

## **"WELCOMING THE STRANGER"**

**July 22, 2018**

**Matthew 25:30-40**

"When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

<sup>34-36</sup> "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:

I was hungry and you fed me,  
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
I was in prison and you came to me.'

<sup>37-40</sup> "Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'

Sometimes we find ourselves in the most unlikely of situations at the most unlikely times. We have our day planned out, it all looks neat and orderly, and then bang! Someone runs into the back of your car. Bang! Your dog swallows the grandchild's metal toy car and has to be rushed to the vet. The IRS sends you notice of an audit and you are

ordered to appear with the auditor in just two weeks' time. You are dutifully checking in all of the prisoners at the local jail in India when Buckingham Palace summons you to deliver a Mohur- a ceremonial coin- to the Queen of the British Empire. Your chief qualification for this task is that you are tall. It is a bonus that you can speak English.

Talk about a stranger in a strange land! The setting for the film, *Victoria and Abdul*, is in the Royal Estate of England, 1887. The Queen, embodied artfully and precisely by Dame Judi Dench, has never met a "Hindu" before. Neither has any of her staff. This is how Abdul and Mohammed are referenced by the Queen's advisors and attendants.

Wait!, you might exclaim, "Mohammed is not a Hindu name, and I don't think Abdul is either!" And you would be right. Abdul and Mohammed are India Muslims, not Hindus. They are not addressed by name but only by a label. They are treated like filth. They are Muslims, and they are strangers.

The two courriers are only tolerated for a limited purpose. They are tasked with the presentation of a token coin by the subjugated and conquered peoples of India to their sovereign conqueror, Queen Victoria. There is no plan to allow them to stay in England or to be welcomed into the Royal Household. That is, no plan until Abdul breaks the rule of etiquette told him not once, but twice. That is, there is no compelling story until Abdul, after presenting the Mohur to Her

Highness, breaks the rules and looks the Queen directly in her eyes. In that instant, the stranger becomes known to the host, the connection is made, and he is a stranger no more.

This true story is a marvelous tale about a cantankerous old woman and a young man whose heart is pure gold. It is a story about a woman of power who is going through the motions of life waiting to die, a man of simple means who becomes devoted to her, and a whole host of other frightened people who are both jealous of the stranger and zealous in their efforts to discredit and dismiss him.

It's what we do when we do not understand the other. It's what we do when we are taught to hate people who are different from us. It's what we say when a stranger enters our familiar space and we feel threatened by them.

Years ago I served a church pretty far from here on the north end of the north of our metro Denver area. I was sent there by the Conference Minister when their minister didn't show up for service one Sunday. He was frustrated by the disconnect of the church members in saying they wanted to grow, but in refusing to welcome the stranger.

The neighboring area around the church was growing by leaps and bounds. New housing was being constructed everywhere. The church, however, was struggling. It needed to grow if it was to survive. Simple

solution, right? Invite the neighbors! Show them a warm invitation to worship, to community, to fellowship and service! Spiff up the place a bit, put out a good spread of food on Sunday, put a welcoming message on the outdoor sign, and let 'em roll on in, yes?

No. Not hardly. The people of the church wanted to grow, but they wanted to recruit ONLY from their own extended families, only from their own kind. Whites only. People who shared the last name of the members. Husbands and wives only, preferably with children, even better with children and grandchildren. No gay or lesbian folks, no way, and they were not wild about divorced women either or unmarried women with children. In other words, strangers need not darken the doorway.

That church has not grown. It has dwindled. It is on its last legs. As the old guard dies or moves on, it dies a bit more along with them. The church membership wasn't welcoming to anyone it did not know or who was not directly sponsored to it. It wasn't particularly welcoming to me, a female preacher, or to the minister who followed me, or to the minister who just left there after a trying and ultimately unsatisfying couple of years there. That minister has, I am told, left ministry altogether, demoralized and disheartened unto career death.

I think what Jesus was saying to his community and to ours is that God cares more about what you do than what you say. I think he

would say to us today that being Christian is about what you *do*, not how you label yourself. Listen to the critical two words he says to those faithful persons that are his sheep, those blessed by the father: "Here's why..."

Here's why. It's because you welcomed me when I was a stranger. It's because you fed me when I was hungry. It's because you gave me a place to rest my head when my feet were too weary to carry on. It's because you extended your hand to me in welcome when others had turned me away. It's because you showed me love when others rejected me. It's because of what you *did*.

