

No Strangers in God's Family

Important though it is for us to cultivate true piety, this must not express itself narrowly in our intimate personal relationship with God; it must bear fruit in our daily lives as we endeavor to respond to the call and the co-mission of Jesus. That response requires us to be boundary-breakers and exemplars of inclusive hospitality, because Jesus was that, and he demands it of us.

Making Friends, Making Enemies

Several years ago now, on that beautiful September morning indelibly etched in national and personal memory, something quite shocking happened: from New York City to New Orleans and from Manhattan to Monterey, lives intersected, people looked at other people and caught glimpses of themselves, and strangers became friends.

It happened more recently when the cataclysmic tsunami struck just after Christmas in 2004, and it has happened many times, before and since, in places and circumstances many of us have never even heard about or perhaps simply forgotten: a mudslide in the Philippines buried an estimated eighteen hundred people in an instant; sixty-five miners were killed in an explosion in Mexico; a huge ferryboat in Indonesia became a grave to hundreds; hundreds more were killed and mutilated by bombs on trains in Madrid. And then, much closer to home, came Katrina, the murder of Amish schoolchildren, the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech, tornado devastation in Kansas, and a daily death list from Darfur to Iraq.

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It is certainly true that catastrophes, wherever they may occur and whomever they may involve, can serve to fuse lives and create companions and comrades. In the midst of horror, heroism can be found. Where sin appears to triumph, grace can abound. Indeed, from great loss can come great love and even a kind of redemption.

Yet, on that particular, dreadful, azure-blue and ash-gray day in Manhattan in 2001, something else was happening, no less shocking, but tragically no less characteristic a response as the bravery and heroism, and even longer lasting. As the nightmare unfolded, and as people began gradually to realize the enormity of the tragedy and to feel terribly vulnerable and scared, so ambivalence toward those perceived as strangers or aliens increased and hardened. A vast quantity of hatred was manufactured in an instant, ready to be poured out in enormous quantities, like quick-drying cement.

Amid the grace, there was yet more sin. After the collapse came the contempt. And when the dust finally settled, the residue of the Twin Towers was piled ten stories high, but the vindictiveness was already choking lungs far beyond New York, and the aftershock waves of discrimination were carried on the morning breeze. Years later, they are still reverberating. Xenophobia has become an epidemic, air travel uncomfortable and fraught, national security a thriving industry, and international relations a tightrope walk. Terrorism *has* won; the world is forever changed; lives are permanently affected; and battle lines that were formed that day are even more visible than ever before.

Humanity is a conundrum, a paradox. Deep human need for “people like us” is contradicted by great human suspicion of “people like them.” Yet wherever vindictive voices demonize and demand vengeance, the words of Jesus can still be heard by anyone with ears to hear; and the clear, stark call to inclusion, and—shockingly—to the forgiveness of enemies, brings confused hope to some, even as it enrages and embitters others. The gospel tells us to look into other people’s eyes as we search for an image of God, to work for healing justice amid the rubble and the memories that litter our lives, to rebuild a human world on the debris of broken dreams, and to commit ourselves—*as God does*—to restoring communities, so that there will be no more estrangement, no more strangers, and no more aliens. It is only a little

less than impossible, and the only way we can do it is to learn to love the world as God already does.

God So Loved the World

What could it possibly mean to say that God loves the world? How *on earth* is this love manifest, recognizable? And how, since this is our concern, does it involve us? God loves tenaciously, tenderly, totally; God loved the world into existence and loves it through each precarious moment. This is an illustration of God’s own breathing out, self-giving creativity: the *missio Dei* in action. From God’s perspective, people are especially precious: animated, culturally diverse embodiments of divinity; veritable images of God; living expressions of deity, more than six-billion-fold in today’s world. If that’s how God loves (and to those who take the Bible seriously, it is), then our own attempts to love must be all enduring and inclusive, given our limitations. We must, in a certain sense, come to *be*—to embody, to incarnate, to bring down to earth—God’s love in our families, our neighborhoods, and in the world beyond. That is what disciples are called and co-missioned to do.

