

I See You – 2. R.E.S.P.E.C.T. the Stranger
Deuteronomy 10:14-22
October 22, 2023
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

Have you ever felt like a stranger in a strange land? Out of place, like you didn't "fit," or felt different from others around you? I know I have. For me, that was Waco, TX, 1993. Jerry and I moved there from Austin, TX for him to teach at Baylor University. While we found Austin to be a current, creative, and forward-thinking community, we found Waco to be very different. The "good-ole-boy" culture was alive and well. Me, being raised to be independent and self-sufficient woman, having thoughts and opinions of my own, I did not fit well into this culture. I probably could have/should have kept my thoughts and opinions to myself a little better than I did but I was younger and less wise. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. But what made me feel welcomed and cared for were people like Linda Cox, an older woman from our church. When I felt alone and misunderstood, she assured me that I was not alone, took time to listen to me and encourage me and remind me that I was her friend and a beloved child of God.

The Bible is full of stories about strangers in a strange land, stories about the dislocation, relocation and reorientation that comes through the experience of God's grace and love. In these stories, God is repeatedly telling us to welcome the stranger with kindness and hospitality for we are all beloved children of God. Last week we heard about listening and being compelled to act. And today, we read that as followers of God, our actions must always be based on God's view of the stranger and how God calls us to love them.

Our text today is from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, which is the fifth and last book of the Torah, the Jewish Bible. It comes right after the Book of Numbers, that epic travel log of the Israelites' disastrous 40-year road trip through the wilderness and where we read that the exodus generation that disqualified themselves from entering into the land promised to Abraham. And so, Deuteronomy begins with Moses standing in front of the new generation explaining the Torah. This book contains a series of speeches from Moses, where he is calling the next generation of Israel to be faithful in their covenant with God. And in the center of the book is the terms of the covenant between God and Israel. Some of the laws are new but many are repeated from the laws given at Mt. Sinai. And this is where the book gets its name. From the Greek word, deuteronomion which means Second Law.

All of these laws are motivated by one thing. In a world where kings ruled over people, God is calling people to remember that their primary relationship is with God, shaping their identity and informing how they are to live in the world. And when they are tempted to see it differently, like when they are taking land from other people, or as people who have come out on top in power struggle, or as a people of one political affiliation or another, they are to remember that their relationship with God is primary. And then they are to act accordingly. The same is true for us.

And because God know that we are forgetful human beings, these laws and rules in Deuteronomy are intended to help us remember our primary relationship with God. They are tangible ways to remember and help us remember how we are supposed to act as people of God. After we have listened deeply to people on the margins, and are motivated to action, these laws inform us in how we are supposed to act.

In today's text, God reminds us that everything is created by God. And out of everything God created, God chose to be in relationship with people. And look, they now number more than the stars in the nighttime sky. You may remember that this is the promise given to Abraham, that he

would be the patriarch of generations that would number more than the stars. It's a reminder that God blesses the world through these chosen people in order to bless all of humanity as God's beloved.

And then God reminds the people of how they are to act, inviting them to wrestle with who they are and what they have become. Circumcise or cut away the thick calluses from your heart," don't forget the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow. Stop being so stubborn. This invitation to wrestle with this both is for them and for us.

Today, Aretha Franklin says RESPECT but in God's voice it says we are to treat immigrants with the same loving care that they, the Israelites had received when they were strangers in Egypt. They knew what it meant to be a stranger. But just in case they have forgotten, God reminds them that the strangers among them are to receive food, clothing and are to be treated with love and respect. Food, clothing, and shelter are a good place to start but we can't let that be the end goal. And if you think this story is an isolated example of what God says, it is not.

If you were to count, you'd find about 300+ passages in the Bible which mention the foreigner, the stranger, the alien, those wandering about in exile. And not only does scripture mention them, but it is also pretty clear about how we should treat them. It is an act of faith, the Bible tells us, that we treat the stranger with kindness, and the widows and orphans, the displaced and marginalized, with respect, dignity, and compassion. 300+ verses, major themes, and multiple parables. Might God be trying to tell us something?

As it turns out, the Bible talks a lot about justice and the displacement of people, whether for economic reasons, like Jacob arriving in Egypt, because of war, like the people of Israel exiled to Babylon, or because of tyranny, like with the family of Jesus who flee to Egypt to escape persecution. Jesus, it would seem, so prizes the value of welcoming that he sends his disciples out into the world as refugees, essentially, telling them to set aside their need for security, to take no money, to rely on the kindness of strangers. It is as if he holds the value of hospitality so high that he wants his disciples to experience both sides – welcoming and being welcomed. He wants them to see themselves in the people pushed to the margins, and to experience what it means to be left out, for that will grow in their hearts' compassion.

