

Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
The Kindness of Strangers
Sermon – March 13, 2011
By Gretchen Haley

Our encounter with the stranger– I mean, our encounter with the one who is different in some way, the one we don't know, or consider one of our own – for whatever reason. Our meeting with this person is inevitably a moral encounter.¹

Moral because each time we meet someone who is not like us, we are offered an opportunity to notice and affirm our common humanity, an opportunity to affirm that mysterious underlying unity that – depending on just how strange we're talking about – can be more or less a matter of faith.

I think when I say “stranger,” especially in a religious context – you know, with all our world religions' stories of being helped by strangers on the side of the road, and gods dressing as strangers to test their people's true kindness – when I start talking about the “kindness of strangers” – I think it's natural to first imagine the extremes. Those people who are way different than us, as in exotic. Strangers, but so much so, they are fascinating, and compelling.

This is maybe not so much a moral encounter with the stranger, as it is meeting the stranger as an opportunity for world travel.

Sometimes, in a group of well-intentioned straight liberals, I can feel like this kind of stranger. Especially at my progressive seminary, where so many of my friends feel a duty to right the wrongs the mainline church has leveled against the gay and lesbian population. While their love for me and my partner and our kids, and their activism for an inclusive Christianity is genuine, and appreciated – sometimes when we all get to talking about our respective lives, as the only gay person in the group, I can start to feel like I'm a rare and valuable art exhibit passing through a small town in Kansas.

This is how many people of color describe feeling in some of our predominantly white congregations, especially those who are actively working to be anti-racist. Or, how young adults can feel in a predominantly older congregation, especially those actively working to lower their median age.

In our pursuit of diversity, spiritual progressives can so easily forget the moral question these encounters ask of us – that question of truly seeing this strange and wonderful person as truly, a person.

Although we would not think of ourselves as xenophobic – afraid of the stranger, we know deep-down that our desires for diverse and yet cohesive community are a longing fulfilled only by coming face-to-face with something quite risky, and terrifying.

¹ Some of the concepts in this sermon were influenced by Dana Wilbanks, in his book, *Re-creating America: The Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective*, Abingdon Press, 1996.

But not terrifying for the reasons you might think. It's not like that lesson I keep trying to my kids about "stranger danger." The stranger is not terrifying for us *because* of the stranger. The stranger is terrifying for us *because of us*.

Terrifying, because deep down, we realize that coming to an open-hearted, real relationship with someone who is different - that is, any encounter with a stranger that could actually create community - asks less of the stranger than it does of us. It asks us to risk ourselves, and our assumptions, our basic notions of identity.

It asks us to risk the possibility that some of the basic things we've always thought or felt, some of our most basic assumptions about how to do things, or how to act, or some of those things we've worked the hardest to understand - that these things might not be right. Or at least not be the *only* right. They might instead be products of our limited experience, limits of our particular socio-cultural existence, our *time-constrained* socio-cultural existence. Which means, in addition to all this risk and vulnerability, in our encounter with the stranger, we are asked to come face to face with our human limitedness. These are the kinds of encounters that if we're serious about it, shake us up, and change us, forever.

I don't know about you, but I think this whole idea sounds *terrible*. I mean, imagining myself and my most basic thinking as irreparably provincial - a product of my upbringing, my social class, my race, my education, my gender, my citizenship ...well, it's not the way I like to think about myself. It's not the way I like to feel about myself. Not only that, I generally *like* myself. Like who I've become, who I am becoming. And while I like to keep learning, I don't really like the idea of being *changed*.

But let me tell you. I think it gets worse.

I mean, the kind of stranger I'm describing - the very-different culturally, very-different educationally, very-different economic class, the fascinatingly very-different - this kind of stranger challenges us very little compared to the strangeness we encounter in those who we assume are most *like* us.

I mean, the strangeness we discover in a close friend. Or maybe more, the strangeness we discover again and again in our own families.

The person we are supposed to cling to, or who should cling to us, the person we should most easily care for and show kindness to - we discover - sometimes to more or less a degree, that they are instead unfathomably different. We discover we not an immediate fondness, or an instant attachment, but instead, a kind of alienation, a questioning, like, who *is* this person?!