So again: how does God love the world? Gratuitously, graciously, greatly. God loves the world so much in fact, as to have given God’s only begotten Son (see Jn 3:16), as we are often reminded by placard bearers at televised sport events. That’s how God loves: by giving. Through Christ, God is reconciling the world so that what had become separated and disintegrated might finally be reunited and reintegrated. In other words, God loves by gathering, by breathing in. In God’s world, *all* are called and *no one* is excluded; there are simply no strangers and aliens. That is God’s idea of humanity. If only it were ours; if only we could even comprehend it. But that is what disciples are called to attempt.

Because humanity has become so scandalously separated and opposed, we (individually and corporately) must make a choice. Either we choose to continue sinning—by exclusion, separation, and boundary maintenance—and every day eat and drink judgment to ourselves; or we resolve, today, to embrace God’s radical option for humanity, and—with God’s help and our own steadfastness—to change our lives. There is no third way. This is what discipleship entails.

The ruins of Manhattan on that glorious blue day were not only the American Dream turned into a nightmare, they vividly illustrate God's own broken dream. God's dream is a far cry from terrorism's, yet those lined up against terrorism are not necessarily ranked on the side of God. This is where, in the heat of the moment, President Bush got it so very wrong. But will God's dream ever dream itself in us? Only if we practice loving the world and people as God loves, for only then will there truly be no strangers and aliens, because the transformation of our lives will, at last, have changed the world. For Americans there never has been a more choosable moment than each succeeding day, nor a more urgent invitation to dream God's dream of peace and reconciliation. Yet as that unforgettable day recedes from our immediate memory, we know that many people did not choose the moment, and many have still not done so. But to be a disciple is both to be chosen and to choose.

Of course, it's a utopian dream. We have no blueprint, no examples of anyone who has succeeded in actually loving the world in quite the way God loves, though people of heroic faith have come close. It's all very well in theory, some of us might think, but isn't that as far as it goes? Yet deep down, we know the answer if we know Jesus. In the first place, Jesus has indeed loved the world and its people; he loved us to death. There is no greater love than this. And second, it's simply not possible to love in theory; we must go further than that. We must love in practice. We must practice in love. That is the disciple's call.

It's easy to persuade ourselves that we can love "people"—until we realize that "people" is an abstraction. Unless we love actual people therefore, concretely and incarnationally, we condemn ourselves by inertia and we obstruct the breakthrough of God's reign. There is only one way forward; we must identify the sinful structures and sinful actions that produce strangers and aliens and foster the animosity that distorts them and dehumanizes us. We must also pledge to change some of those structures and actions *by changing our own lives in order to love more faithfully and intimately*. We must identify our sin, the sin in our own hearts and at the heart of our own culture and our own Church. There has never been a better time than today: "now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2).

Cultures and Strangers

When they ask at the airport, "Did you receive anything from a stranger?" does anyone ever answer: "yes: a gentle smile, a courteous word, a helping hand"? Probably not. Check-in is no place for wise guys. A negative answer is expected, and a negative answer is wordlessly given. But each time, in that moment, *the System* wins another victory. And the stranger—at least the faceless bogeyman of Western cultural fantasy—is again condemned and demonized *in absentia*. To say anything unexpected to a jittery airport official would be looking for trouble, and yet silence itself perpetuates the sinful stereotype of strangers: strangers are different, dangerous, deviant.

Every human society creates systems of classification that separate, divide, and draw boundary lines. Anything that fits uneasily or straddles the culturally constructed lines is labeled anomalous; thus, strange animals, deformed births, and even twins may be pushed into the "anomaly" category. Anomalies, of course, cry out for more than mere comment—what do they *mean*? Most often they receive moral comment of a negative kind: these creatures, these people, are *bad*. Ambiguity must be reclassified: domesticated, banished, or exterminated. When anomalies are banished, communities are usually prevailed on to leave them alone or to despise them. When they are exterminated, communities rarely protest.