Here at Messiah Church, we place a high value on hospitality both inside the walls of our church and beyond. These past few weeks, since returning from the Leadership Institute at Resurrection Church, our staff has been reading a book together called, *The Art of Hospitality, A Practical Guide for a Ministry of Radical Welcome* by Yvonne Gentile and Debi Nixon. In this book, they offer some basic principles of hospitality. Now, while they are specifically writing to faith communities, these practices can be applied to our everyday, walking around lives because hospitality ascribes value to people and declares them worth welcoming.

Do you know that it takes only 30 seconds to form a first impression? That means before someone even enters our sanctuary, we have already made a first impression. And it takes less than seven minutes for a first-time guest to decide if they are going to return for a second time. That is long before worship has begun or Pastor Bethany or I have even had a chance to start a message. While guests come here hoping to meet God, if we don't do hospitality right, all they will meet is us. So, who is responsible for extending excellent hospitality? It's all of us! We are all on the hospitality team! The authors offer some simple ways we can work together to offer this exceptional hospitality not only to our guests but to one another as well.

Notice-there is tremendous power in noticing. Everything we offer depends on us first noticing others. Be on the look out for people who look lost or are sitting or standing alone. Then offer them a warm greeting. Which leads to tip #2.

Second, offer personal attention. Introduce yourself, learn their name, wear a nametag, whether you've been here 30 years or today is your first visit because if we all wear name tag this removes barriers that distinguish between longtime members and first time guests. No one feels like an outsider.

And then practice the 3/10 rule. The 3 in the 3/10 Rule reminds you to spend at least 3 minutes before and after worship (or any other church activity) talking to someone you do not know well.

And the 10 reminds you to take responsibility for greeting those seated or standing within 10 feet of you, especially if they're alone. Introduce the people you meet to other people. Make a connection. This 3/10 Rule is not meant to hinder opportunities to connect with those you know well but to expand your circle, invite a guest into a conversation, make introductions so the guest feels included. We have the responsibility and the pleasure of creating that warm, welcoming, non-judgmental experience that we all crave. Hebrew 13:2 reminds us, "Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it." You can find the 3/10 in today's show notes.

Beyond our walls. I am reminded of our sponsorship of our two refugee families. With each family, we formed a team of folks who helped collect furniture and set up their new homes. We met them at the airport and welcomed them. We helped these families get their children registered for school and for the parents to find work. We helped to set up doctors' appointments, provided transportation, purchased winter clothing and school supplies. These teams helped them learn to use the public transportation systems and libraries. It wasn't always easy and often required long hours of driving and the use of translators to communicate better but the families are so grateful. It was a rewarding experience for all involved. We didn't have any special training to do this work, but we came together as a community to help them feel welcomed in a strange land. And someday, it is my dream that we will form a team to sponsor a third family. All of these things together are how Messiah Church works to take action in welcoming the stranger.

So, the Bible is clear. As children made in God's image, we are to treat the foreigner, the stranger, the immigrant with empathy, compassion, and justice. This is a major theme throughout scripture. Starting in Genesis 1 and continuing through Revelation. Time and again God blesses those who treat the stranger with kindness, and curses those who do not.

In the Hebrew scripture, we see how God chooses the Israelites to be God's chosen people. This does not mean God does not love everyone else or that we can justify division. Rather, God chooses the Israelites to be the people who reveal the character of God to the whole world and show the world what it is like to live in covenant faithfulness. This is precisely why they must show God's love to the stranger.

In the New Testament this theme is given even greater emphasis through Jesus' call to welcome the stranger, his ministry outside the borders of Palestine, and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. As God enters into human life in Jesus, God includes more and more people in the work of showing the world who God is. This does not erase the special covenant God has with the Jewish people; it is evidence of it – the world increasingly comes to know the God of Israel. And as people who have been incorporated into the "new covenant" because of the resurrection

of Jesus, we too are called to treat the stranger with dignity, empathy, impartiality, and by advocating on their behalf, just as generations have before us have done.

The core motivation in this passage is empathy “...for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” We have all had the experience of being strangers in a strange land. For some of us, perhaps this means we’ve lived the immigrant experience. For others it was when traveling or studying abroad, moving into a new community or new neighborhood, changing jobs, starting in a new school, joining a new sports team or visiting a church for the first time. A place and time, wherever it was, that there was an existing culture that was unfamiliar to you.

