

Carol M. Strickland  
First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
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Text: Deuteronomy 10:12-19, I John 4:7-12

## Stranger Love

Just Friday night in Paris three teams of Islamic State attackers carried out a coordinated assault. It began at 9:20 pm when a terrorist detonated a suicide bomb outside the gates of a soccer stadium. Minutes later across the city gunmen sprayed restaurant diners. The violence reached its climax at a concert hall. At 9:40 three terrorists took a thousand music fans hostage and shot them indiscriminately before police regained control in a hail of gunfire and explosives. Carnage, wreckage, destruction. The death toll is 129 with 352 others wounded, many of them critically.

Before worship on Sunday morning August 5, 2012 as members of a Sikh temple near Milwaukee were gathering for worship, a gunman entered. He began shooting. Congregants ran for shelter and barricaded themselves in bathrooms and prayer halls, where they made desperate phone calls and sent anguished texts pleading for help as confusion and fear took hold. The police arrived and engaged the shooter. He was wounded and committed suicide but only after killing six innocent men and wounding four others.

These horrendous acts of violence are but two examples of the growing intolerance and antipathy loose in our world. Why are people so hateful toward those who are different from themselves? The reasons undoubtedly are complex but seem to boil down to ignorance and fear. In the month following 9/11 more than 300 incidences of hate crimes against Sikhs in the US were reported. Though there are almost twice as many Sikhs worldwide as Jews, most people, myself included, know little about them. Because their men wear turbans they often get mistaken for Muslims (or Hindus), which they are not.

Because people don't know much *about* people who are different from them, not to mention actually *knowing* many personally, there is mistrust. There is fear. Differences are threatening. I see you don't belong to the same tribe as I do. So I prefer to keep at a distance. It would feel disloyal to my tribe to reach across the line. And further, I believe that there is not enough good stuff to go around, so I have to stick with my tribe and keep your tribe out. And it's easier to see you as not just different but inferior—less than human. I compare the worst examples of your tribe with the best of mine. The fact that you see the world differently, from a different perspective may cause me to question my own point of view. That makes me feel very vulnerable. I don't understand you, and your otherness scares me.

In spite of our all too human suspicion of those who are different from us, God commands us to love the stranger. Love the stranger. Love the neighbor. This concept runs throughout the Bible. We recall how Jesus quoted the command to love your neighbor as yourself when answering a question about the greatest commandment in the law. Now, in the Old Testament you could argue that "neighbor" referred only to a fellow member of the community, i.e. a fellow Jew. But Jesus blew that definition of neighbor wide open in the parable he told to the lawyer who asked, "Just who is my neighbor?" In the parable of the Good Samaritan the neighbor wasn't the one who was from the neighborhood, who was a fellow Jew, but an outsider, a Samaritan, a

stranger. Ironically, it was the Good Samaritan who practiced true neighbor love.

In our passage from Deuteronomy Moses is preaching to the people. He reminds them of their special place in God's plan. Out of all the peoples of the world, God chose you, he tells them. This is what theologians call the doctrine of election. God elected the Jews. And subsequently in Jesus Christ God has elected us. However, election is not for privilege but for service and sacrifice.

The fifth grade teacher tapped Brian to be one of a select group: the safety patrols. He would get to wear the cool white belt which went diagonally over the shoulder. He would get to leave class 15 minutes early and come in 15 minutes late. He was so excited to be selected. But being a safety patrol, Brian soon learned, meant he had to arrive at his post 30 minutes before school started. Everyday. It meant he had to stand out there in the rain and cold.

Yes, Israel and we are chosen. We are chosen not for some great reward for ourselves but to be a blessing to others. God told Abraham that through him, all the families of the earth were to be blessed. Such election isn't easy. It requires difficult things like obedience to God when we'd rather follow the crowd. It requires circumcising our hearts when we'd rather not. It requires loving the stranger when it would be so much easier to keep our distance.

Love the stranger. The Hebrew word for "stranger" in our text is a word that technically means a foreign sojourner or resident alien. An article I read in the New York Times a couple of weeks ago said that there are more displaced people and refugees now than at any other time in recorded history—60 million people in all. And there's no end in sight. The crisis could well get bigger. You've seen their pictures. You've heard their stories of desperation. A young Kurdish doctor from Iraq was interviewed at the Croatian border. He had taken his life savings of \$2,000 and spent nearly all of it, including \$1200 for a seat in a rubber dinghy on a perilous sea crossing to Greece. Desperation was in his voice: "Better to die quickly there, than slowly in Iraq," he said.

Love the stranger, Moses tells the people. Why? For at least three reasons we can glean from this passage.