The stranger is a classic anomaly: ambiguous, out of place, and difficult to categorize. So the stranger always constitutes a challenge; he or she is clearly an outsider and yet recognizably human. How shall the stranger be treated: expelled or assimilated, privileged or killed? It is every culture's dilemma, every society's challenge. In our days as perhaps never before, we must take responsibility. We must make a stand, because we are followers of Jesus and Jesus made a stand.

Let us take another perspective. Hospitality is vital for people who travel, and travelers who leave their own territory thereby become strangers to the people they encounter. People at home are the insiders; understandably they regard others—the outsiders—as strangers. But failure to treat strangers as fellow human beings, and failure to see or accept that we ourselves have been or are strangers ourselves (in which case we must learn how to be so appropriately), has produced

a catalog of appalling evil. Our own very civilized institutions (state and church) have blood on their hands in this matter.

Every stranger depends on the kindness, or at least the tolerance, of other people. Hosts are in control, but they show their humanity by extending gracious hospitality. In ancient Greece, the honor code required that people welcome the stranger as they would a friend: the stranger could become a guest. Like the biblical command to love one's neighbor as oneself, this also was mandatory; it was far too serious a business to be optional. For the Greeks, hospitality to strangers (*philoxenia*) was a preeminent virtue, vigorously practiced because it was believed that Zeus (chief of the gods) frequently came to earth disguised as a stranger, precisely to test people's character. The moral stature of a society—from the ancients' to our own—can be gauged from its treatment of strangers. Some of us may be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Strangers, of course, may sometimes be feared. Then they can quickly be treated not as guests but as aliens. Yet not every stranger is in fact an alien, and unarmed strangers have been widely accorded the moral right to preferential treatment because they are literally vulnerable ("able to be wounded or hurt") and needy. In Homer's epic, Odysseus is stranded in a foreign land and fears that the people might turn on him (hospitality and hostility are siblings). But he discovers that they too know perfectly well that "every stranger and beggar comes from Zeus."⁷⁵ The Greeks theologized that, to have any credibility at all, Zeus [God] *must be* a lover and defender of the stranger. It's a rich insight. Only the arrogant or very foolish would fail to take it seriously.

Christians and Strangers

The judgment scene in Matthew 25 recapitulates Greek wisdom. There, says Johann Metz, "God is *only* visible in the face of other human beings. Blessed are those who have served their neighbors and cared for their needs; cursed are those who have selfishly disregarded their brothers and sisters."⁷⁶ Woe to those who fail to recognize their own kin. Woe to those who fail to embrace the stranger with compassionate justice.

Our own experience of other people's compassion should teach us to be compassionate; Saint Paul taught that Christians have received God's hospitality and must now extend it to others. He spoke of the personal experience of transformation that marks believers: "Not long ago *you were strangers* and enemies, but now you are reconciled by Christ's death; there is no more room for distinctions, between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female."⁷⁷ This should remind us that male and female are complementary images of God—and of humanity.⁷⁸ It should also warn us of just how far we still have to travel in order to become authentic Christians. It should challenge us to reflect that we who have been reconciled to Christ must do to others what Christ has done to us: receive them and treat them with respect and without discrimination.

But Paul was a Jew; and the rabbis, since even before Homer, had also taught that God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (see Gen 18), not as one but as three strangers! And says Paul, all who remember being strangers themselves should feel compassion for those who are strangers still: kindness to strangers is an extension of piety to God. The stranger/alien theme is elaborated throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The basic attitude is this: You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex 22:21; see also Ex 23:9; Lev 19:34).

A reminder for and challenge to Christians in every generation is embedded in a passage addressed to the community at Ephesus. Paul says:

[R]emember that you were...without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by 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... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace

to you who were far off and peace to those who were near...
So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are
citizens with the saints and also members of the household
of God (Eph 2:12–19).