Abdul appears before the Queen as a stranger, but she meets his gaze, acknowledging him as a person, a person who interests her. Mean as she appears to be to all who know her, we learn that she is actually very sad, isolated, uninspired, and unloved. Because she lets the stranger into her life, she is befriended, claimed, excited to learn about him, his culture, his wife, and his religion. Because she takes a step toward the unknown, she is graced in the last years of her life with a deep and loyal friendship, a love that asks for nothing but to be known, a peace upon dying that she would have been denied but for the words of prayer she can hear only from Abdul the Muslim, not from a Christian minister, not from a family member, not from a doctor.

When she worries, "I keep thinking I am falling," he responds to her with assurance born of deep faith in the loving will of God,

"Fall. All will be well." What a lovely thing to say at someone's last moments: Just fall. God will catch you. All will be well." I will give up all the platitudes about heaven and life everlasting and St. Peter at the pearly gates for someone who loves me deeply, whose friendship knows no fear to say to me, "Just fall. Go ahead. God will catch you. All will be well."

It takes the stranger to reach the Queen. It takes the stranger sometimes to wake us up to God's call, to what is missing from our own lives. In the past year, I met a stranger, another minister I had only seen in passing. She was at an event I attended at the magical Camp La Foret in the Black Forest just south of here. I say magical because Spirit always is there at La Foret, it seems, waiting for an opportunity to connect us with an experience of the Divine. Spirit has never failed me there, and she did not fail me that time either.

To be honest with you, I was feeling lonely in ministry. I was feeling alone, despite that I love all of you and have such a fulfilling ministry life with you on so many different levels. This ministry has been the greatest grace God has ever shown me next to the day 24 years ago when I met another stranger who saved my life, Chris Dawson.

But it's hard being a purple church pastor. It's lonely sometimes being isolated physically from other churches. And I was needing to

find connection within my own ranks. I knew in my heart that to save my ministry life I would have to step out of my introverted shell and put myself out there. That's right—I am actually an introvert—I call myself a superficial extrovert. I can meet and greet anyone and my smile and welcome are genuine. But I let very few people in to my inner self and I am a lousy wallflower date at a cocktail party.

At La Foret, I welcomed a stranger. You heard her preach here last Sunday—Wendy Kidd. I welcomed a stranger, and she was a stranger no more. Now she is my friend and colleague and I am ever grateful for her.

Some of you have had the same experience here at church. You were here on a Sunday or on another day and you met a stranger who came in through that door,. Remember how they were wary, unsure, nervous, and isolated? You greeted them and you looked into their eyes, and they were a stranger no more. Now you are close friends. Now you thank God for that chance encounter that changed your life.

Maybe you *were* that person who felt called by Spirit to try it out here, unsure of exactly why or exactly what or who you might find once you set foot inside. Unsure of what lay ahead, but feeling the need to connect, to find family and friendship, shared common values and purpose, a church you could embrace, a church that would just as importantly, embrace you, you drove into the parking lot, stayed in your

car a moment vacillating on whether to come inside, and then you made the bold, what-the-heck move that has changed your life, too.

Of course, you had your questions and doubts: Would you be welcomed here without a spouse? Would you be welcomed here after suffering the disappointment of a prior failed church relationship? Would you be welcomed with your children who could be a bit disruptive, one perhaps who has special needs? Would you be welcomed as a lesbian or gay person, or a person who is questioning your gender identity? Would you be welcomed here even though you doubted God or God's love?

Do you remember the young woman who wandered in here after she came out to her fundamentalist parents and was then kicked out of the family home? I wonder how Steph felt walking in here the first time to us, desperate to find community, longing for acceptance for who she—now he—was? She came in here, called by Spirit to be a stranger no longer, to rightfully claim a place among the beloved children of God. And you welcomed her. You fed her when she was hungry. You gave her shelter from the storms of her life when she was shivering and soaking from standing alone outside in the rain. You were Christian for her. You were Jesus for her. You were God's Spirit for her. You were her springboard. She still has the prayer shawl you made for her, ladies, hanging in her bedroom, reminding her that she

was accepted, she was known, she was family here, she was a stranger no more.

We do a great job here of welcoming newcomers. YOU all do a great job of it. In the next few weeks, 7 former strangers who are now friends will express their joys and affirmations as our newest community members. They all wandered in here as strangers; now they are us. I invite you to find them or somebody today at Hospitality Hour that you don't know very well, maybe that you don't know at all. Welcome them, befriend them. Change their life and take the risk that yours will be changed as well.

Abdul assures the aging Victoria, "As long as I shall live, I will be by your side." She looks into the eyes of her dear friend and says softly,

"You are a fool, but I adore you." Jesus says, "Go. Go out into the broken and hungry world and be someone's fool. Change a life. Welcome a stranger. Find a friend. God will smile."

*May it Be So.*