

Tracy Daub
6/28/20--University Presbyterian Church
Matthew 10:40-42

BLURRED LINES

I invite you to think about a time when you received warm and generous hospitality from someone. Perhaps you were the guest in someone's house. Or you were a guest at a dinner party. Or you were a visitor in another country. Think about a time when you experienced hospitality and how it made you feel.

Hospitality was a crucial element in the ancient world that Jesus lived in. But there was a difference than from how we understand hospitality today. Today, we generally extend hospitality to people we know--to those who are part of our circle of friends, acquaintances, or colleagues. The times when we offer hospitality to a stranger are usually because the stranger is somehow connected to someone we already know. They are a friend of a friend.

In Jesus' day, hospitality was not about entertaining family or friends. Rather, it was the process of receiving an outsider and changing them from stranger into guest. It was something extended to strangers. When people traveled in Jesus' day, there were no Holiday Inns for them to stay at. They needed the hospitality of people in that community to house them and feed them and to protect them. Without hospitality, people were very vulnerable. A newcomer had no legal rights in that community. They could be abused; they could be robbed; they could be harmed. But if they were taken into the house of a resident from that community, they were granted the protection of their host. No one could harm the guest without violating and offending the host as well.

But travelers were strangers to the people in that community. How could the people of that community know they could trust the stranger? How could they know that the stranger was

not a threat to them? Not everyone was willing to take a risk by extending hospitality to a stranger.

In the passage we read today from Matthew, Jesus is preparing to send his disciples out to do ministry. They were to travel around preaching and teaching and healing people. Jesus instructs his disciples to take absolutely nothing with them--no food, no extra clothes, no money. They were to be dependent upon the communities they entered. In other words, they were to be dependent upon the hospitality of others. And Jesus offers his disciples these words: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Did you see what Jesus just did there? Jesus blurs the lines of distinction and separation--the lines of distinction and separation we all craft in our lives and in our societies. Think about all those boundary lines we create in ordinary ways as well as large ways in our lives. We build fences to separate our yard from the neighbor's yard. This is us. That's you. We build walls to separate our nation from the people of another nation. In our hearts and minds we categorize people as soon as we meet them as to whether they are one of us or not one of us. Did they go to our same school or university? Are they Christian or Muslim or Jew or atheist? Are they black or white? Are they from our hometown or neighborhood or from somewhere else? Are they blue collar or white collar? Are they a Bills fan or a Patriots fan? When we meet someone new, we unconsciously but immediately begin trying to find the category into which we will place this person. What we are really doing is establishing, are they one of us or not. Are they one of us or are they a stranger? And this distinction can affect in subtle ways and in very profound ways how we will interact with them, how we will treat them, or think of them.

In preparing to send his disciples out into the region, Jesus knows that they will be perceived as strangers to those communities into which they will travel. They will not always be

give a welcome. They might not be offered housing or shelter. They might not be offered food or water. But he tells them that whoever welcomes them welcomes him as well, and not only him but God. Whoever welcomes these strangers will be welcoming God.

The lines of distinction are completely blurred. There is no longer stranger or friend. There is no longer family member or outsider. There is no longer documented or undocumented. There is no longer black or white, gay or straight, homeowner or homeless person. There is just God, staring at us in the face of the stranger. And when we welcome the stranger, when we receive the stranger, when we offer assistance to the stranger, shelter to the stranger, kindness to the stranger, hope for the stranger, we are welcoming God.

The idea of welcoming others is very appealing. We like the idea of being welcoming to others. But truthfully, it is not very easy to do. Sometimes in driving passed churches I will see this message on their church sign: All are welcome! And I think to myself, "Really?" Really? Because it is really hard to truly welcome *everyone*. It is hard for us to do this as individuals and it is very hard to do this as a community. Will everyone in that community really welcome everyone? To be honest, I can think of situations in our church's life and history when it was really hard to welcome certain people. So maybe a more truthful sign would read, "We try to welcome everyone. Come and help us."

Maybe a first step in trying to welcome others is to pause and consider what are the obstacles standing in our way of welcoming others. What fears keep us from welcoming others? What unacknowledged biases or prejudices stand in our way? What grievances or resentments obstruct our path to welcoming others?

We have created very deep lines of demarcation between those we will accept and those we will not, between those we will care for and care about, and those we will not, between those we will stand up for and those we will not.

But Christ blurs those lines. And he tells us that whoever welcomes the stranger, welcomes God. In fact, Jesus tells his disciples that when someone offers them a cup of cold water--remember, they lived in a hot desert climate--that even that small act of kindness would be rewarded.

So start small. Start small in welcoming the stranger. Start practicing small acts of hospitality and kindness. Start with small acts of self-examination and little steps in learning about another culture or group of people. Start with small but important acts like voting for people and policies that honor the lives of other people not like you. Start practicing hospitality in large and small ways so that when you see the stranger at the check-out line, or walking through your neighborhood, or in a story on the evening news, when you see the stranger, the person you do not know, the person who does not appear to be like you, when you see the stranger, you will think to yourself, "Oh, here comes Jesus!"