The image here is of critical importance for us. Jesus broke down the dividing wall (other translations say the “barrier”) that divides, separates, and alienates, *in order to recreate a single human family, reconciled with itself and with God*. This promotes the reintegration of what was separated by sinful structures. Jesus begins to restore what (or who) is broken and heals the ruptured. He is committed to loving as God loves, until there are no more strangers and aliens. He is our example, dismantling barriers and integrating communities. And we in turn, once strangers ourselves, must henceforth treat other strangers as God has treated us; the preferential treatment we have received must be the preferential treatment we extend to others. That is discipleship; so why is the word *xenophobia* so much better known than *xenophilia* or *philoxenia*? Why are fear and hatred so much more palpable than love? How dimly is the example of Jesus mirrored in our lives!

No Longer Strangers and Aliens

Breaking barriers, erasing boundaries, embracing strangers: these are the elements of fairy tales. Such tales are an important repository of cultural and religious wisdom. Every fairy tale builds on challenges and setbacks, and heroes or heroines always come perilously close to death before they triumph. Christians, though, must venture beyond fairy tales and discover a life-giving theology of the cross.

There can be no resurrection without crucifixion. It took that much to love the world as God loves: Jesus, loving to death, laying down his own life in order to make strangers into friends. There is no other way. And we, disciples of Jesus, are called to put our lives—our daily living, perhaps even our livelihood—on the line for this eschatological dream. We surely remember that fear-filled September day in the blinding, choking dust of Manhattan when the firefighters ran to lay down their lives, ran to their deaths so that others could live. Yet within weeks, hundreds more had volunteered and signed up and with-

in months had graduated as their replacements, because real service of other persons—love—is truly stronger than death. On All Saints' Day in 2001, mere weeks after 9/11, 308 new firefighters graduated in New York City. There will always be “vocations” if there is something really worth living and dying for.

So what has happened to the great challenge and promise of Christianity? Simply that on too many occasions, sin and selfishness won out over grace and godliness; that instead of seeing strangers as God in disguise, conceited humanity began to demonize the “other” and treat strangers⁷⁹ with contempt; that instead of looking into the eyes of the other and recognizing a familiar reflection of humanness, many Christians saw only difference and mistook it for inferiority. Indeed, many came to see “others” only as “aliens” and then rationalized and justified a less than noble—and entirely nonbiblical—treatment of them.

After a brief, graced moment in paradise, when God's human creation established as axiomatic the equation $I + THOU = WE$, human arrogance and ignorance gradually came to imagine that what God had joined together could indeed be put asunder. Humankind fell into the appalling error of thinking that the integrity of *WE* could first be broken down into *ME* and *YOU*, or *US* and *THEM*—and then opposed! After that, there were no limits to the arguments marshaled to justify human degradation, to privilege *ME* over *YOU*, and to polarize *US* against *THEM*. But *in God's realm there is no such opposition*: in God's view there is only *WE*; humanity is one: our name is *WE*. Our very “original” sin is to look at human differences, to see only moral distinctions, and then to disregard or repudiate the original equation.

“When do you know it is dawn?” asked the rabbi. One person said, “When you can see a tree against the horizon.” “No,” said the rabbi. Someone else said, “When you can distinguish a black thread from a white one.” “No,” he answered again. And when no one else had an answer, the rabbi said: “When *you* can look into the face of a stranger and recognize your brother or your sister; *then* you know it is dawn. Until then it is still night.” The paradox and mystery of humanity is that we are all different *and* all the same. Our perversity is to emphasize the difference at the expense of the resemblance, driving a wedge into the very heart of *WE*, splitting and sundering *WE* into *US* and

THEM, and then perpetuating the very ungodly divisions Jesus came to heal, the very barriers he came to erase.

