

## ***DON'T BE A STRANGER***

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

July 22, 2018; 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Deuteronomy 10: 12-22; Ephesians 2:11-22

***“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens  
with the saints and also members of the household of God...”***

Ephesians 2:19

*“Don't be a stranger!”*

If somebody ever says that to you, you ought to feel flattered. It's a fond farewell, spoken by a person who likes you, who wants to see you again.

Nobody wants to be a stranger. The very word conjures up fear and dread. Think of all the movies about a stranger coming to town: the mysterious *hombre* minding his own business at the corner table in a Western saloon; the naive teenager driving in from the big city, caught like a fly in the spider-web of a small-town speed trap; the silent newcomer who, if a child goes missing, is the first one to be suspected of something nefarious.

Early on, in the process of human evolution, fear of the stranger was burned deep into our consciousness. For millennia, we human beings found our collective security in the tribe. A person not of our clan symbolized potential danger. The rule was: suspect the worst, until you know for certain the stranger is safe.

There are certain experiences in life — many of them connected with travel

— that thrust us into the role of strangers. Train stations and airport departure lounges are like that. With a very few exceptions — like the one or two people you may be traveling with — everybody’s a stranger.

So what do people do in such a setting? They look for a seat not directly next to someone else. They find something to read, avoiding eye contact. Admit it: you’ve done it before. I have too. A roomful of strangers — even though everyone has a perfectly good explanation for being there — raises our anxiety.

Billy Collins was at one time poet laureate of the United States. I had an opportunity, once, to hear him read this poem, written in an airport lounge — as it suddenly occurred to him that, should the plane they were all about to board happen to crash, these were the people with whom he’d be spending his last moments. It’s called “Passengers”:

**At the gate, I sit in a row of blue seats  
with the possible company of my death,  
this sprawling miscellany of people —  
carry-on bags and paperbacks —**

**that could be gathered in a flash  
into a band of pilgrims on the last open road.  
Not that I think  
if our plane crumpled into a mountain**

**we would all ascend together,  
holding hands like a ring of sky divers,  
into a sudden gasp of brightness,  
or that there would be some common spot**

**for us to reunite to jubilize the moment,  
some spaceless, pillarless Greece  
where we could, at the count of three,  
toss our ashes into the sunny air.**

**It's just that the way that man has his briefcase  
so carefully arranged,  
the way that girl is cooling her tea,  
and the flow of the comb that woman**

**passes through her daughter's hair...  
and when you consider the altitude,  
the secret parts of the engines,  
and all the hard water and the deep canyons below...**

**well, I just think it would be good if one of us  
maybe stood up and said a few words,  
or, so as not to involve the police,  
at least quietly wrote something down.<sup>1</sup>**

The thing I like about that poem is how thoroughly it punctures this illusion we all have that we are strangers to one another on this earth: that we do not, in fact, share a common humanity; that we are not — every one of us — created in God's image, after all.

Sadly, it sometimes takes an experience of shared peril to bring strangers together: like Billy Collins' hypothetical plane crash, or — on 9/11 — the experience of all those ash-covered survivors of the collapse of the Twin Towers walking together to the Staten Island Ferry.

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<sup>1</sup>Billy Collins, from *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (Random House, 2002).

If only there were some way for us to bridge that gap of fear that divides us from our fellow travelers on this spinning planet!

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In Ephesians, chapter 2, the writer — traditionally thought to be the Apostle Paul — draws our attention to a shared experience that just might help us do that:

**“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...”**

The author’s writing, here, to a church torn up by disagreements and differences. The church in Ephesus was divided between two ethnic groups: Jews and Greeks. That early Christian community was trying to decide what it was, essentially. Was it was a new sect of Judaism, or was it something else altogether?

The Jewish followers of Jesus resented the Greeks, these newcomers to their spiritual tradition. They thought them lazy and undisciplined, because their men would not submit to circumcision, nor learn Hebrew so they could study the ancient scriptures. The Greeks, for their part, resented the Jews, thinking them hidebound traditionalists.

This rift in the church had been going on for some time. It had gotten so bad that some church members had stopped speaking to those who belonged to the other party. The Ephesian Christians were, for all practical purposes, treating one

another like strangers. Their apostle will have none of it. “You are no longer strangers and aliens,” he tells them.

The Greek word translated “strangers” means “foreigners,” those who come from another place. The word translated “aliens” occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It means something similar to our phrase, “resident aliens.” It’s as though the author is saying, “You people are neither just off the boat, nor are you green-card holders.”

“What you are,” the author goes on to say, “is full citizens.” Literally, he says: “You are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

Whenever we read about “the saints” in the New Testament, it means simply “the people of God.” Nowhere does the New Testament set apart certain individuals and call them “saints,” raising them above the common herd. Always the word is plural, and always it refers to the entire church. To the Greek Christians of Ephesus — who were feeling so maligned by the Jewish faction — this is a word of reassurance and welcome.

“Turn in your green cards,” the author’s saying. “You won’t need them any more: for here is your very own passport — with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto.”

But he goes even further. “What you also are,” the author continues, is

“members of the household of God.”

