



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

May 22, 2016

When I Was a Stranger

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

When I Was a Stranger

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2016 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: May 27, 2016

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, '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, was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' (Matthew 25:34-36).

In May of 1980, back in my Methodist days, I was what the church called a “mission ambassador” for three weeks in Latin America. My assignment was to meet church leaders in Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, and Puerto Rico, then come home and describe to people back here what life was like for the churches in those areas, by way of strengthening connections between Christians around the world.

All was going well until my traveling companion and I got to Bolivia. La Paz is about 12,000 feet above sea level, and our hosts told us to take it easy for the few days we would be there, so that our bodies could adjust to the altitude. I thought that was probably good advice for older people, but I was young, and in pretty good shape, and there were hills to climb and bags to carry and people to impress. The upshot is, I didn't take the advice very seriously. That's when I learned a new word in Spanish: *soroche*, which is what they call altitude sickness in the Andes.

I'll spare you the details, but it was the worst night of my life. I thought I was going to die out there in the mountains, thousands of miles from home, where the only

person I really knew was the one I came with, and she was staying in a different house. I thought, “So this is it. This is how it ends. I’m going to die all alone in Bolivia at the tender age of 27, and someone will send a note back home to ask what they should do with the body.” This was in the days before email and text messaging, so I thought it might take a while before anyone at home even realized I was gone.

But one of the Bolivians at the center we were visiting discovered my sickness and sent for Dr. Crespo, the head of the mission whom we had met earlier that day. The doctor came to me in the middle of the night, did a quick examination, and asked me a few questions. Then he smiled, which I thought was an odd reaction in the presence of someone about to die. He said, “It’s just the *soroche*, the altitude sickness. Tomorrow you’ll fly down to Lima, which is at sea level. So here, take two Tylenol. You’ll be fine.”

“Really?” I thought. Two Tylenol? That’s it? It turns out, that was all I needed, besides a serious altitude adjustment. The doctor was right. The next day I was fine, with a lot more oxygen and considerably more humility flowing through me.

As it happened, a few months later there was a military coup in Bolivia. It made some inside page of the newspapers here, because in those days Latin America was full of unrest and governments were in turmoil all the time. But the United Methodist mission agency reported that among the people who were missing in the coup was Dr. Crespo, since his work with the poor made him suspect in the eyes of the government. So many people were disappearing in Latin America back then, they were known simply as *los desaparecidos*.

The news of that coup in Bolivia, which barely made the papers in America, struck me with great force as I thought of Dr. Crespo. I remembered Matthew 25, where Jesus says, come Judgment Day, he'll ask what we did when we saw someone who was hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and the answer will determine whether we're a sheep or a goat, whether we're the sort of soul to be welcomed into heaven or the kind that gets cast off to hell. "As much as you did or did not do for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did or did not do for me," Jesus says.

I had always read that text as a mandate for me to do things, and of course it is. It's a mandate for all of us who claim to follow Jesus. But I always pictured myself on the giving side of the story, taking care of other people. What struck me in Bolivia was how I was on the receiving end, how someone came to me in the middle of the night because his life was shaped by those same words of Jesus. I was a stranger and I was sick, and this man came and cared for me when I was a foreigner in his country. And because he did that sort of thing all the time, there were those who wanted to stop him, lest he cause trouble by raising poor people's expectations about the kind of care they themselves might hope to receive.

I tell you this story for a couple of reasons.

First, as the New Testament letter of James says, "Faith without works is dead." Not just weak, or a little anemic, but dead. And the kind of works God has in mind are spelled out all through the Bible. They include welcoming strangers, making sure that people have the food, clothing, shelter, and health care they need, and seeing that even those in prison are treated fairly. All these things are signs of

true faithfulness to God. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

And then again, my experience reminds me of something we need to underscore today, when people are anxious about so many things, and some are tempted to build strong barriers between who’s in and who’s out, between who they think deserves our caring and who does not.

The Bible begins with the creation of the whole world, then zooms in quickly to focus on the way God works through a particular people in order to show them how to live as a nation. Even though Israel is in some sense a “chosen people,” the nation is reminded again and again that strangers and aliens in their midst are to be treated justly, along with widows and orphans and anyone else who might not have someone to look out for them.