The problem is cultural. It cannot be entirely solved, but it *must* be tackled by people of faith. Grace *must* restore and transform sin-filled culture. The only way is the way of grace (for us, the *Way* of Jesus) and not simply or uncritically the way of culture. Unless cultures are transformed (by grace), xenophobia and rank injustice will prevail. There are indeed those labeled “strangers” and “aliens” all around us. Culturally speaking, those who are “us” need those who are “them”—as a picture needs a frame—to mark the territory we want to identify and defend. Culturally speaking, “us” needs “them” to distinguish “people like me” from “people not like me.” Culturally speaking, we need that dissimilarity to reassure ourselves, but every time we make such distinctions, we tend to differentiate ourselves from others—no bad thing, except that those cultural differences tend to harden into moral hierarchies, backed by theological justifications, and we sin.

So what of grace and faith? To turn strangers into friends you first must look them in the eye; until then, it is still night. Typically, we do not look strangers in the eye. We caricature and avoid them. We go through life *surrounded* by strangers because it is easier that way; it is easier *not* to look at them honestly and compassionately, just in case we might recognize a brother or sister or even a fleeting glimpse of the face of God. Avoiding eye contact is so much easier than stopping and encountering another person. So we *say* we love our neighbor as ourselves, and sometimes we even believe it. But we distort the radical story of the Good Samaritan by twisting the meaning of “neighbor” until it simply means “someone like me.” Then anyone slightly unlike me is not even noticed and I can carry on, sinfully unaware of my blindness.

Isn't that why God sent Jesus to declare very clearly, “I was a stranger,” so that we would remember the possibility, the potentiality, of strangers as God in disguise? From his anomalous birth—a homeless child of homeless parents—at the very margins of civilized society, to his ignominious death outside the city walls, *Jesus was a stranger*. He came to his own, and they neither recognized nor received him. But other strangers—the shepherds and those strange Oriental astrologers—did recognize him at his birth; and the women who stayed with

him at Calvary received him at his death. Perhaps it takes a stranger to know a stranger. Perhaps that is exactly the challenge before anyone who wants to be a disciple: to go forth, to encounter boundaries of discrimination, and to attempt to erase those boundaries by our graciousness, vulnerability, hospitality, and compassion.

Christianity and Restored Humanity

Unless those who profess to be Christians are committed to the agenda of Jesus, and unless we are learners, disciples, and willing to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus, then we are no better than the hypocrites for whom Jesus had some biting words. Many would-be, or professing, Christians are in fact racists or religious bigots, and many have no commitment whatsoever to the poor. For such nominal Christians, though they would not admit it, the dawn has not yet fully broken. Unless we who call ourselves Christian embrace strangers and aliens, we are not yet what we claim to be. There is not a city in the United States, and probably not one on earth, without estranged and alienated people. That fact alone should be sufficient stimulus for us, people who have personal experience of God's inclusive love that makes us no longer strangers or aliens. But unless we go and do for, and among, others what God has done for and among us, we have not yet assimilated the gospel.

This, of course, is costly. The first generations of Christians did not only love each other (Tertullian noted: “See how these Christians love one another!”); they also knew something that many of us may have forgotten: that unless their love explicitly reached beyond the Christian community to strangers and aliens, they had no hope of eternal life.⁸⁰ In that famous second-century *Letter to Diognetus*, we read:

Christians are not distinguished...by either country, speech, or customs;...they nowhere settle in cities of their own....Yet...the whole tenor of their way of living stamps it as...admittedly extraordinary. They reside in their respective countries...and put up with everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land.⁸¹

These Christians knew perfectly well that their Hebrew ancestors had

been strangers in Egypt; that is why they pledged always to honor the rights of other strangers and foreigners. As Christianity became more established, it broke the connection between the Ten Commandments and the commandment to respect aliens and strangers. Today, many self-proclaimed Christians seem simply not to know that to claim to love God and one's neighbor absolutely demands that we love the stranger and alien, because God does, for God is compassionate (see Ex 22:27). At the heart of our faith is the truth that "closeness to God is incompatible with discrimination against strangers" and that "any breach of the rights of strangers brings about separation from God."⁸² However, many people never learned, many have forgotten, and many—in a post-9/11 world—are still not at all sure.