The first reason is rooted in the character of God. God is concerned with justice for all people. God cares particularly for society's most vulnerable—for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. I heard someone say recently that the go-to Bible verse for Christians shouldn't be John 3:16, which has been wrongly interpreted as 'Believe in Jesus or go to hell.' Rather it should be I John 4:7-8 which we heard read earlier: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." The very essence and character of God is love. "God loves the stranger," Moses says. "You also shall love the stranger." So we are called to love the stranger in imitation of God.

The second reason to love the stranger is out of empathy. "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt." For four hundred years the Jews were slaves in Egypt. They knew what it was like to be oppressed. They knew what it was like to be foreigners in another's land. They knew what it was to be different.

Everyone here has had experiences where they were in the minority. When I lived in St. Joseph, Missouri I went to a Carolina-Kansas football game. There were about 40 of us Tarheels down near the end zone in that stadium that must have held 40,000 KU fans. In my Carolina blue sweatshirt yelling "Go Heels" I was different. I was in a foreign land. That, of course, is a trivial example. But I daresay, you can think of times when you were the stranger. Tap into that

empathy when you encounter others who are different. “Walk a mile in another person’s moccasins,” the proverb says. When you do, you realize that we all share a common humanity. We all know what it is like to be a stranger, so we are called to love the stranger out of empathy.

The third reason to love the stranger is for our own wellbeing. That’s how Moses starts his sermon. Obey God’s commands for your own sake he says. This is true for us in an individual way. When we live our lives in tune with what God asks of us, we experience purpose and meaning. When we risk crossing lines that separate us from others—racial lines, ethnic lines, religious lines, cultural lines, age lines, and so on—we grow as people and can discover delightful friendships. But obeying God’s commands, and in particular God’s command to love the stranger, is good for us not only as individuals but as a society and as a world. We all know that the world is shrinking. It behooves us all in a world with so much diversity to love one another. We are to love the stranger because it is for our own wellbeing and the world’s to do so.

There’s a story about a rabbi who asked his students how to tell when night was ending and day was beginning. “Is it when you can see the difference between a goat and a sheep?” asked one student.

“No,” said the rabbi.

“Is it when you can see the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree?” asked another.

“No,” said the rabbi.

“It is when you look into any fellow human being’s face and see a brother or sister. Night has not ended until we see not our differences but our common humanity.”

I went to a Montreat conference about living in a multi-faith world last month. One of the speakers was Valerie Kaur. She is a graduate of Stanford, Harvard, and Yale; a civil rights advocate; a lawyer; a film maker; and a Sikh. Sikhs believe in one god, the equality of all people, engaging in selfless service, striving for social justice, and honest conduct. Valerie spoke about revolutionary love, love that’s selfless and risks everything, love that is not safe or easy but is truly the only thing that can save the world. She was so passionate, and articulate, and beautiful. If she had given an altar call, I would have come forward and become a Sikh!

She told us that the weekend before the conference, the weekend of October 10<sup>th</sup>, there were hateful protests planned at Muslim community centers and mosques in twenty US cities intended to stir up hate and intimidate worshippers. For Muslim Americans and for Sikhs, who as I noted before are often mistake for Muslims, there was a great deal of apprehension. Valerie told her many Facebook followers that she was so discouraged to hear that after devoting her life the past fourteen years to combat such bigotry it was still alive and well. Her Facebook friend, Lt. Brian Murphy wrote her back immediately. “You can’t give up!” he posted. Brian Murphy was the police officer who responded to the calls for help from the Sikh temple in suburban Milwaukee three years ago. He was a white Christian officer who had never heard of Sikhs before the incident. But he took 15 bullets from the terrorist who was massacring those gathering at the temple for worship. During the massacre Brian kept telling himself that he had to keep moving in order to give the gunman a target. His selfless action saved who knows how many others. Fortunately, for every hate group that gathered around the mosques last month, there were hundreds of others (mostly Christian) that mobilized in support of their Muslim brothers and sisters. Quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. Valerie said. “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Valerie told another story of revolutionary love practiced toward a stranger. Shortly after 9/11 in California her Punjabi teacher was on a bus. He had a beard and a turban as do all Sikh

men. Not cutting their hair is one of the tenets of their faith which identifies them. A man stood up on the bus and started yelling hateful slurs at her teacher. He shook his fist and started to move toward the Sikh. Her teacher was terrified and silently looked out the window, praying that this would pass. Soon several fellow passengers told the man to calm down. One got up and put his hand on the man's arm and got him back in his seat. At the next stop Valerie's teacher quickly got off the bus. But the man got off too and followed him. When he caught up to the teacher he blurted out, "I am so sorry. Forgive me. I lost my granddaughter in the Twin Towers attack."

Love the stranger. That's what all of you have done this morning as you brought a sack of groceries so a family you do not know--a family who is economically different and perhaps racially and religiously different from you--can celebrate Thanksgiving. Keep it up. Keep serving. Keep befriending. Keep speaking up for and advocating for the stranger. Keep building bridges of understanding and cooperation and compassion. Love the stranger. Amen.