

Series: Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Part III: The Welcoming Table
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
October 7, 2018
World Communion Sunday

In thinking about today's message, I was reminded of something that happened to me when I went to pastor a church in Staunton, Virginia. Staunton is a college town of about 25,000 located in the Shenandoah Valley. Mary Baldwin College is located there and it is also the birthplace of Woodrow Wilson, who was born in the manse of the First Presbyterian Church where his father was pastor.

I remember when we first moved there, heading downtown to find a dry cleaner. I found it and pulled my car into one of the parking places along the street. I got out and grabbed my cleaning, but after I had taken a few steps, I stopped and turned around because I had forgotten to lock my car. This was before there were remotes, so I actually had to use the key to lock my door. As I turned back around, a man was walking down the street who looked at me with kind of a wry smile and he said to me, "You're not from around here, are you?" Now I just smiled, but I wondered why he said that. I didn't have my Atlanta Braves jersey on or anything like that. I was dressed for work. What I later realized is that in Staunton, most people didn't lock their cars, or even their front doors for that matter. They felt safe enough to leave them open. But, I grew up in Atlanta where you always locked your doors. Somehow that simple action on my part branded me as someone who was "not from there" – I was a stranger.

Maybe you have had a similar experience where you felt like a stranger – someone "not from here." Think about what it was like for you, maybe when you first came to this church and didn't know anybody. What was that like? Did someone speak to you or not? When I first came to this church, I was having lunch with one of our church members and I asked him what brought him to this church. He told me about coming here and not knowing anybody -- as a stranger so to speak -- and he called one of our members by name – Tina Bradley. He told me how she had come over and talked with him, and then taken him around to introduce him to others, and helped him find his way. He was a stranger and she welcomed him in. Those words about welcoming the stranger come straight out of our passage today from Matthew's gospel.

Those words remind me of the story of the man who owned a general store out west – the kind that carries a little bit of everything. You've seen the type. He was a new Christian and as a part of his studying to be a better Christian, he was learning verses from the Bible. He decided that every time he rang up a sale, he would say a Bible verse that had something to do with the transaction – kind of like his own personal Bible quiz. In this general store there were always folks gathered around, playing checkers and watching what was going on.

Well, one day a man came in the store and no one had seen him before. The owner asked him what he needed, and the man said that he had a horse and he was looking for a saddle. The owner said, "I have just what you need." He went in the back and brought out a saddle and plopped it up on the counter. He told the man that this was a fine saddle. The man asked him how much it cost, and the owner said "\$25." The man then said, "Look, I don't think you understand. I have a really nice horse and I want a really nice saddle." The store owner said, "I know just what you mean." He took the saddle, went in the back, came back with the very same saddle and plopped it up on the counter and said, "Now, this is a really nice saddle." The man asked him how much it cost. The owner said, "\$50." The man said, "Really, you don't understand. I have a really, really fine horse and I need a really, really fine saddle." The owner said, "I'll be right back." He took the saddle, went in the back, brought out the same saddle and plopped it up on the counter and said, "Now this – this is a really, really fine saddle for your fine horse." The man asked, "How much is it?" The owner said, "\$100." The man said, "I'll take it!" And he left.

Now, all these people in the store had been watching what was going on, and they were curious as to what Bible verse the store owner was going to say when he finished ringing up the sale. So, as the owner closed the cash register, he turned to the folks in the store and said, "He was a stranger and I took him in."

So, how should we relate to the stranger or the neighbor we encounter? I believe the words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel can help us with that. Please join with me in reading from Matthew 25:34-39. It can be found on your bulletin insert, the pew Bible, or your own personal Bible. This is Jesus telling a parable:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' -- Matthew 25:34-39, NIV

Jesus is at the end of his earthly ministry and these words are some of the last things he said. What he chooses to tell his followers is quite profound. He tells the parable of a king. The story represents the last judgment when God will judge all of humankind. The king literally divides people on his right and his left. He tells the "righteous" on his right that he came to them hungry, thirsty, as a stranger, needing clothing, healing, and in prison – and that they had provided for his needs. Those listening seem clueless as to when they saw Jesus in those conditions, and Jesus says that when they showed that care

to anyone who was hungry, thirsty, or a stranger – then it was as if they did it for Jesus. Not only that, he goes on to say that when anyone failed to do those things for someone in need, it was as if they did not do those things for Jesus. Jesus links those actions, or failures to act, to the final judgment.

Now before we get off on a rabbit trail that may confuse us, we need to talk about what is going on here. In one sense, Jesus *seems* to be saying that if we are good and do the right things then we go to heaven, and if we fail to do those things then we don't – which sounds like we have to earn our way to heaven. But, if you have been around the church for a while, you have probably heard us say that we are saved not by “works” – by what we do, but by faith in Jesus Christ. That faith is a gift from God – not something we can earn. So, how does that square with what Jesus is saying here?

