

## **“Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy – Part Four”**

Deuteronomy 10:17-22; Matthew 25:31-40 – Tesa Hauser

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*Holy God bless the speaking and the hearing of these words that we might be open to those who are strangers. In the name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.*

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Over the past few weeks, Pastor Rebecca has been sharing what scripture says about our relationships with others such as those we call friend and neighbor. This week we start going into less familiar territory (pun intended) to talk about strangers. Can you remember the time you were the new person? It may have been attending a new school, joining a new club you were interested in, moving into a new place, or even visiting Vista La Mesa for the first time. I remember that one like it was a year and a half ago. Another way to describe being the “new person” is being a stranger. You are a stranger entering a place where people know one another, where knowledge about one’s life has been shared, and love may abound.

Being a stranger is tough; it may be an experience filled with anxiety and fear, but then a person recognizes you are a stranger, comes up to you and welcomes you. You might still be nervous introducing yourself to this other stranger, but their willingness to acknowledge your presence can be comforting and allows you to slowly open up. Then they introduce you to more people, and

slowly, over time, you are no longer a stranger, but you become a well-known acquaintance, a friend, a neighbor, or like family.

It is hard to move from stranger to known. It takes work; it takes time. It may involve a good amount of energy, but it is worth it. At one point we were strangers to God; still, God welcomed us. Israel's story is that of stranger to God, approached by God to be in covenant relationship with God. However, for much time only those who were Israelites or who were willing to follow Jewish law and be circumcised were seen as eligible to be in covenant relationship with God. Those who were Gentiles (non-Jews) were strangers to the covenant promises, but as Paul writes in Ephesians 2, through Christ, all barriers or limitations have been eliminated and lifted. Through Christ, we are now called children of God, invited to be in covenant relationship with God and to know this God who has welcomed us through Christ. Thanks to scripture, we are able to know God and what it means to be in relationship with God.

In the two passages we read this morning, we see much about our relationship with God and Jesus. In Deuteronomy, we learn that relationship with God affects all other relationships we have with people/creation. The God "who executes justice for the orphan and the widow and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing" means that if we are in relationship with God, we should be doing the same. The word for justice used here is a Hebrew word that

is translated as “judgment”, or “the deciding of a case or decision of judgement.” This means God decidedly cares for the orphan, widow, and strangers, and that God has decided that providing food, clothing, and loving them matters. Being in relationship with God means all of this should matter to us. Another commentary I read says, “To love God is to love one’s neighbor, and to serve God necessitates social obligation.”

What does this social obligation mean for us? The term “social justice” bothers many Christians for various reasons. Some don’t believe that following society’s idea of justice should trump God’s, and I would say that they are correct, and then direct them to this scripture. Our relationship with God means we don’t simply proclaim God as the one true God, but that we look to also execute God’s justice in the world with action. Sometimes enacting God’s justice in the world will align to those fighting for social justice, especially those who are working to welcome the stranger.

The definition of stranger is a sojourner, temporary dweller, or a newcomer (with no inherited rights). What does this mean? That those who come into our lives for a short time should be cared for; they should be given food, clothing, or shelter, for as we see in Matthew, they may even be Christ. This means that those who come to our community and even our country without rights, should be treated with love. There are no exceptions, there are no qualifications, or ways of

being a correct “stranger” in order to receive God’s love shown in scripture. And again, in Matthew we see that those who pay particular attention to those in need, to the stranger, are called righteous by God. Those who are righteous are those who enacted the justice of God in the world.

Jesus says that at the end times God’s judgement isn’t mainly or solely based on how many doctrines you remembered or followed closely. It isn’t how many scriptures verses you knew or could recite (not that these do not matter), but Jesus emphasizes how we treated the “least of these,” Christian or not Christian, “legal” or “not legal” with abundant love and mercy. What matters is that we gave expecting nothing in return, that we loved without expecting love in return, because we know that we are loved by a good and just God. I think of the two men that showed Jesus hospitality on the road to Emmaus. They didn’t know it was Jesus; in Luke 24:16 it says they were kept from recognizing him. After they reached the city, they urged Jesus strongly to stay with them, and those who they were staying with welcomed Jesus also. The result of their hospitality to this stranger meant they were able to witness the resurrected Christ! This is a great ending, but sometimes giving and caring for the stranger means we do not receive recognition or praise. God is our praise; God has done great and awesome things and we now do the same as those whom God has called family.

What it means to be in the family of God, as Pastor Rebecca has said, is a healthy obligation to love and forgive and offer the benefit of the doubt. The issue with strangers is that we feel as though there isn't enough knowledge to provide the benefit of the doubt; there isn't enough time and commitment for love to grow; there isn't enough of a history or understanding to offer forgiveness. That stranger doesn't parent like I think they should. That stranger is a terrible driver and should have their license revoked. It is hard work to move past being a stranger; but as children of God we have said yes to this work, willingly or unwillingly to care for the stranger. That means encouraging that random parent doing the hard work of raising kids or having immense patience with that driver.

When we think of strangers, we think of others, but that isn't always the case. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes we are the stranger and once we were strangers to God and the body of Christ. We are sometimes the stranger that needs to be welcomed. Being welcomed by God changed our lives and means there are people we can (hopefully) lean on, when we are in need. It makes a difference to be seen and known, to not be a stranger, but friend, neighbor, or family. We were and are shown grace, mercy, and justice by God. Relationship with God means doing the same to stranger and the "least of these" and not expecting anything in return. Alleluia and Amen!