

“WHY DOES THE OTHER APPROACH US?”

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It's a big word but we know what it means. Xenophobia--an excluding fear of the Other--is more than preferring those we like to hang with, those who make us feel comfortable. Xenophobia means deep-seated fear of the Other, and separating ourselves from them.

For as we separate ourselves from them, we make them into an alien Other. And with that convenient distance we create, then we can feel less bad about ourselves as we hunt, confine, hurt, exploit, expel, and deny them the same justice we insist is our right. The distance we strategically fabricate between us and the Other is how we convince ourselves they're beyond the bounds of sharing a bond with us or making a claim on us.

As Americans, we seemed inoculated against that because of the statue in the waters south of Manhattan, between Brooklyn and Jersey, facing where my poor family and yours entered into this land. We like to celebrate that statue as essential to who we are.

But then last year with the election, there was all this talk: “If we let them in, what is the cost? Will our nation be less secure? Will my property values drop? Will newcomers hurt or help the economy?” These are not unreasonable questions. I just thought they were superseded by the ethos of that statue. I was disappointed, not once in that election did anyone make any kind of appeal to that statue, which is one of the things I love about this country, more than military flyovers at the Super Bowl. The simple truth is, if we don't mean it anymore--if that was just for a time when most all of us were huddled working masses with a heart for others like ourselves--then we should just dismantle it.

But I have good news. Our earthly citizenship doesn't define us, but God does. As Jesus' followers, our default setting is always hospitality. For here is the narrative we live out of, the one with the final say: by extending his arms wide to embrace us on the cross, after everything we God-forsaken strangers did to cast him as a dangerous outsider and to kill him, Jesus overcame fear by establishing love as the highest power.

You often hear me use that expression—the wide arms of Jesus—as I welcome visitors, outsiders, and guests at worship. I don't always mention the Cross in my welcome. Even if the cross is that essential, it is a little stark as symbols go to invoke at first blush. But I always eventually get around to it, don't I? Because of Jesus' posture on the cross, saving even hateful enemies like us—embracing us as we attempted to ruin God's rescue plan for us--we Christians are prejudiced toward hospitality, particularly toward those individuals facing grinding need. Why? That's how God treated us in Jesus Christ.

To sum up for you confirmands out there--you can write it down--we Christians believe that the one universal God became known in a particular way in a man who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly—Jesus Christ. God refused to remain obscure. God wanted to clarify life's terms. In these acts, a fully human Jesus who was also fully

divine, loving and embracing with those wide extended arms sporting spikes through his wrists, in all of this we believe we've seen as much of God as we can ever hope to see.

Isn't it a relief to have that settled? It is for me. Oh, we can still argue about how to be hospitable, how to best welcome strangers and supply what they need to thrive. So many challenges exist in coming to our shores, in becoming strangers in a strange land.

Our lesson from 1 John confirms everything just said. Love, for us Christians, is not a free-floating benign human disposition. Love is a miraculous act God undertook not with our help but despite our hatred. Love begins not on our side but on God's side. Love defines God, not power, not goodness, not order. And Jesus has once and for all defined love. Our human love, our loving each other, depends upon the God who first loved us.

Did you hear in 1 John how our love derives from God's loving initiative? Yes, Christian love isn't original to us, but responds to the God we worship and serve. "We love because he first loved us," says verse 19. Notice also how the statement in the indicative, "God is love," leads directly to the imperative "so also you ought to love one another." And by the way, the words of this 1 John sermon were preached in a church under assault, facing threats. So notice the message is not "be on guard" or "defend yourselves." The message is "love one another", loving in the shape that God has loved us.

Sometimes we wish that the other, the stranger, the alien would not bother us, but just leave us alone. But as the stranger or alien moves into the status of brother or sister, that is the moment when we suddenly find ourselves drawing closest to the God of love. Funny how that works. As the stranger becomes one of us we become what we profess. Love of neighbor validates our love of the true and living God as opposed to the godlets we're always wanting to invent for ourselves to substitute for our God, also called idols.

If this world belongs to God and not to us, no one is foreign to God's forgiving, loving embrace. People may be strangers to me, but we know they're not strangers to God. Remember the thief crucified next to Jesus to whom he promised no less than paradise? The Gospel compels us to locate the stranger and ourselves side by side in the same story. We don't deny our differences but we open ourselves to find what's good in them. We ask ourselves what might God teach us through others unlike us? God loves to do that, and God does that all of the time. We see them as we hope God in Christ sees us.

Right now I'm reading a 653 page volume on the crucifixion of Jesus. I don't know how I get roped into reading things like that, but I suspect it has something to do with my job. I mean, you could drive nails with this thing, and it is a paperback. Anyway, the author is Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge. And she likes to speak of the relationship between loving and seeing. If we wish to love properly, we must first learn to see properly. Fleming tells this story: in 2005, convict Julius Earl Ruffin was released from a Virginia prison after 21 years of captivity for a crime he didn't commit. An all-white jury convicted him of assaulting a white woman solely upon her identifying him as her assailant. Ruffin was released after DNA evidence completely exonerated him of any wrongdoing.

Ruffin's accuser, Ann Meng, did an amazing thing. She wrote to him expressing her deep regret for misidentifying him. Then she testified on his behalf at the hearing to compensate him for wrongful imprisonment. Meng said, "I feel a personal responsibility for Mr. Ruffin's incarceration. However, our criminal justice system must also bear some responsibility. There was no one on this jury who saw themselves, their son or their brother as they looked at Mr. Ruffin." Was she aware how deeply insightful her words were?

One great gift of our faith is not only to see the stranger as beloved unto God and embraced by the Christ but also to see ourselves as those who mess that up. We muck up the works. Even Jesus' closest disciples were part of the problem for which he came to set things right. Paul was, hunting down believers. Peter was, resisting the Gentiles. We all do. So before seeing alien in the other, our faith invites us to see alien in our self. So instead of projecting the alien other on people we don't know, we try it out on ourselves.

An accusation hurled against the early church was, "they stand the world on its head." We must confess, guilty as charged. But seen through God's eyes, that's a good thing, right? At our best we do stand the world and its values on its head. I only hope that in this moment of history, and for as long as we have breath, we never lose that power. Amen.

I John 4.7-21

God Is Love

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.