I think we need to understand that this is an important part of the Bible, but it is not everything the Bible says on this topic. Over in the book of James, it says that faith without works is dead. (James 2:17) It goes on to say that if our faith does not make itself known in our actions, then we may wonder if we really have any faith at all. But, here Jesus is establishing the idea that our good works – particularly to those around us who are in need – are a vital sign of genuine faith. So, when we do things like welcoming the stranger, we are showing that the love of Christ is at work within us. In other words, we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, but a genuine faith will make itself known in what we do – especially to “the least of these” around us.

Now when it comes to welcoming the stranger, I know the NIV version of the Bible says, “I was a stranger and you invited me in,” but the NRSV says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35b) Yet, I think there is a real tension between what we have been taught in life and what Jesus is saying here. How many of us were taught, “Don't talk to strangers?” Or, we told our kids the phrase, “stranger/danger.” And to some degree we know that not everyone in the world is safe to be around. But, Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” What is Jesus saying here?

In looking at this passage about welcoming the stranger, I spent some time researching at the Greek word for “stranger.” It is *xenos*. “Xenophobia” is a word we get from *xenos* and it means “fear of strangers.” It is often part of the normal human condition when we withdraw from those who are different from us. But, as I spent time studying this word, *xenos*, I found out that in addition to “stranger” -- it can also mean “guest” and even “host.” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, by Geoffrey W. Bromiley: 661) Over at the end of Paul's letter to the church at Rome he mentions someone named Gaius who was his “host” (*xenos*) who showed Paul hospitality. (Romans 16:23, NRSV) It made me wonder about this word, *xenos*, and how one can move from being a *stranger* to being a *guest* to being a *host*. How does that happen?

Then I began thinking about my own experiences of being a stranger and a guest. A few years ago, I went with the church I was serving on a mission trip to Mexico. We went every year, sometimes even twice a year. There was a Presbyterian church on the

Mexican side of the U.S. border that we would go visit. Over time, we became good friends with some of the Christians there.

We would go and sometimes we worked on building a community center. One time we taught Vacation Bible School. We would learn about how they made their living. One of the best partnerships started there is called “Just Coffee.” You can find it on the internet. (www.justcoffee.org) The Presbyterian Church USA gave a micro-loan for the people there to buy a roaster to roast coffee. The farmers to the south grew the coffee beans and were able to sell them at a fair price without the middle man, so that they could then support their families. In the town where the coffee was grown, at the time of our work with them, not one person had felt the need to cross the U.S. border because they had work and jobs to support their family.

I often tell folks that no matter what your politics may be on this issue, you need to support something like Just Coffee because it helps create real jobs for folks who really don’t want to leave in the first place. (It is dangerous to cross the border and it splits up families.) We have ordered Just Coffee over the years and you can get great coffee that makes a difference in the lives of others. When we were there, we went to see the coffee roaster. Now, whenever I get a bag Just Coffee and it says it was “packed by Adrian” -- because I know Adrian I can picture his face whenever I drink that coffee.

But, what was more surprising than anything was how happy these Mexican Christians were. They live in very basic homes on much less than any of us do, and yet they were some of the happiest Christians I have ever met. Many of us realized that we had something to learn about life from them.

One of the highlights of our trip was to go into one of their homes for a meal. Again, the homes were very basic – usually a few rooms with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling in each room. As our group of twelve entered, our hosts had prepared a wonderful meal for us of all sorts of foods. It was all good. And they had the most amazing smiles on their faces as they hosted us as their guests and served us this meal. So, together we broke bread and drank – and all of us who were there would say that at that table of welcome we experienced the presence of Christ. We thought we were going down there to help them, and what we realized was that when we came into their homes as *strangers*, they welcomed us as their *guests*. And they were the perfect *hosts* – and our new neighbors!

That picture of gathering around a table with Christians from another part of the world reminds us that as we come to gather around this table on World Communion Sunday, Christ is the perfect host who welcomes us as his guest. At one point we were all strangers – estranged from God because of our sin and brokenness – but God reached to each one of us and invited us in. God offered grace and forgiveness so that we might sit at table with those from east and west and north and south and enjoy the welcome of God.

But it doesn't end here. As Jesus reminds us, every day we have the privilege of seeing Christ in the strangers or neighbors we meet, and the persons in need. And we can welcome them as Christ welcomed us. So, come to this table of welcome and be filled with the grace of the God who welcomes us all!

I want to close this morning with a short video of how one person used her table to welcome strangers from her neighborhood.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElTq8PTm7rc>)

The final words of the video were this: "This was one person's expression of love for their neighbors. What will be yours?" Friends, that is up to you!

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