. He apparently included slaves, rulers, powerful men, and twelve year old girls within his intimate community. The fecundity of this act, learning to love the stranger, can lead to deep transformation.

Jonathon Sacks, the current chief rabbi of Great Britain, says “the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger’.” So why should we welcome the stranger into our midst, because through such action we too can encounter God. Jesus invites us, even today, to respond to every stranger as if they are an aspect of the divine. Abraham knew this to his everlasting merit. Lot did also, but the men of Sodom did not, and look at the difference that made. How we respond to the stranger is critical for how we progress upon our own spiritual paths. Perhaps it would be too literal for us to wash the feet, and feed the hunger, of everyone who comes through our doors. But we should always allow for the possibility that the “other” is divinity in disguise, for in spiritual terms it may often be so. We are asked to welcome every stranger, every new thing in our life as a potential guide from beyond for our spiritual growth. As the 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi advises us: “This being human is a guest house; every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” Yes, be grateful for whoever comes, because each may have been sent as a guide from beyond. This spiritual practice is turning xenophobia into xenophilia, and involves deep questions about our sense of identity. This is how we are intended to welcome the stranger.

I love you all dearly. Amen and Blessed Be.