

“NOT WELCOME HERE”

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A WORLD CITIZEN COMES HOME

I've always considered myself to be a sort of "world citizen."

I mean, I've always liked living in the United States of America in the 20th & 21st centuries. I always felt kinda lucky that when it was time for me to show up, I showed up here, but I never thought much about it beyond that.

Then I went to Nicaragua. It was my first time traveling outside the United States of America unless you count Texas. (Just kidding, Texans.) And I didn't realize what I was feeling until, on our return, our plane touched down inside the United States and I passed through customs.

Something, some weight that I didn't even realize was there slipped off my shoulders. I don't know if it was anxiety or fear or just a general uneasiness, but I know that when I stepped back into the United States of America, it disappeared.

After thinking about it I have come to believe that what I was feeling was a sense of security that I had not felt when I was in another country. I was home.

I'm an American. I know how the United States works – or is supposed to work. I have a fairly good idea what the laws are and what my rights are and my place in the scheme of things. I know the dominant language and the money and a lot of the customs.

None of that was true in Nicaragua. I could only speak a little of the language. I was trying to learn the history and the customs but it was slow going. I certainly didn't know the laws or my rights if, indeed, I had any.

It wasn't that we were treated roughly or badly. In fact, I was never treated with anything but courtesy and kindness by the Nicaraguan people and I think most of our group could say the same thing. They are a happy, friendly, warm, hardworking, kind and generous people who tend to look out for strangers and foreigners.

(I will never forget the prison guard who, when we were entering the prison to help with a ministry, there, abruptly stopped the process, left his shack, walked out into the sun and patiently directed a group of us who were standing there to move into the shade about ten feet away. Then he sighed and climbed back into his guard shack to resume the pass-through process. -- These whacky Americans. You have to tell them everything!)

Be all that as it may, however, there still lingered in me that anxious, uneasy knowledge that I was vulnerable. I was at the mercy of those who knew the language, the laws and the customs better than I did. I was dependent on them and their sense of hospitality.

Fortunately, our experience was a good one. The Nicaraguan people – they call themselves, Nicos -- are innately friendly and hospitable. But it didn't change the fact that I felt suddenly easier, freer, safer and, generally, more at ease, when my feet were back on American soil.

You don't have to leave the country to have that experience.

I've been to New York a dozen times and I still remember the first time I went. People warned me about everything! Put your wallet in your front pocket. Make sure you give the taxi driver directions or he'll rip you off by driving a long route. Ask the price before you buy anything. Don't make eye contact with people on the street.

Then we got there and the taxi driver drove fast but couldn't have been nicer or more honest. When we got lost on the subway and needed directions the people literally stood in line to offer advice. The prices of everything were prominently displayed. And the New Yorkers we met were, by and large, friendly and helpful.

And, yet...

We were keenly aware, the whole time we were there, that we were not at home. This was not our place or our space. We needed the help of other people. We were vulnerable and dependent.

That vulnerability and dependence which comes from being a stranger in a strange land is a nearly universal human experience throughout history and across cultures.

But in the history of humankind only one civilization has sought to address it specifically in their code of laws and that was the ancient Hebrews, the Israelites who we meet in the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament. For them, hospitality was not an option, a kind of etiquette that could be obeyed or ignored.

For them, hospitality was the law.

JEWISH HOSPITALITY IN ANCIENT TIMES

The Jews understood what it meant to find yourself at the mercy of strangers. At the time these stories were being written down, edited and compiled, the Hebrew people had been through two exiles, forced to live away from home: once in Egypt and once, at the time of this writing, in Babylon.

They knew by experience the difference in those who made their life hard through rejection and poor treatment and those who, by hospitality and kindness, made their lives bearable.

So it is not surprising that hospitality played such a huge part in their laws and customs. Indeed, Isaiah valued it, along with charity as among the highest values and more important to God than fasting and prayer.

There was also a practical side to these laws and customs. The Middle East is a dry and arid place with a harsh, even dangerous climate. Access to food and water was extremely important, especially water. Communities usually sprang up around sources of water – wells, oases, rivers, springs, etc. – that could mean the difference in life and death to a traveler. But the community also needed some sort of protection and security.

The Hebrew laws requiring hospitality from the host also required civility from the guest. The idea was that, if these customs were obeyed with something like universality, no one need parish for want of food or drink in the desert. Everyone would know that both host and guest were protected by law and custom but the guest, who was most vulnerable, was protected the most.

According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, which was published between 1901 and 1906, the sojourner or traveler (“ger” in Hebrew) who abided with a Hebrew family was assured not just civility but kindness, respect and protection. And this was not just Emily Post, it was the law of the Torah.

Specifically, guests were protected from oppression (Ex. 23:9) and from deceit (Lev. 19:33). They were to be treated with love (Deut. 16: 14). Indeed, the Hebrews are admonished in Leviticus 19:34 to love not just the neighbor but the stranger as they love themselves. Guests were to be invited to participate in all family and tribal festivals, the only optional one being Passover. If the guests were poor they were to be given part of the family’s religious offering or poor tithe.