Can you recall one of those experiences in your own life? How did you begin to feel more at home, more comfortable and welcomed? Most likely there was a person or people who extended hospitality or kindness to you. Professor Arthur Sutherland points out the centrality of hospitality to God’s plan. He says, Since [many aspects of] God will always be a stranger to us, receiving God is receiving a stranger, someone different from us. Receiving God, therefore is an act of faith and so therefore is receiving the stranger. As we continue to seek ways to extend the table of Christ here at Messiah Church, to welcome those we do not yet know, will require us to find new ways to extend hospitality.

This week I invite you to be especially mindful in situations where you feel like the stranger, out of place or uncomfortable. And then notice what helps to make you feel more comfortable, what kindness or welcome is extended to you. And if it’s not, what it would have looked like and felt like if that grace had been extended to you. Then, when you are in situations where you do feel comfortable and welcome, take the opportunity to step into the role of welcoming, being extra intentional in extending hospitality, kindness, and grace to others. As people of God, we know how to do this. We are called, we are created to do the work of welcoming others in our church and in our community for it is in the very nature of our being.

Let’s pray: Loving and merciful God, we give thanks for your unconditional love. Help us to receive your love and grace and extend it to others. We offer you our whole selves. Use us to serve all your people regardless of our differences, sharing with them the unconditional love you so freely give us. Grant us the understanding that we may be the only Jesus some people will ever meet. May we reflect his love. It’s in the precious and powerful name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 22, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, You invite me over and over again to redefine what love looks like. Continue to expand my understanding of You. Expand my sight to see each person as one You love. As You welcome me, help me to show Your expansive welcome in my community and beyond. Amen.

Monday, October 23

Scripture: Deuteronomy 10:14-22

Clearly, the LORD owns the sky, the highest heavens, the earth, and everything in it. But the LORD adored your ancestors, loving them and choosing the descendants that followed them—you!—from all other people. That’s how things still stand now. So circumcise your hearts and stop being so stubborn, because the LORD your God is the God of all gods and Lord of all lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God who doesn’t play favorites and doesn’t take bribes. He

enacts justice for orphans and widows, and he loves immigrants, giving them food and clothing. That means you must also love immigrants because you were immigrants in Egypt. Revere the LORD your God, serve him, cling to him, swear by his name alone! He is your praise, and he is your God—the one who performed these great and awesome acts that you witnessed with your very own eyes. Your ancestors went down to Egypt with a total of seventy people, but now look! The LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the nighttime sky!

Observation

The Bible is clear: as children made in God's image, we are to treat the foreigner/immigrant with empathy, compassion, justice, and inclusion. This is not an isolated passage; it is part of a major theme throughout the Bible starting in Genesis 1 and continuing through Revelation. God is known as one who acts for the poor and the outsiders. Providing for the poor and weak was one of the ways that the ideal king was pictured in the ancient world. Time and again throughout scripture God blesses those who treat the stranger with kindness, and curses those who do not.

Application

The core motivation in this passage is empathy "...for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Since God will always be a stranger to us, receiving God is receiving a stranger, someone different from us. Receiving God, therefore, is an act of faith and so is receiving others. Are there any stories from your own family's history that might help you relate to the new immigrants among us?

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for sending your son to save the least and the lost, including me. Guide me to the ways I can join You in doing that great, world-changing work. Amen.

Tuesday, October 24

Scripture: Matthew 22:36-40

"Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" He replied, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.* This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: *You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.* All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

Observation

Jewish rabbis debated: were all commandments equal or was there a greater one? Asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus chose not one but two. The first was Deuteronomy 6:4: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind." But he added Leviticus 19:18: "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." Jesus said the point of all other truths is to lead us to love God and neighbor more fully. God wants us to show contagious love to all we know.

Application

Jesus said every key Bible principle, all the truths we know about what God wants, depend on the two commands he quoted. The second command can be especially challenging. Loving others the way we love ourselves is based on how God loves us—never giving up, no matter what. Our humanity makes it hard for us to love ourselves or others with God's unwarranted love with no hesitation. But God calls us to move toward that, for our own sake and the sake of others. What has stopped you or made it hard for you to love yourself or someone else persistently? How might you love the stranger more fully?

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for loving me unconditionally. Help me to recognize the moments in my life when I can relentlessly love those around me. Amen.

Wednesday, October 25

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:1-8, 11-12; Luke 15:1-7

The LORD's word came to me: Human one, prophesy against Israel's shepherds. Prophesy and say to them, The LORD God proclaims to the shepherds: Doom to Israel's shepherds who tended themselves! Shouldn't shepherds tend the flock? You drink the milk, you wear the wool, and you slaughter the fat animals, but you don't tend the flock. You don't strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, or seek out the lost; but instead you use force to rule them with injustice. Without a shepherd, my flock was scattered; and when it was scattered, it became food for all the wild animals. My flock strayed on all the mountains and on every high hill throughout all the earth. My flock was scattered, and there was no one to look for them or find them. So now shepherds, hear the LORD's word! This is what the LORD God says: As surely as I live, without a shepherd, my flock became prey. My flock became food for all the wild animals. My shepherds didn't seek out my flock. They tended themselves, but they didn't tend my flock.