We are not merely neighbors and fellow-citizens, here in the church. We are members of the same family. It’s really quite extraordinary, the language of unity in this verse. The apostle wants us to know, beyond a doubt, that in Jesus Christ, we are all one.

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No doubt he’s referring to a social practice in the Roman world that was well-known to his readers. This was the institution of adoption.

When we think of adoption in our culture, it’s a beautiful thing. A couple decides they’ve got enough love in their hearts to share it beyond their existing social unit. And so they welcome in a child — perhaps an infant, or a boy or girl who’s a little older. Once legal adoption papers are filed and duly recognized by a judge, that child becomes — in the eyes of the law — no different from a natural-born son or daughter.

The Romans had child adoptions like that, to be sure, but they also allowed for the adoption of adults. In Roman society, family was everything. There was little sense of obligation to someone who was not a member of your family. So, when a mentoring relationship was set up in the context of a business or profession, when that relationship reached a certain point of maturity, the mentor

would legally adopt the person being mentored. This could happen even if both parties were adults.

Because family was all-in-all in that society, the only way to forge a lasting relationship with another person not of your own blood was to expand the family circle so as to take them in.

I think we can sense a faint echo of the Roman institution of adult adoption in today's Italian mafia — as you hear about it in, say, the *Godfather* movies. You know, of course, what they call those criminal organizations: families. The ritual of becoming a “made man” in mafia culture is a sort of adult adoption. Once people have crossed that line, committing themselves to the other members of the so-called family, they're in for life. Both parties to the arrangement — the adopter and the adoptee — expect certain things of one another.

It's probably no accident that these criminals of Italian heritage — descendants of the ancient Romans — perpetuate this age-old practice of adult adoption, even though it's for evil purposes.

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Well, Paul, of course, means nothing so nefarious when he tells the Ephesians, both Jews and Greeks, that they are “no longer strangers...but members of the household of God.” What has brought them together, he explains — a few

verses earlier — is **“the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”** It’s not that the Jews have adopted the Greeks, or vice-versa. Both those factions were once “far off,” estranged from God by sin: but that is no longer so. Both have been adopted into God’s family by the saving death of Jesus Christ.

Because of that adoption, they are no longer strangers to one another.

That has powerful implications for us, here at Lamington Church — or for any church that aspires to follow Jesus Christ. When guests walk through the doors of this church, for the first time, they often fear, on some level, that they will not be fully welcomed, will not be accepted. There’s a beautiful line in the marriage prayer, that I use in every wedding I conduct. It asks God to help the couple “to build together a home where no one is a stranger.” Let us work together, here, to build a church where no one is a stranger!

Not every church is so adept at extending hospitality to strangers. Sadly, there are times when churches forget this essential truth of the faith, and start behaving as though they were a more exclusive organization. The preacher, Fred Craddock, tells a story of a church like that. Sadly, it was a church he once served, early in his ministry. It was located in the hills of Eastern Tennessee.

Years later, Fred returned to that church. He brought his wife, Nettie, along for the ride — for they hadn't been married at time, and she had never seen it. As the two of them drove to the little town, Fred reminisced about a time of controversy in that congregation. The nearby Oak Ridge National Laboratory was expanding, and new families were moving into the area. Fred, the young pastor, urged the people of this beautiful, little white-frame church to call on the newcomers, to invite them to join them.

“They wouldn't fit in here,” was the curt reply.

A week later, there was a congregational meeting. “I move,” said one of the longtime members, “that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.” The motion passed, over the pastor's objections.

When Fred and Nettie pulled up to the old church building, years later, it looked to be a busy place, much busier than he remembered. In his words:

**“The parking lot was full — motorcycles and trucks and cars packed in there. And out front, a great big sign: “Barbecue, all you can eat.” It's a restaurant, so we went inside. The pews are against a wall. They have electric lights now, and the organ pushed over into the corner. There are all these aluminum and plastic tables, and people sitting there eating barbecued pork and chicken and ribs — all kinds of people. Parthians and Medes and Edomites and dwellers of Mesopotamia, all kinds of people. I said to Nettie, ‘It's a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn't be in here.’”<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup>Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (Chalice Press, 2001), 29.

Fred's story is a cautionary tale for any church that forgets this essential truth about its own nature: that none of us are here because we deserve to be here (not even those of us who happen to have been born into this congregation). We are here for one reason and one reason only — we who once were strangers and far off, but who have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

We are all of us adopted members of this family of God. And because none of us are natural-born, there is none who can claim pride of place over anyone else.

So, don't be a stranger here — and don't treat anyone else as a stranger, either. Before Christ, we are all equal. We are all one: brothers and sisters by adoption.

**“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”**

Let us pray:

**God of aliens and strangers:  
make the doors of this church wide enough  
so all may find here a welcome, a home, a haven, a heart.  
Christ of the near and of those who are far-off:  
make our hearts big enough so all your children  
may find a place in this household of faith.**

**Welcoming Spirit of saints and sinners:  
open our arms wide enough so that all —  
the guest, the neighbor,**

**the child, the widow,  
the distinguished citizen, the homeless,  
the brother, the sister —  
may all be embraced by your love and grace.**

**God of holy love,  
open your arms wide enough to enfold us, even us, in your heart.  
In the name of Jesus, Amen.**

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