

“I was a stranger, and you invited me in...” Matthew 25:35

Relationships have always defined human beings—relationship to family, tribe, language, culture and religion. More recently, definition has included relationship to a ruler or location (ie the city states of Greece, citizenship in Rome, and the feudal system of Medievalism). The rise of nationalism and the concept of ‘countries’ led to the institutionalization of national boundaries and the denominationalism of religions—adding new complexities to our self-understanding. We may now define ourselves as members of a family, an ethnicity, a language group, a religious affiliation, a nation-state and political ideology. By our self-definition, we also define who is not a part of our circle and we create the outsider—what the Bible refers to as “the alien and the stranger.”

In the Old Testament, God’s promise to make a great nation out of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, took form with the twelve tribes of Israel living on land west of the Jordan River and east of the Mediterranean Sea. Bound together by family, language and religious rituals (most significantly the law and circumcision), the 12 tribes became identified as a single group of people, the Israelites. After the rise of the monarchy through David and Solomon, the Israelites also took on even greater corporate identity. They were God’s chosen people.

God’s Law as recorded in the Pentateuch affirmed the people’s unique identity. However, the Law also gave very specific instructions as to how the Israelites were to treat the alien and the stranger. The alien that lived in their midst was to be treated as a ‘native-born Israelite.’ (Leviticus 19:33-34) They were not to be discriminated against in any way. In fact, God called his people to practice love towards the alien, not just tolerance (Leviticus 19:34). God’s rationale for such inclusion was the experience the Israelites had as aliens in Egypt. Again and again, God speaks, “for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt.” (See Exodus 23:9) Their experience as outsiders was to provide a reference point for their treatment of those different from them.

In the New Testament, Jesus affirms the Law’s demand to treat others as equals. The law, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ is applied not to fellow Jews, but to the Samaritans and the gentiles. Polluted Samaritans were often the heroes of Jesus’ stories, and “unclean” Gentiles received the same miraculous care as their Jewish counterparts. Jewish sensibilities were offended by Jesus’ inclusion of outsiders—tax collectors, prostitutes, heretics and “sinners”—and by Jesus’ expansion of those invited to feast at the kingdom banquet. The Pharisees and teachers of the law identified Jesus as a stranger and treated him as an outcast.

In the same way that the Israelites were to remember their strangeness, we too must acknowledge that we may find ourselves on the outside of any number of circles. God’s message of love and hospitality towards the stranger is “good news” for those on the outside. In Matthew 25:35, Jesus says to the nations that when they invited the stranger in, they invited him. Conversely, when they did not invite the stranger in, they denied him entrance. Part of the “Good News” is that God is with the stranger and that his will for us is to practice radical hospitality in the now and not yet Kingdom.

We recognize that the ways in which we segregate ourselves and others are merely social constructs. A part of being “of the world” is to live by the rules of the old social constructs. We are called out of the world into the Kingdom. Racial, gender, socio-economic, religious or national identities ultimately have no meaning in the new order of the Kingdom of God (Ephesians 2:11-22 and Colossians 3:11). The old circles and boundaries are broken down and we are called to live out the new order.

However, we must always be aware of the human tendency to rebuild walls and create new circles of exclusion. We must always remember that we were, and continue to find ourselves, aliens and strangers; and that we are called to ethical and just relationships with those who are different from us or who live outside of our national borders as either friends or enemies of the state. Love for the alien and stranger requires that we will not only work for inclusion and equality, but that we will also actively oppose attempts to marginalize or disenfranchise others on the basis of social constructs including our own attempts to define who is worthy of our hospitality. We must seek just relationships with those that are outside of our own circles and always welcome “the alien and the stranger” no matter why they are strange to us. In doing so, we are following the way of Christ who has welcomed us even though we were strangers to him. God calls us to these relationships because it is in relationships to one another, relationships between strangers, that we are transformed.