How could we have forgotten that our call includes the command or the implication that we must *be* resident aliens ("here we have no lasting city" [Heb 13:14]; our true home is hereafter) and we are enjoined and instructed to include all kinds of strangers and aliens in a community of love where there will be neither Jew nor Greek? Many of us have indeed forgotten. Many of us do not think of ourselves as resident aliens or strangers, but as proud citizens with full, protected, and inalienable rights. It is *other people* who are the strangers—surely, not us! Then we try so hard to guard lines of separation between our privileged lives and those "others" whom we label "them."

Transformation

God is the subject and initiator of mission—that centrifugal, outreaching, and centripetal, ingathering movement of life-giving and compassionate concern. Believers are commissioned (co-missioned) by Jesus and called to be his faithful followers. So our commitment is by way of a response rather than by seizing the initiative, however generous or enlightened we may consider it to be. But our commitment is also mandatory rather than purely optional and corporate rather than private: "If you wish to be my disciple," said Jesus, "you must..." (we know the rest); and "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:62). There are obligations here and clear imperatives, yet some people think of mission as a personal initiative or an optional "extra" tacked on to Christianity. Today,

many Christians cannot identify themselves with a true community of believers, while some communities—families, parishes, and even religious communities—are frankly not committed to mission at all. Something is seriously lacking in many people's understanding of the nature of the call, the disturbance, and the co-mission that are at the very heart of our faith.

Consequently, if we are ever to image the body of Christ, committed to loving the world as God loves, then all of us need transformation, conversion, and revitalization—personally and collectively. It is easy enough to dream, but unless every one of us (but together) is committed to radical social and religious change, not only will nothing good happen, not only will things simply get worse, but we will stand condemned as guilty bystanders and unfaithful stewards. Perhaps even worse than that: we will have failed to realize our own potential, and many other people will suffer as a consequence.

Only when humanity is no longer divided will there be no strangers and aliens. So unless each of us is committed to creating new communities, crafted from our respective raw materials (*ME, YOU, US, and THEM* but transformed once again into *WE*), the idea of Christianity will remain a dream, and our failure to realize it will be an insult to God. Our own lives may appear to be relatively integrated—with other "people like us"—but if we are separated from strangers and aliens, neither we, nor they, are fully integrated yet. Discipleship entails a call to respond to this situation.

Transformation requires radical commitment. It will not destroy our lives, but it will surely help to erode some of our cherished privileges. For transformation to occur we must commit ourselves intentionally to love God by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. This is to love as Jesus teaches and as God loves. Then, wherever we happen to be, there will be a deliberate commitment to creating communities of *WE*: inclusive rather than exclusive. Tragically, since 9/11 the world has become even more polarized than before as fear has hardened into cold, granite-hard hatred. This is *not* what God had in mind, and it is not worthy of human persons, let alone followers of the *Way* of Jesus.

The Example of Jesus

In a culture shaped by the honor code and the fear of shame, Jesus was always countercultural: he never courted favor or sought prestige. He gathered his disciples by calling them, only to scatter them by sending them in mission. For him, community served the mission and not vice versa. He said, “Come to me. . . and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28), establishing himself as the focal point but only so that he could pour himself out for others, extend hospitality, and gather all manner of aliens and strangers into a safe environment. Sometimes his wandering ministry left him “nowhere to lay his head,” so he must have relied on the hospitality of others. This give-and-take created relationships of mutual indebtedness and respect. At its core, his apostolate maintained a delicate counterpoint between being host and stranger, insider and outsider, master and servant, first and last, giver and receiver—but each component of every pair mattered equally. By doing likewise, we learn to avoid unwholesome dependence or inappropriate control and to develop relationships of mutuality and dignity.

