Loving the Stranger

Hespeler, 15 November 2026 © Scott McAndless – Katie's Sermon Request
Exodus 22:21-27, Psalm 146, Luke 10:25-37

As many of you know, I have been putting the opportunity to order up a sermon into our annual auction for several years now. And every time someone puts in a winning bid and gets to order up that sermon, I wait with some trepidation to hear what they want me to preach about. Are they going to try and trip me up and make me preach about something I know nothing about? Will they force me to talk about a topic that doesn't interest me that much?

It has always worked out, and I have really enjoyed the results of these challenges. But something makes today's sermon particularly delicious to me. Last year, the winning bid on the sermon was put in by Katie. And she had an entire year to think about what she wanted to make me preach about. To my mind, the results are amazing.

Controversial

First of all, Katie has asked me to preach about what has become a very controversial subject in our world. And controversial subjects can cause a certain amount of anxiety for preachers, as you can imagine. I mean, what if you don't like me because I am talking about something you find uncomfortable? But that doesn't matter today, does it? Because today I'm not the one who chose the topic. If you feel at all uncomfortable with today's sermon, you can't blame me. Katie gets all of the blame today. Thank you, Katie!

Katie wants me to preach about loving the stranger, the foreigner and the outsider. This is an increasingly controversial topic that is indeed very close to my own heart. But not only did she raise the issue, she also did a lot of work to flesh out the question. That is why I wanted to share what she gave me with you. It has all the background. Thanks to her, therefore, I don't even need to really make the argument that loving the stranger is a major theme in the Bible.

A Major Biblical Theme

Katie is absolutely right that the need to welcome strangers and foreigners and treat them with respect is very important in the Bible. In the laws of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the people are commanded to do this because of their experiences being outsiders and slaves in Egypt.

And it is not just commanded, there are also a number of biblical stories that show how important this practice is – that some who welcomed strangers actually had divine encounters as a result.

So, thanks again to Katie, I don't have to spend time trying to convince you that the Bible says this is important. And that gives me the opportunity to look at what is always the more important question. Why don't we believe it? Why are all kinds of Christians, and Christians who gladly identify themselves as Bible believers, completely unaware that the Bible teaches them to love the stranger?



Why Do Christians Reject the Idea?

Why indeed do many such Christians argue that it is a Christian's duty to do the very opposite of what the Bible teaches, that it is a Christian's duty to reject foreigners, to make sure they can't get across the border and, to expel any who do make it in.

People don't get that from the Bible. And yet for some strange reason, we are living in a world where people increasingly think that rejecting the stranger is a Christian virtue.

How did that happen? We could blame it, perhaps, on biblical illiteracy; people are no longer reading their Bibles. That is part of it, but there is more.

Deflecting Blame

We are living in a world where rich and powerful people don't want to be accountable for their decisions and actions. And so, when what they are doing is causing poverty or homelessness, or when they don't want to take action to deal with these problems, they need to deflect the blame elsewhere.

Immigrants, migrants and refugees are handy scapegoats. They have little voice in society, so they can't complain. And so, the message goes out to people that the reason why you can't buy a home or find a job is that there are these strangers who live among us. They are also blamed for crime rates and the cost of social services and all kinds of other problems.

Not True

And it doesn't matter that it is not true. Statistically, immigrants contribute much more to the economy than they take out of it. They commit crimes at much lower rates than native-born Canadians and pay more in taxes while receiving fewer benefits than the average Canadian does over their full lifespan.

Are there problems caused by immigration? Of course there are. When the system is run poorly or with insufficient checks, and when the infrastructure to welcome people is not in place, it creates problems. But on the balance, especially in our modern society with low birth rates, newcomers are a net benefit to this country.

But, like I say, they are the handy scapegoats who we can blame for anything. And yes, Christian leaders get swept up in it and, when they do, they are not going to let what the Bible actually says stop them from blaming or targeting strangers.

So, what can we do? How can we bring a new focus on what the Bible actually says? That is, as I understand it, is the task Katie has given me today, to fix this misunderstanding of the Bible and all of the trouble it has caused. No pressure, right Katie?

Love Thy Neighbour

There is another law in the Bible that lives alongside all of the passages that teach us to welcome the stranger. That is the command that **"you shall love… your neighbour as yourself."** Throughout the Old Testament, there is a clear interpretation of that word "neighbour." If you read through all of the laws regarding the treatment of "your neighbour," including the one we read this morning, it is pretty clear that the word neighbour refers in the Old Testament to your fellow Israelite. It is the person who lives next door or down the street and who is like you when it comes to tribe, ethnicity, language and religion.

And if you read through the Old Testament, you can easily come away with the impression that there is a pecking order. Sure, you are to welcome the strangers and treat them with respect, but you are to *love* your neighbour, your fellow Israelite and the person who is just like you.