There was to be one law for everyone, native and foreigner alike. Foreigners were subject to the same laws, rights and freedoms as everyone else and were not to be singled out for different, usually worse, treatment than natives as was the custom in many ancient near eastern civilizations.

These laws gave birth to customs and traditions that became sacred in ancient Israel.

Hebrews were not to wait for strangers to come to them. They were instructed to go to strangers, even run to them, when they saw them on the road, and offer them hospitality before they could pass by. The host was to ask no questions about where the stranger was going or even his or her name until the guest’s rudimentary needs were met. These included foot bathing, cool water to drink, a meal and a cool or shady place to sit in comfort.

The guest’s animals were to be tended to, watered and fed and the host was responsible for any injury or illness that might befall at person while in their household.

Upon leaving, another meal was served and food prepared for the road. The host would then accompany the stranger some distance on the way to make sure they were safely off.

The guest would offer a blessing to the host upon leaving and asked him if he stood in need of anything. If a guest wanted to stay and become part of the clan, the clan was to help the guest build a house.

Charity and hospitality – kindness, gentleness, and generosity were the rule.

THE SIN OF SODOM

So now we come to our story.

You will recall that Lot, Abraham’s nephew chose, when the clan split up, to live in and near the cities. He chose the urban route while Abraham chose the rural.

Two of the biggest, most powerful cities in that area at the time were Sodom and Gomorrah, sister cities that we believe sat near the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Lot and his family lived in Sodom which, we are told, was an evil city.

The well which supplied water to these ancient cities was usually located near the main gate so that people in need of water could get it without coming all the way into the city. The area around the well also served as a kind of open square where people gathered to visit, gossip, make deals, apply for work, and to just hang out.

One day Lot is hanging out there, sitting near the city gate when he sees these two strangers approaching. These, we know, are the same strangers who earlier had lunch with Abraham and are here to destroy the cities if they can’t find ten decent folks living in them. (The three from the Abraham story have somehow morphed into two. We are not told why or how. Some scholars write it off to an editor’s error. Who knows?)

Lot sees them coming and, falling back on his Hebrew upbringing, he does not wait for them to arrive. He goes out to them and welcomes them and invites them into his home. They say that he shouldn’t go to any trouble; they’ll just stay on the square, sleeping outdoors. But Lot insists that they come to his house and they finally agree.

Once they are at Lot’s home he shows himself to be every bit the good Hebrew host. He provides a “feast” – not just a meal, a feast – for them and beds for them to sleep on.

But before they can go to bed a mob of men gathers outside the house and begins pounding on the walls and doors, demanding that the newcomers be sent out. Their intention, they announce, is to rape these visitors to their city. Scholars tell us, however, that the motivation is not sexual. The subtext is that they intend to take advantage of the fact that these two men are foreigners – vulnerable and dependent. They are going to beat, rob, humiliate and then, probably, murder these two strangers.

Lot is a Hebrew, however, and he cannot, by Hebrew law, allow this to happen. Once he invited them into his home and they accepted his invitation, he was responsible for their safety. They were under his protection and anything bad that happened to them would be on his head.

So seriously does Lot take this responsibility that he places it even above his responsibility as a parent. Better, he tells the mob, that you should rape and murder my two teenage daughters than these two men who are guests in our city and my home.

For generations we Christians have been shocked by Lot's offer of his two daughters to the mob, but we have allowed our indignation to obscure the point of the story. The point is that Lot – a Hebrew – takes his duties and responsibilities as a host that seriously.

And the second point is that the Sodomites have shown themselves to be utterly uncivilized and unredeemable because they have no laws of charity and hospitality. That basic decency which should reside in the deepest part of the human soul, that desire to protect those who are vulnerable and exposed, to help the weak and aid the oppressed, that simple milk of human kindness is not in them.

In fact, in case we have missed that point, the story teller takes it a step further. The mob becomes indignant at Lot for trying to protect his guests and they threaten to do to him that which they were going to do to his guests. And why? Because he, too, is a foreigner.

"This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them. And they pressed hard against Lot and came near the door to break it down." (19:9)

At this the two strangers – angels, we are told – reach out and snatch Lot through the door and back into the house and bar the door. But the mob is trying to break the door down so the angels cast a spell on them to blind them and they are forced to turn away and grope their way back home.

DESTRUCTION

The next morning the two angels seem to have convinced themselves that there aren't even ten decent people living in the cities. Or maybe there are, but they have decided to give the decent folks a chance to leave before they bring down the fire and the brimstone.

At any rate, they tell Lot to get his family – by blood and by marriage – together and get them out of town because the time for destruction has come. Lot goes to warn his daughters and their fiancés but the fiancés only laugh at him so he takes his daughters and flees.

The angels have told him to flee, with his family, into the wilderness but he reminds them that he has been a city boy for some time now and will die if he has to live in the wilderness. He offers that there is a nice little city called Zoar just a few miles away and asks if that would do instead of the wilderness and the angels allow that it would.