The LORD God proclaims: I myself will search for my flock and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out the flock when some in the flock have been scattered, so will I seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered during the time of clouds and thick darkness.

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

Observation

Jesus, God in the flesh, came to this planet on a very real rescue mission. Drawing from the image in Ezekiel 34, Jesus told a story about a shepherd who lost one sheep from his flock. That was only 1% of the flock, but the shepherd cared deeply about any lost sheep. He dropped everything, searched until he found that sheep – and felt great joy when he found it. Jesus' critics thought he should write off the human lost sheep (Luke 15:2), but Jesus in fact searched tirelessly for them.

Application

Ezekiel's metaphor goes beyond the normal responsibilities of making sure that the sheep are protected and fed. Instead, it focuses on the remedial duties, caring for the sick and finding the lost. These equate to the need for kings to bring about justice for alienated and disenfranchised people. What are some of the ways you can actively support and work for justice for alienated or disenfranchised people around you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you that You've never seen me (or anyone) as disposable, a stranger, or as someone who doesn't matter. Give me Your heart for everyone in Your human family. Amen.

Thursday, October 26

Scripture: Romans 13:8-10

Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have*, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself*. Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

Observation

Paul sent this letter to Roman house churches (there were no big cathedrals in his day). Some were mainly Jewish, others mostly Gentile. Their standards of righteousness varied (see Romans 14:1-15:13). It was easy for them to criticize each other. Paul said the purpose of God's law or rules is to help us love. "Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor" was a big challenge to people who disagreed. It was (and is) vital, because "Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law."

Application

How might ugly religious conflicts of the past (such as the Salem witch trials or the Inquisition) have been different if Christians had always aimed to fulfill the law by loving? How can you stand for truths that matter to you without acting in unloving ways toward those who disagree? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you grow in the inner qualities (that may not come naturally) that help you live out the law of love.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, "love is what fulfills the Law" sometimes feels too easy to me. Until, that is, I try to do it. Then I realize how high and hard a standard that really is. Teach me how to love the way that You love. Amen.

Friday, October 27

Scripture: Matthew 9:35-38; Luke 19:1-10

Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest."

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as

much.” Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One came to seek and save the lost.”

Observation

Our reason to be as a congregation grows from Jesus' actions and teaching. Jesus was a man on a mission. He did many admirable, valuable things during his ministry on earth. He healed the sick, broke down barriers of prejudice and exclusion, taught people how to live better lives, and challenged religious hypocrisy. Yet all that grew from his one central mission. First and foremost, Jesus said, he came to seek and to save the lost.

Application

Jesus said he “came to seek and save the lost.” In his commentary, William Barclay wrote, *“In the New Testament 'lost' does not mean damned or doomed. It just means in the wrong place.... A man is lost when he has wandered away from God; and he is found when once again he takes his rightful place as an obedient child in the...family of his Father.”* In what ways has God found you, and given you your rightful place in God's family? When have you been able to help God find someone else?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming "to seek and save the lost," including me. Guide me to the ways I can join You in doing that great, world-changing work. Amen.

Saturday, October 28

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-14; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

Observation

Paul was emphatically practical in his letters to the Christians in Ephesus and Corinth. He would have grown up reciting the Shema, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus said that was the greatest commandment, and added, “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). The next logical question for Paul, like Jesus' followers ever since, was, “What does it look like to love my neighbor?” These were his answers. It looks like being humble – not thinking of yourself more highly than others. It looks like being gentle – take a deep breath if you feel angry, speak carefully. It looks like being patient – while waiting, focus on God instead of yourself. Love requires compassion (suffering with others), kindness (honor and consideration) and forgiveness to all God's children.

Application

As you read this list of loving actions, how do you feel? Great? Guilty? Condemned? If you're not perfectly living this list, remember none of us are. Start with, how can you be more loving this week? Instead of trying to grow in all areas at once, choose one characteristic Paul lists and

focus on living into a new way of loving. You might consider plugging into a Faith Group as an opportunity to do life together with other Christians who are supporting each other in this wonderful yet challenging work of being loving people.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I want to love all my neighbors everywhere. Help me start close to home and guide me as I expand my vision to be more and more like Your vast, world-changing vision. Amen.