Jesus endeavored to erase boundaries, first by identifying them and then by gathering those he encountered there, in a movement that actually displaced the boundaries themselves. By deliberately becoming the stranger, he attempted to turn lines of separation into highways of inclusion. By gathering at table—anyone’s, anywhere—Jesus reshaped the rules of etiquette and relocated the field of mission and ministry, and he instructed and encouraged his disciples to do likewise. But such radical transformation is immensely difficult to sustain, because every human society has the capacity and the perversity to turn equality into hierarchy and collaboration into competition. Jesus models a utopian community without strangers or aliens, but societies sometimes create monsters of discrimination and xenophobia. So it will always be necessary to choose between (or make a preferential option relative to) God and Caesar, Christ and culture. That is not to say that the choice must be *absolutely* exclusive. Jesus memorably acknowledged the legitimate claims of Caesar, and every single one of us is caught to varying degrees in the web of culture. But the right choice, repeatedly chosen, requires a repositioning, a relocating, a *kenosis*—and a dedicated and deliberate option for the poor, the stranger, and the alien.

Simply to welcome the “other” into our world, however, is inadequate, for we would then remain at the center. So we must also choose to leave the centrality and comfort of our own world, to place ourselves on the edge of other people’s worlds, to *become strangers ourselves*. Otherwise we will be gatekeepers protecting our own worlds rather than disciples who visit other people’s worlds and risk encounters with those who live there. Where there is risk and trust, boundaries can become transformed into meeting places where status distinctions are dissolved, rather than checkpoints where hierarchy and difference are displayed like visas or passports. But where there is no risk and trust between people, we can quickly become imprisoned within our own countries and communities. In the years since that apocalyptic September day in New York City and the United States, many people have become increasingly embittered, belligerent, and besieged. This is *not* the way of Jesus. We are Christians, and each and all of us must stand up and be counted. We must *become* reconciliation, risk, and trust. How else will the rubble ever be rebuilt? How else will the wounds within ever heal?

Formation for Christian Living

How on earth can we love as God loves? “Love one another as I have loved you,” said Jesus (Jn 15:12). There are no options here, only gospel imperatives. If we ponder the command to love other people as we have been loved, a number of images or movements come to mind. Here are five that might challenge us.

First, the *outside-in* movement: we are commanded to welcome and gather the stranger. There is a rich vein within the Christian tradition, visible in the Sanctuary Movement, the Catholic Worker Movement, or L’Arche, but equally authentic among other communities that offer hospitality. Opportunities abound.

Second, the *inside-out* (or *co-mission*) movement: we are sent, commissioned to go to the margins and to the marginalized people. Outreach is expressed in serving at soup kitchens or homeless shelters, in putting our time and presence at the service of people in need, in rearranging our schedules to be at the disposition of the “other.” The most vulnerable people in our neighborhoods and cities now are

those who look different from us and from our friends. *They* now are the strangers we fear, the strangers we fight; they should be the strangers we serve. This is not only good civic sense; it is at the heart of the Christian faith.

Third, the *displacement* (or *disturbance*) movement: we are called to a more radical encounter, to actually seeking or willing to become strangers ourselves. This requires us to cross boundaries and actually become located in other people's worlds: in the world of the "other." This is what a truly missional outreach entails. The true stranger neither brings status nor falls back on titles or achievements. The voluntary stranger must learn a spirituality of risk. The Christian stranger must continue to learn from Jesus.

Fourth, the *transformation* movement: we are challenged to cultivate downward and lateral mobility. The most effective way to close gaps and erase distinctions is to bridge those gaps with our daily outreach and to remove the distinctions with our wide embrace. The poor (including strangers, refugees, displaced persons, and aliens) are the fastest-growing population on earth. To suffer chronic economic poverty is continuously to fall beneath the mean standard of living. Every tiny increment of upward mobility on our part widens the gap, the distance, between ourselves and the poor. To be chronically alienated and excluded is to live in fear. Our every failure to move laterally is a refusal to encounter the alien and alienated in our midst. Unless, like Jesus, we embrace downward mobility, we frankly betray our faith and our religious commitment. Downward, and lateral, mobility, not only demonstrates radical simplicity but commits us to the intentional redistribution of our own wealth and security. Unless we live more simply, so that others may simply live, we are not committed to transforming strangers, and our religion is a travesty and a sham. Downward mobility helps us to see the world through the eyes of the "other." Lateral mobility allows us to encounter our invisible and alienated neighbors.

