

June 15, 2008 5th After Pentecost

Reflection: When a stranger calls

Do you remember that movie? I never saw it, but I sure heard about it a lot when I was a young teen. All of my friends knew the story. The young Jill Johnson is babysitting one night when the phone rings. When she picks it up – silence. She hangs up the phone, and it rings again. The same thing happens over and over again, and she finally calls the police, who do a trace of the call. While the police are checking, the phone rings once more, and a stranger on the other end of the line says, “Have you checked the children lately?” She hangs up. The phone rings again, and it’s the police: the phone calls were made from inside the house! Murder and mayhem ensue, as you might imagine. Thoughts of that movie would often enter my head as I was out late babysitting for church friends. I would be terrified to go down the darkened hallway for fear something or someone might be lurking in the shadows, and every time the phone rang, I jumped. It was ridiculous, but I was still scared.

That movie plays on one of those fears I mentioned in my sermon last week: the fear of the stranger. We teach children not to speak to strangers, for fear they will be harmed. From diapers on, we learn to fear the unknown, the unfamiliar person, the one who might look OK on the outside but inside is just full of potential evil. It’s even worse when the stranger is someone who appears to be different from us. How many women here have been out walking on a quiet street and heard footsteps, seen a man behind you, and immediately quickened your pace or crossed the street? How many of you have done the same when you saw a young man of colour coming your way? How many of you have headed for the other side of the sidewalk to avoid the panhandler on the street? I’m guessing all of us have had at least one experience like that. Strangers make us nervous, because we cannot predict their motivation or their actions. If a stranger shows up at our doors, the first response is usually suspicion.

Contrast that with the strangers who arrive at Abraham’s tent flap. Ancient people of the Near East held hospitality to be one of the most important values. In fact, it was more than a value; it was an obligation. To deny a traveller food, water and shelter in the harsh conditions of that climate was to condemn him to death. One showed hospitality to others, knowing that there might be a time when you depended on such hospitality your self. Even enemies were entitled to hospitality – and in return, they were required not to attack their host for a period of three days. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah indicates that safeguarding a guest in one’s home was even more important than safeguarding one’s own family. Sodom and Gomorrah, remember that? That’s what happens in between the two halves of our Genesis reading today. The men of Sodom threaten to attack these same strangers, who have taken refuge in the home of Abraham’s nephew Lot. The twin cities are destroyed, because they violated the laws of hospitality. Jesus makes that clear in his reference to Sodom and Gomorrah when speaking to his disciples about how they will deal with inhospitable cities.

Hospitality to strangers is absolutely essential. That is a standard Near Eastern value, and wouldn't surprise anyone from that culture who heard these Scripture passages. The Bible, however, adds a double-emphasis to the importance of welcoming the stranger: we are told that the stranger may speak with the voice of God, and speak the blessing of God.

Hospitality is the first value I want to emphasize in today's readings. Every church on the planet thinks it's a welcoming, hospitable congregation. But visitors often experience something quite different:

- like the young family locked out of our church on Easter Sunday morning because they were running late and didn't know which doors to use;
- like the group from another congregation who were invited to join us for an event but then found that only people they already knew here would talk to them;
- like the group renting our building who had people from our church take over their meeting space or interrupt their programs;
- like the young couple who were looking for a new church to attend with their daughter and found that no-one did more than offer a smile and a hello – no-one actually conversed with them!
- like the woman who couldn't find the bathroom when she needed to in the middle of the service, and didn't know who to ask.
- Like the folks who didn't have a bulletin or a hymnbook, and no-one offered to share with them or get them one
- Like the person who was told they were sitting in someone else's pew
- Like the woman who came faithfully for months and still had only a handful of people who greeted her or talked to her at coffee time

You may say these are isolated incidents, and that people shouldn't judge on the basis of one encounter with the congregation. I know that many, many people do experience this congregation as warm and welcoming – I certainly have – but I want you, for a moment, to put defensiveness aside, and imagine yourself in the place of those people I mentioned. How would you feel?

We are trying to address some of these issues through Session, Stewards, and our Emerging Spirit Welcoming team; but we need everyone here to offer hospitality. Not just because we want to be on the receiving end of good hospitality when we need it, as in the ancient traditions, but because Scripture teaches that the stranger, the newcomer, the guest, has something important to say to us, to teach us, about the will of God. There are many stories in the traditions of our faith, of how people have entertained angels, God's messengers, unaware.

The second value that I want to emphasize is the other part of the Gospel story: the commissioning. Jesus didn't tell his disciples to erect a building and form a club to worship him; he told them to go out into the world to declare the coming of

God's kingdom both in word and in action. Let me just say that going out on the streetcorners or knocking on doors isn't likely to get us anywhere in this day and age. We have to find a different way of sharing the message of God's compassion with the people around us.

I believe that one of the most important aspects of sharing the Gospel is to get out of our churches and to communicate with people where they live, work and play. And remember: the biggest part of good communication is listening. In order to share the good news of Jesus in ways that people can relate to, we need to know about their lives: what matters to them, what their worries are, what they celebrate, what challenges them, where they struggle in life, what it is about the church that appeals to them or turns them off. One of the goals of *Ministry Beyond Our Walls* was to begin a dialogue with the Langford community about what matters to them – to see how the love and justice and hope of the Kingdom of God can make a real impact in this region. We begin with listening; only then do we move to speech and action.

So I have an assignment for you this summer – or better yet, a commission. I want you to start that conversation on an informal basis. This summer, I want you to pay close attention to what the people around you are saying. I want those of you who are extroverts to strike up conversations with strangers as well as friends about their lives and about this community we live in – remembering that the number one goal is to learn about their concerns and their joys, not to tell them about our church; that comes later. And I want those of you who are more reserved or introverted to listen – to eavesdrop on conversations on the bus, in the coffee shop, on the golf course, to talk with your family and friends – to have conversations that matter. I want you to pay attention to the local newspapers and radio and TV; I want you to find out what the young people at the gym are talking about and I want you to listen to the retired folk at the Seniors' Centre and hear what they have to say. I'm going to put a great big piece of paper up in the CE Hall, and I'm going to ask you to write down in point form the things that you've heard as the summer progresses. I believe that if we listen to the voices of the stranger, we will hear God calling.

The stranger: the one to whom we offer hospitality, the one from whom we receive the word of God; the one who blesses us with an unexpected gift; the one with whom we in turn share the gift of life in Christ. It is a relationship of mutuality; it is a relationship that matters; it is a relationship that has the potential to change who we are and to reshape not only our church but also our community.

We don't need to be afraid of the stranger. When God is involved, "When a Stranger Calls" can have a whole new meaning. When a stranger calls, it may be God calling. So let's pay attention. Amen.