So Lot and his family flee to Zoar and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed because they had proved themselves to be unable to follow the most basic and elementary of all of God's moral laws, the law of charity and hospitality.

The story teller ends with an epilogue:

He shows us Abraham standing on a hill in the same exact place where he had made his deal with God to spare the cities if ten good people could be found within them. Abraham looks out over the plain and sees the smoke of the two cities rising up into the sky and, as we ponder this scene, we are told that both God and Abraham got their way.

The righteous people who lived in the cities, the Hebrews, were led out of them to safety and the cities were, themselves, destroyed.

HISTORICAL REFLECTION

As to the historical evidence for this story there is some but it is hardly conclusive. Most historians and geologists point to trace evidence in the area around the southern edge of the Dead Sea. This trace suggests that a great conflagration took place in that area at sometime within a couple hundred or so years of 2000 BCE, the time we are talking about.

Given the scientific evidence, the most popular theory is this:

Four thousand years ago the area around the southern end of the Dead Sea was not dead and arid as it is now but was a relatively fertile and productive place. It was not agriculture, however, which sustained the people. These people lived in fairly large cities in the area. Geologists have found what appears to be the remnants of an active, primitive mining industry which produced bitumen or naturally occurring asphalt which was used in building and paving.

Bitumen occurs in areas where oil is close to the surface of the earth. These shallow oil deposits would also produce gasses along with the bitumen. Sometime around 2000 BCE it appears that this area was shaken by a massive earthquake which collapsed the cities into giant sinkholes which became the southern end of the Dead Sea. At the same time this collapse released huge clouds of natural gas into the air. These poisonous clouds of gas were then ignited either by a flame from the cities or by lightning.

The burning of natural gas and oil would, they say, account for the huge clouds of black smoke which descriptions of the destruction all include.

That the ancient Hebrew observers saw in this massive tragedy the hand of God is not surprising. They were a story telling people and they were a religious people. They weren't about to let an opportunity to make a point about their God and their moral code go by unremarked.

The issue for us is not to be found in the historical particulars and data about the fall of the cities, however. The issue for us, the point of the story, is to be found in God's response to Xenophobia.

THE RIGHT MESSAGE

It is, I believe, tragic that, for so long, we Christians have taken the wrong message from this story. We have twisted and pressed it into a mold of our own making so we could use it to condemn homosexuality when that is not at all what this story is about.

Let us be clear. The Hebrew people of the Old Testament were trying to create a nation. They needed people to breed and make babies and they were intolerant of homosexuality. They believed it to be against God's will just as they believed eating lobster was against God's will. Just as they believed wearing blended fabrics was against God's will. Just as they believed trimming the edges of your beard was against God's will. Just as they believed building your house with a gabled roof was against God's will.

They were a homophobic race...but this is not a story about homophobia.

This is a story about xenophobia.

Xenophobia is the fear and/or hatred of foreigners. And, brothers and sisters, if we are to take this passage seriously and honestly, we will understand that its lesson is that God does not look kindly on xenophobia.

The world fears strangers and holds them at arm's length. The People of God run to them and welcome them. The world threatens strangers and takes advantage of them. The People of God protect them and is kind to them.

The world sees a stranger and asks, "Am I in danger?" The People of God see a stranger and ask, "Can I help?"

We live in a xenophobic world, true enough.

But our God calls us to a higher standard.

"...a stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you....especially if a proselyte of righteousness; for then he enjoyed the same privileges, civil and religious...for there IS one law for them both ...and thou shalt love him as thyself; and show it by doing all the good things for him [you] would have done for [yourselves] in like circumstances: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: and therefore knew what hardships such were exposed unto; and it became [you] to put on bowels of compassion, and show pity to those in a like condition...I am the Lord your God... who showed kindness to them when strangers in Egypt, and ...brought them out of that land, and therefore [you] ought to obey his commands, and particularly in this instance."¹

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Think about the opening stories of the sermon. Have you ever been a stranger in a strange land? How is it possible to have this experience without leaving your own country? Without leaving your own state?
2. What other stories from literature, television, movies, etc. have to do with this them of living as a sojourner in a strange land with a strange people?
3. The laws of most countries deal with foreigners only in ways that protect the natives from the foreigners. Why was ancient Israel the only country ever to create laws to protect the foreigner from the native?
4. What do the lessons of this story have to do with our community? How can we apply them in Wilmington? In our church? In the USA?
5. Discuss this quote: "A truly Christian moral approach would be not to acquiesce to illegal immigration, but to work to end it... Matthew's injunction -- to care for 'the least of these my brothers' -- advocates individual acts of kindness but does not mandate a public policy." Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX) July 2010.
6. How should the lessons of this sermon be applied to immigration policy in a "Christian nation?"

¹ Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible at <http://bible.cc/leviticus/19-34.htm> (Lev. 19:34 & Ex.12:49)