And once you introduce that pecking order, there will be people who take that as permission to treat strangers like dirt. I mean, if love for the neighbour, who is like you, comes first, then it becomes the perfect excuse to put the stranger way at the end of the line.

An Expert in the Law

And that is exactly what a certain expert in the law was counting on when he challenged Jesus one day. When Jesus asked him what was at the heart of the law, he answered, as most Judeans would have at the time, saying, **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself."**

But then the law expert smugly asked Jesus, **"And who is my neighbour?"** He asked it because he thought that Jesus would have to give the standard answer, the answer that everyone had. He thought that Jesus would have to admit that his neighbour was his fellow Israelite and someone most like him. Then he could have said, "Aha, so that means I don't have to love strangers because they matter less than neighbours.

Jesus' Surprising Answer

But Jesus didn't give the standard answer. He didn't appeal to the text of the law. Talking about laws only makes people defensive and rigid. Instead, Jesus did what he often did when he wanted to help people look at things from a different point of view. Jesus told a story because stories make us realize that we are dealing with flesh-and-blood human beings.

And Jesus' story is justly famous. Everybody knows the story of the "Good Samaritan." But I don't think everybody realizes just how much the story was designed to upset that expert in the law's way of thinking.

Hatred of Samaritans

Oh, people usually catch on that Judeans and Samaritans did not get along. In every sermon preached on this parable, the point is made that the Judeans rejected and hated Samaritans because they did not worship God in the right way. In that sense, even though Samaritans lived right next door to Judea, they were the perfect example of a stranger.

So, everybody gets Jesus' important point that there really is no pecking order when it comes to love – that the love of the neighbour *is* the love of the stranger and you cannot put one ahead of the other. So, the expert's big excuse is eliminated.

Beyond Colonial Theology

But Jesus is doing more than that. If that were all he wanted to say, he would have told a story of a *Samaritan* beaten and left for dead at the side of the road. He would have made the Samaritan the victim and told his fellow Judeans to take care of foreign Samaritans by helping and saving them.

Such a telling would have only encouraged what Katie calls colonial theology, which frames loving the stranger only in terms of acts of voluntary kindness or mission work. But the problem such ways of thinking, as she says, is that it reinforces our feelings of cultural superiority.

It gives us an attitude that we are so much smarter and more sophisticated that we have to go around saving everyone else. This approach to loving the stranger leads to colonial control, dependence and prevents the true flourishing of another culture.

So Jesus didn't tell the story of a Judean who saved a Samaritan. He told a story of a hated Samaritan who saved a Judean when other Judeans had failed to love their neighbour.

A Disturbing History

There is more about the relationship between Judeans and Samaritans that people often miss in this story though. Judeans didn't just hate Samaritans; they had colonized them. In 110 BC, the Jewish king John Hyrcanus led his army into Samaria; he took control of their land, killed a bunch of them and destroyed the temple on Mount Gerizim where they worshipped the God of Israel.

So, for the entirety of Jesus' life and a century before that, the Judeans had treated Samaria as a colony. They didn't just hate the Samaritans because they were strangers or because of religious differences. They hated them because it was the only way that they could manage their guilt for destroying the lives and the religious freedom of their ethnic neighbours.

They had to think of the Samaritans as inferior and wicked because the alternative was to come to terms with what they had done. Otherwise, the Judeans would have to admit the truth, that they were monsters who had attacked an innocent people who had done nothing to deserve it.

So, if we want to really absorb the impact of the parable of the Good Samaritan, we need to imagine a situation where a Gazan saves the life of a Zionist, where a Ukrainian saves a Russian, where an Indigenous person saves a settler. That is the kind of scenario Jesus was setting up with his story.

Making Us See in a New Light

So, with one simple story, Jesus took on every reason why people want to ignore and reject the clear biblical teaching that we must love the stranger. He forces us to look at all such people in a new light. But he doesn't do it by quoting the law at people. Commanding people to love the stranger will not get you very far. Jesus does it by telling a story that turns the despised Samaritan into a real, three-dimensional human being who exercises care and concern for someone who hates him.

Living This Truth

And where does that leave us? If we want to live as Christians who take the Bible seriously, we cannot ignore the Biblical call to love the stranger. But just telling people what the Bible says is not going to cut it. The only thing that will change people's attitudes is if we do what Jesus did and take the time to present real-life strangers to people. Tell them the stories of how strangers and immigrants, refugees and migrants who come among us are real people who bring real gifts that help build up the whole community. But you can only tell those stories is if you get to know the people yourself.

So, I don't know what anyone else thinks, Katie, but I am glad that you made me spend some time thinking about why the Bible teaches us to love the stranger. It offers us a real challenge given what is going on in our world today.

If you don't want to think about how we ought to meet that challenge, if that makes you feel uncomfortable, you don't have to blame me. You can blame Katie – she said she can handle it. But if you, like me, appreciate such a timely challenge, I hope you will join me in thanking her at the end of today's service.