

## **Never Talk to Strangers ??**

First Friday, Edgewood Summit, Charleston Gardens, Arthur B. Hodges –  
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**33** “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. **34** You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

I recently listened to an interview of Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. He talked about how Jesus indeed preached from the Jewish Bible. We know those commandments that Jesus said were so important: (1) Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and (2) Love your neighbor as yourself. But the rabbis tells us that there is another LOVE commandment that is important in our Bible – so much so that it is repeated 36 times: LOVE THE STRANGER.

And the scripture that I just read from Leviticus, gives the reason for this “Love the stranger” commandment: BECAUSE YOU YOURSELVES WERE STRANGERS IN THE LAND OF EGYPT.

In modern words, Jonathan Sacks says, This means that we might consider them strangers, but they also consider US a stranger. It is only when we share together that we are made complete.

**Conversation with the stranger - should not be seen as an opportunity to convert, but an opportunity to be made more complete.**

Even Jesus, himself, seemed to grow when He had conversation with a stranger – with one of “THE OTHER.”

There's a story that the Gospel of Mark shares about Jesus encountering a "syrophoenician woman" - not of his faith, not of his country, not of any group to which He belonged (other than fellow human.) It's language makes some people uncomfortable and makes them even squirm. Listen to how Mark tells it, not how I might tell it:

<sup>24</sup> And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon.<sup>[a]</sup> And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. <sup>25</sup> But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup> And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." <sup>30</sup> And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.  
(Mark 7:24-30)

Jesus calling this stranger a dog is not the nice image that we have of Jesus. But we see that Jesus did not leave his encounter with this strong woman, saying the same kinds of things. I know some women clergy who like to tell me that this passage shows how the only times Jesus was ever talked into changing his mind was by a woman - here and by his mother at the wedding in Cana, of Galilee.

**"NEVER TALK TO STRANGERS!"** These are words that I heard as a child, particularly at the beginning of the new school year. And these were the same words that I repeated to my children -- particularly at the beginning of a new school year.

Jesus calls this poor distressed woman a dog and tells her that He has nothing for her. Yes, there are lots of supposed reasons and possible explanations for Jesus' difficult behavior when he talked to strangers on this particular day. But, sometimes instead of defending Jesus' honor, it's helpful just to take the scripture at face value.

It's OK to let the scripture talk to us today, in a time when it seems like so many people don't want to talk to strangers. People are afraid of strangers.

**It's OK to see how Jesus was challenged to step outside of His box, to show us how we can do it, also.**

Who is afraid of you or – or at least don't want to have anything to do with you, a stranger? What strangers are you afraid of – or at least don't want to have anything to do with?

Jesus ended up devoting his life to not only talking to, but healing, strangers. And not only healing strangers, but transforming them from stranger to beloved.

Almost every single person who has any interest in God, has a path in which they have traveled to God. It's a path that has worked for them. And then, most people who have traveled a pathway to God, somehow get the notion that THEIR way is the ONLY way to arrive at God.

And so many people get turned off by God, because so many of God's followers, God's believers, God's beloved ... are so rigid in how they treat everyone else.

36 times, the First Testament tells us to LOVE THE STRANGER. Doesn't say to convert the stranger. Doesn't say to make the stranger travel the same way that you did. LOVE THE STRANGER ... because God loved you when you were a stranger.

We simply cannot have a higher standard for people to be lovable than God does.

Love the stranger ... like God does.

When we do this, it helps us to get over our fear. FEAR is the thing that seems to be driving so many people to action today. And God's Word tells us that LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR.

Do we talk to strangers? I ask each person here today, as they come to the Lord's Table to receive that which they do not deserve -- and don't anyone stay away because they feel unworthy; everyone here is unworthy to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ -- but it is offered to all of us, anyway.

When you come to receive -- to be welcomed not as a stranger, but as a beloved friend of Jesus -- I want you to ask Jesus to break down any barriers you might have about strangers -- ask Jesus to lead a stranger into your life this coming week -- and ask Jesus to direct you and empower you to respond as one of Jesus' disciples. Not to convert them. Not to be converted by them. But to share in the status of someone that Jesus loves. Them - just as they are. You - just as you are. When we can all learn to look at one another as beloved children of God, even when they seem strange, it makes a difference in how we allow God to love us, and to share love through us. Amen.