

“Strangers As Family”

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Deut. 10:12-19

Today we are talking about strangers as family.

Just hearing those words together might have you feel a bit uncomfortable, because strangers are, by definition, people we don't know very well, and we have been taught to be cautious around people we don't know well.

Children today are instructed to yell “Stranger danger!” when they are confronted by someone they do not know when a trusted adult is not around.

We hear stories all the time of people who have been approached by strangers and hurt or abused.

Today, we no longer let our kids run off and play by themselves in the neighborhood all day without adult supervision, only returning for lunch or when it gets dark. These days, parents who do this might be considered irresponsible and neglectful because their kids could be hurt by a stranger.

Strangers are scary and dangerous.

We have also been trained by our culture to preserve the relationships called “family” for those who are biologically related, or for people whom we know well who have been sufficiently vetted. We want to be sure that anyone we let into the inner circle of family is trustworthy and reliable.

We even have movies about such things, like Meet the Parents. In this movie, Ben Stiller's character is dating Robert De Niro's daughter and wants to marry her. The movie's funniest scenes are about all of the extravagant tests Robert Di Niro puts Ben Stiller through to be sure that he is good enough to join the family and enter the “circle of trust.”

This is funny because we really get how important family is.

So, thinking about strangers as family can feel uncomfortable. You might be thinking: “Pastor Scott has been talking for a few years about including new people as part of our church family. But maybe he is going too far by saying we need to consider strangers just like family. Has he gone off the deep end?” Good question.

Let's consider what the Bible says about “strangers.”

Way back in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, is the story of a man named Abraham who became the great grandfather of the Jewish people. Abraham one day was visited by some strangers from a different land who has a message for him. Abraham offered these strangers generous accommodations by giving them a place to rest and sleep, and also providing food for them to eat. In essence, he provided warm hospitality for people who were traveling who did not know the lay of the land and did not have the resources or other means to provide for themselves.

Forever after Abraham, the Jewish people recall his story and how he showed kindness and hospitality to strangers. This was lifted up as a central value for the Jewish people, who themselves were enslaved as strangers in strange lands multiple times. In those environments they, as strangers themselves, relied on the kindness of people who called those places their home.

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Today we have given other names to people described as “strangers” in the Bible. Now we call them: immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker, or alien.

It is important to say that issues of immigration are very complex these days. The topic has been polarized and politicized where people are asked to choose sides based on political party.

Let’s acknowledge together that the issues of immigration are difficult to address because of this contentious climate. However, as people of faith we need to set the polarizing politics aside and explore the core reality based on what the Bible says and where God’s heart resides.

In fact, there are many places in the Bible that talk about God’s concern for the most vulnerable among us, and repeatedly included in that conversation are immigrants. These passages often teach us about what a healthy relationship with immigrants looks like.

In Exodus 22 it says not to mistreat or abuse immigrants.

It says the same thing in Leviticus 19, and then adds to love immigrants as you love those who were born in your own community.

Then further down in Leviticus 25 it talks about treating struggling immigrants in the same way as native-born Israelites.

In Deuteronomy 24 it talks about not exploiting them but treating immigrant people in every way with fairness and justice, in particular paying them the same wages as anyone else.

In many other books including Jeremiah, Malachi, Zechariah, Ezekiel, Psalms, and others it reaffirms that God's people are to protect and not oppress immigrants.

Land was a precious thing for the Jewish people in ancient times, and they had many laws about the sale and use of land as well as about how land was passed on from one generation to the next. This was done most often based on family inheritance.

Then in Ezekiel 47, it says the same thing as Leviticus about not mistreating immigrants who lived among them and treating them as if they were native born, but then it goes further. It says to give immigrants the right to inherit land among the tribe where they have lived. Ezekiel 47:22 says that "they shall be to you as citizens of Israel."

Jesus also specifically affirmed how to relate with immigrants. In Matthew 25 he said that God's people are to generously welcome and treat immigrants in the same

way they would treat Jesus. "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me," he said.

Through many stories, we see Jesus as both God and our human brother. One of the most profound and celebrated realities we find in the Bible is that God came to be with us as one of us, as our brother, as part of our family.

Remarkably, we see God's heart stretching out, inviting us to also welcome immigrants as our brothers and sisters. In the Biblical narrative we see the literal transformation over time of strangers into family.

This is part of the Good News we find in the Bible — that those who have been abandoned, lost, driven away, discarded, and forgotten, God has given a home and a family. That family is among us and with us.

The Bible is abundantly clear that it is the responsibility of God's people to care for those who are immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, many of whom have fled dangerous and life threatening situations in their home countries. I can't imagine who is in greater need of a home?

It is a sad day when we learn about people like Javier, who at 17-years-

old, fled for his life from El Salvador to the United States to avoid recruitment by the vicious MI-13 gangs. Six years later, at 23-years-old in 2017 he was deported by our government. Four months later Javier was killed by members of the MI-13 gang.

This is a tragedy that God is calling people of faith to prevent from happening.

Even though international law prevents deportation of anyone to a country where they face serious risks to their life, our government continues to do this.

The Human Rights Watch organization between 2013 and 2019 documented 138 refugees from El Salvador alone who were deported from the United States only to be killed by the gangs, police, soldiers, and death squads from whom they had fled.

It was also a treacherous situation after World War II as people were forced to move or flee the chaos and turmoil of post-war Europe, often fueled by discrimination based on race and ethnicity.

In those days, due to fear and racism, refugees were not always welcome on the shores where they landed or in communities where

they were looking for safety, peace and a restart of their lives.

However, people from this congregation heard the cries of these human beings who were searching for refuge. They understood their responsibility as people of faith to stand with and for these vulnerable human beings.

Pastor Emil Kontz came to this congregation in 1947 with social conscience and experience working with Japanese Americans who had been unjustly forced into internment camps here in the United States.

Rev. Kontz led the congregation to extend compassion and resources to displaced people here in Birmingham. Through the 1940s and 50s, this congregation sponsored four Hungarian couples, a Ukrainian couple, an immigrant family from Germany, and a refugee family from Laos.

Fear was a powerful force in those days and there was not a uniform support for helping refugees and immigrants, however this congregation stood on the bleeding edge and did what their God called them to for the sake of the most vulnerable when it really mattered.

This is our history. This is our story!

That same spirit and character lives on in this congregation today. It is what had us rally around Jose and his kids during his unjust jailing in January. And Jose is helping us to understand a helpful approach to injustice. By his example we are learning how to place our attention on what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be in the middle of it all.

This is who we are and this informs us about where we are heading in the future.