

Welcoming the Stranger Within

A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, September 7, 2017

Deuteronomy 10: 17-19 and Matthew 25: 31-46

In the name of the God who creates, welcomes, and nurtures. Amen.

Having developed an interest in the practice of Centering Prayer, I decided to try an evening service that used the method. I was surprised by the number of people in attendance and was greeted warmly, even offered coffee in the back of the room. There were rows of chairs with little cards on them. Prayer cards, I assumed. But as I went to find a seat I noticed a poster at the front of the room. It was not filled with meditations or prayers, but with Twelve Steps. I'd inadvertently walked not into a prayer session but an AA meeting! (Nonetheless, I was a welcomed stranger.)

Welcoming the stranger, offering care and hospitality to people from all walks, are essentials of Christian practice. Jesus makes it very clear in tonight's Gospel from Matthew that in caring for the least of God's family, we also care for God. If we do not care for God's family, then we are not caring for God. Even in Deuteronomy we are told that God "loves the strangers." It's a simple yet profound principle.

As Christians, we talk a lot about caring for stranger and friend alike. And we're very good at walking the walk in some cases. Just look at the outpouring of support for the flood victims in greater Houston, and the signings of counter statements to the anti-LGBTQ and anti-woman rhetoric found in the Nashville Statement. Here at St. Paul's, we are blessed to be a community that both talks the talk and walks the walk of radical welcome, powered by an underlying understanding that those who enter our doors do so as Christ in our midst.

But there's a type of caring for the stranger, the least of the members of God's family, that is, arguably, the most challenging, and one about which we don't talk enough: the stranger within ourselves.

It's hard to know who we are at the center when the internalized voices of shame, that negative self-talk we repeat over and over to ourselves, estranges us from our God-breathed goodness within. We shun or imprison aspects of

ourselves we'd rather not know inside a dark room with a padlock and chain around the door. We end up hurting because we estrange ourselves from those parts. Then we project our pain onto others.

The truth is, we don't usually stop to consider that what we reject about ourselves might just be Christ in our midst—God trying to burst through—with something to teach us about our God-given nature.

God loves the stranger, even the one within ourselves. If what we do to others is also what we do to God, then think of what we're doing to God when we engage in negative self-talk and self-destructive behaviors.

The next time we're feeling ashamed or like we're not good enough, why not pause and come back to center? Why not unlock that door? Jesus may be waiting there, reaching out to us for an embrace. Why would we shun him?