Deuteronomy reminds the people of what God’s law requires, as they’re about to take over the Promised Land:

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being (Deut. 10:12-13).

Lest there be any uncertainty about what that means, among God’s decrees mentioned immediately afterwards is that they show no partiality when it comes to matters of

justice and mercy. “You shall also love the stranger,” God says through the prophet Moses, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The people serve a God “who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.”

Now these strangers among the Israelites are not like them in some important ways. They come from different cultures. They speak different languages. And they often have a different religion, though sometimes they reflect God’s justice and mercy more faithfully than some of the Israelites themselves. Remember, Moses says: God loves the strangers, and you were strangers once yourselves.

This country we love so much, the United States of America, is famously a nation of immigrants. Every one of us here is a descendant of someone who came from someplace else. All our ancestors were strangers in this land once upon a time. Some have been here longer than others, and people have a tendency to treat longevity as a kind of entitlement. But America has always been built up by immigrants, from industrialists like Andrew Carnegie, who came from Scotland, to scientific geniuses like Albert Einstein, who of course was a refugee from Hitler’s Germany. We of all people know what a blessing it is to be welcomed in a new land, and what great gifts talented, hard-working immigrants can bring.

The importance of strangers is true for our nation, and it’s even more obviously true in our personal lives. Except for our immediately family, virtually everyone we know was a stranger to us once upon a time. When we first went to school, most of the children there were strangers, and some of them became our life-long friends. When we started to

work, the people we call colleagues now were strangers at first. When we joined the church, most everyone around us was a stranger. Even the people we're married to were strangers once. First dates are so intimidating precisely because people don't know each other yet, and we worry about how we'll come across to someone we want to impress.

The task of welcoming strangers is not a question of liberal values or conservative values. It's a matter of human values. Jonathan Haidt, a moral psychologist at the University of Virginia, says people base their values on different kinds of moral intuitions. Some emphasize qualities like caring and fairness, while others focus more on loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Haidt thinks that human beings evolved in a state of nature for what he calls "groupish righteousness": that is, we have strong feelings about what's right and wrong, but those feelings tend to apply mostly within our own group, and they also serve to protect our group from anything or anyone that might be seen as a threat.

It's tempting to label whole groups of people as threatening—especially if we don't know any individuals from those groups and all we know is that some of them have done bad things. Stereotypes take over when we have no experience to offset them, and some people are quick to exploit stereotypes and fears for their own advantage. But when we stop to think about it, we know that individuals from all kinds of backgrounds do good things and bad things. The task is to distinguish people by their character and actions, not by their ethnicity or gender or race or religion or any other social category.

In one day's paper last week there were stories about a local school district where the administration seems to have ignored repeated rumors of criminal behavior by some teachers, and a nearby religious diocese that protected clergy who abused children for decades. The same paper carried a story about the plane that crashed a few days ago on its way to Egypt, which may well be the work of terrorists. Thoughtful people know that we're no more justified in stereotyping Muslims or people from the Middle East according to the actions of groups like ISIS than we are in stereotyping teachers and priests according to the behavior of the few who do abominable things.

I personally have been welcomed into the homes of people in Latin America and Africa and Asia and Europe, all of whom were strangers when I met them, and I've hosted a few visitors from abroad as well. It's simply a Christian value to practice hospitality with strangers. And who knows, as the letter to the Hebrews says: in so doing we might even entertain angels unawares.

Of course we need to take reasonable precautions with some people we don't know, which is why we teach little children not to talk to strangers, for example. We all agree that's the right thing to do. But, as Professor Haidt would say, we need to balance our intuitions about loyalty and protection with other intuitions about caring and fairness. And all of us who claim to follow Jesus will have to answer his question one day: "When I was a stranger, did you welcome me?"

The epilogue to my story from Bolivia, by the way, is that we learned a few weeks after the coup that Dr. Crespo was released and back at work taking care of people in the mission. The church was looking out for people then, even

internationally, as it still does today, praying for brothers and sisters everywhere, and doing what we can to influence the powers that be in ways that reflect God's love for everyone—including those who are far from us but near to the heart of God.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org