Fifth, the *conversion* movement: we are charged with being much more intentional, much more concerned about strangers and aliens, instead of claiming that a climate of fearful uneasiness justifies us in taking greater care of our own security or making preemptive attacks on others. Unless we are as concerned about the "other" as we are

about our portfolios, our stocks and bonds, we are not being holy as God is holy, we are being unfaithful to the God of Abraham, and we are actually building up the sinful structures that terrorists so zealously want to destroy.

An Inconclusive Conclusion

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson tells of an international space shuttle crew. One astronaut recalled: "The first day we all pointed out our own countries. The third day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were all aware of only one earth."⁸³ Here is a new perspective: the earth had not changed but the observers certainly had. So it is for each of us as we look upon this world, a world sundered, stratified, and seared into our consciousness through a succession of violent acts, whether by legitimately elected governments making preemptive war or by so-called terrorist others. We see a first, second, third—and even a fourth world: a world of haves and have-nots; a world of *US* and *THEM*, of polarization, of strangers and aliens, of those we trust and those we fear, of our allies and our nation's enemies. Only if and when we adopt a different perspective—a God's-eye view—will we be able to perceive the reality God created, the reality Christians profess to champion: a world where everyone is brother and sister, a world of complementarity, equality, and collaboration, a world without strangers and aliens, a world of *WE*.

On 9/11 many Americans experienced (or at least were able to imagine), as never before, what it is to be an alien in a violent world, a stranger in one's very own land. This experience is also, potentially, a critically important step toward empathy. Without empathy we cannot work with others to dismantle the barriers that separate and segregate and systematically create strangers and aliens. Maybe in the future we will look more earnestly, more openly, more hopefully into other people's eyes. And maybe we won't. The challenge is first to look, and then to look with eyes of love and expectant recognition, rather than to live with downcast eyes or to look through the distorting lenses of hostility and hatred.

We are still far from loving the world and its people as God loves. We maintain structures of oppression, or we delude ourselves by be-

lieving that our national outrage and our lack of hunger for God's justice will not catch up with us and condemn us. God's love of the world is inclusive, equal, and total. We have experienced God's love in many of our yesterdays. Perhaps today we will hear God's call to conversion. Then maybe tomorrow we will begin to love again, as we dare to embrace strangers, and to dismantle boundaries of exclusion, to allow God's realm to break through. But until we do, we are not yet disciples.

Further Reading

Gittins, Anthony. "The Christian as Stranger: Responding to Xenophobia," *The Month*, 25, no. 5 (1994): 185–190.

Johnson, Elizabeth. "Passion for God, Passion for Earth." In *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D. Chittister*, edited by Mary Hembrow Snyder, 118–125. New York: Orbis, 2001.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Chapter Eight: No Strangers in God's Family

75. Robert Fagles, trans., *Homer: The Odyssey* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1996), book 14:66–8, 318–9; book 9:304.
76. Johannes Metz, *Poverty of Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1968/1998), 33.
77. This is a composite but faithful translation of Col 1:21–22 and Gal 3:28 (with emphasis added).
78. Feminist theologians very much dislike "complementary" because of its connotations. See Michelle A. Gonzales: *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).
79. We should include in the category "stranger," a variety of "others," or members of minority or "subaltern" groups, whether identified as such by creed, caste, or any condition that allows them to be perceived or treated unjustly. This theme recurs in chapter seven.
80. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1997), 212; Frank Crüsemann, "Do You Know the Heart of a Stranger? A Recollection of the Torah in the Face of New Nationalism and Xenophobia," *Concilium* 4 (1993): 95–109.
81. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, eds., *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 6 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1948), 138–139.
82. Crüsemann, *Concilium* 4 (1993): 101.
83. Elizabeth Johnson, "Passion for God, Passion for Earth," in *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D. Chittister*, ed. Mary Hembrow Snyder, 118–125 (New York: Orbis, 2001), 118.