

Who is a stranger to you? Who sees you as a foreigner? Why is it so difficult to deal with differences? As a culture we struggle with that daily, whether it concerns who is crossing the border in the south, living in a neighborhood different than ours, or entering our zones of comfort. Why do words such as stranger, foreigner, or alien often evoke such fear? Is there any way our basic, knee jerk reactions to strangers can be changed?

Our concerns are nothing new. My great grandparents entered this land unable to speak the language and knowing no one. I can't imagine how brave they must have been and about how lonely they must have often felt. Remember what happened to Japanese Americans in World War 2, where many were incarcerated, even though they had been citizens for several generations. Fear of being branded as sympathizers of the German war machine is why Lutherans quit using German in worship during World War 1. My great grandfather changed his name from Guenther to George, for that same reason.

All cultures have always struggled with strangers. Anyone who looks different, sounds different, dresses, or acts differently can be seen as a stranger. Anything unfamiliar, different, or new to our expected daily experience can seem strange, making us nervous or uncomfortable. In such situations, we see others as foreign to our way of life. All sorts of differences can seem alien to our way of thinking or doing, and those differences are magnified when anyone looks different than me.

There is no one of any race or color who does not have similar fears, prejudices, or apprehension when strangers surprise or confront one's level of comfort. Most interesting is we can see others as strangers without even realizing they might have the same fears and lack of comfort about you and me.

Once upon a time, there was a prophet named Isaiah. He spoke to his congregation of faithful Jews. They all pretty much looked and dressed alike. They had common ancestors and common rituals and beliefs. One day his sermon proclaimed God's inspired message that it was time to open the doors to all – even in the temple! Can you imagine how that went over, what a change that meant, and how their comfort levels had to have been challenged?

They were confused because they thought they understood Old Testament rules, yet Isaiah said they had it all wrong. He said God is not just for one but for all! He told Israel they, better than anyone, should know how important it is to welcome the foreigner because as they had lived for 400 years as aliens in Egypt.

They understood the harsh treatment that had come their way out of fear. They knew what it was like to be victims of prejudice and the mistreatment their ancestors had endured. Isaiah said that God's goal was that all would become one and that one day a Messiah would come who would open up those doors.

We all know, through Jesus, that God's intent is that all embrace his love. We believe Jesus' mission is to bring an entire world into a relationship with God, and that his sacrificial death was the key in conquering the ultimate power of this world so that we might live forever with the God who love us so much.

The truth of the Gospel is that such sin filled living is alien to God and treats God as if He is a stranger to us. In reality we are the outsiders who have destroyed the paradise God intended. We have erected roadblocks. Walls, and barriers between each other and even God himself.

Scripture consistently reveals God's loving walk among the aliens and strangers we have made ourselves, that we might recognize God and his love. Finally, in the living example of servant love, Jesus gave clarity to the worlds of Isaiah, and the cross and empty tomb broke down the barriers, roadblocks, and walls that we might be made one with God and live in love for one another.

One day Jesus encountered a Canaanite woman whose daughter was possessed by the devil. She was an outsider! A gentile! A woman. With an unclean daughter. How much more of an alien or stranger could she have been? She begged for a crumb. For love for her daughter. She didn't want anything for herself! "Please!" she cried. "Please!" And Jesus' answer seems strange.

He gave the stock answer that any legalist would give, and any brother or sister of the faith would expect. He said that Messiah had come only to the lost sheep of Israel. We don't expect such words from Jesus, but he was giving voice to what the crowd wanted him to say. This was the answer they had been taught!

The woman said, "I know, but surely there must be more than enough love ... more than the insiders truly need; all I am looking for is a crumb! Even a dog gets crumbs!" Her response was one of FAITH! She got it. She knew who Jesus was and what his promise was all about and knew that he was stronger than Satan!

Jesus says that the kingdom he brought to earth was for ALL! His love, his healing power, his promise of heaven, is for ALL! He filled Isaiah's promise FULL! It was like having Isaiah come back from the dead and repeating his sermon? (Or maybe for Israel to finally understand what Isaiah had meant all along?!)

Think of all that was going on in this story, beyond just the words of Jesus and his conversation with a woman who was a stranger and alien in the midst of the disciples! He shattered the taboos of religion and culture by visiting unclean region, speaking to disrespectful, foreign woman, healing a foreign child!

That was deliberate, undeserved, and unexpected LOVE! That is the definition of GRACE as revealed to us through the sacrificial, foot washing, love of Jesus! This IS THE GOSPEL. THE Good News! And it is as good as it gets! This is the change that brings

us back to paradise and sends us out to bring all to the wedding feast of the Lamb! This is the Change that God has sought from us from day one!

The message is pretty straightforward, simple, and clear. We are to leave our traditional fears behind (just like Isaiah called for.) We are to get off the beaten path that is all too comfortable and walk the new way of love for all. And in doing so, it is not just to share God's love with a stranger but to open the possibility of a stranger sharing his love with me.

One of our members told me that her father always shopped in the store of a Lebanese immigrant, and she didn't know why. When she finally asked, her father told her a story. A neighbor's child had rickets. Every time they carried groceries home there would be a fresh orange they hadn't paid for. It was a gift from a stranger – a cure for an ailing child. Her father said because of such love, he decided he would always buy his food in that foreign neighbor.

Have we been asking the wrong question? Maybe the challenge is to not to ask what shall we do with foreigners, but what has God done for me? What has Christ surrendered so that I would no longer be alien to God and his love?

As we see the world through the lens of grace, it not only changes how I see others but strengthens my call to be one with all, just as God even loves me. Like five loaves and two fish, maybe there is always enough for all! Who is calling for your crumbs!? Who is reaching out to feed the emptiness in your life?