Equally disheartening, those moments when you realize *you* are the stranger amongst your own people. How many of us grew up in families with a more conservative philosophy, only to come at some point to a kind of awakening, and then feeling all of sudden like we were strangers in a strange land?

When I saw *A Streetcar Named Desire* this time, it was this kind of irony - the irony of finding the greatest strangeness amongst those who are theoretically supposed to be your most familiar companions, that really hit me, really stayed with me after the performance. I mean, here we have this woman who comes in desperate need to her family, comes at her lowest point. She

comes - yes, coated in pretense and with all her vulnerability shielded by flirtation and regular inebriation. But despite all this - she comes because she sincerely needs help, and she has nowhere else to turn. And she comes in the hope that her sister will recognize her, remember her as her sister, despite time and their changed circumstances.

But ultimately, she was too strange. Too different than what Stella had become. Too different than Stanley, with his working class sneer and animalistic passions. Too different and too desperate. She needed too much, and needed to be responded to on her own terms, not on Stanley's or Stella's. Responded to with a kind of magic, with a kind of truth like she says, of what *should* be true, rather than what is. And so in her strangeness and her desperate need, in her bottomless desire to be seen and cared for by those who should most recognize her, she was finally turned over to the arms of actual strangers for relief.

Of course, Stella *does* care for Blanche. She is there for what - seven months? Seven months in that small little place. Seven months, and don't forget, Stella was pregnant that whole time. I mean really, most of us would've kicked our sister out long before, right?

There's a reason productions of *Streetcar* have gone back and forth over the years between cultivating sympathy for Blanche on the one end and Stanley and Stella on the other. There is not an easy answer in this kind of situation.

No easy answer, but it's a familiar question. It's a question that many of us wrestle with - where to draw the lines with our family members, and the ways they ask us to comply with their needs, the ways they ask us to bend to their point of view, the ways they show up masking their vulnerability in showy displays of bravado that just rubs us the wrong way. And makes it so hard to help them. So hard to recognize our common humanity - despite our being officially in the very same family.

I know the kindness of strangers we truly do not know may be the more common theme in religious circles. But I think in real life, how to show and receive kindness from the stranger we *do* know, is way more complicated, and often way more heartbreaking.

I think it can actually be easier to find a generic sense of our common humanity when you *don't* know someone's story. When they just appear before you as superficially different, but you don't yet know the particulars of their story. I mean, the good, and the bad of it. Their temptations, and their tendencies. Their demons. The kinds of things you get to know in long-term friendship. The kinds of things you almost always know in families. The kinds of things that can make you squirm, that make you certain more of humanity's utter separateness than our inherent unity. Yes, this is the kind of stranger that's the real challenge.

When the truth finally comes out for Blanche. When the mask falls - for Mitch, for Stella, for Blanche herself. She confesses that before coming to her sister's, she had sought solace in the arms of strangers. It was all she could do. With that much vulnerability, and brokenness, she could only manage to seek superficial comfort from those who did not know her, rather than facing up to the possibility of being unrecognized and turned away by those who know her best. It's so much easier to accept being the stranger amongst those who do not know how strange you really are.

Blanche's story, our own stories remind us: Strangers are everywhere. We need not go world traveling to find them. Look beside you, there's one. Look inside your own heart. Maybe there's one, too.

The moral encounter with the stranger, then - that is, the moral encounter with any other person, is to first recognize, to see and accept the ways we are different. Building real relationship in the midst of all this strangeness, requires we dig deep for these differences and hold them up to the light with praise, bearing witness to the surprising kaleidoscope of human radiance, in all its great variation.

And, our moral encounter with the stranger asks us to go beyond the most basic of differences. Into the deeper core. And there, we come to realize just how limited we truly are. How limited our perspectives are. How limited our knowledge is. The moral imperative is to be lovingly, astoundingly, amazed. We are more provincial than we can ever realize. Which is terribly humbling, isn't it?

Perhaps the encounter with the stranger still doesn't sound all that enticing. It's probably even worse now, I've drawn attention to just how different every single one of us is. How much strangeness there really is.

So then, it must be time for the kindness.

The great fourteenth century Christian mystic, Catherine of Siena, had a theory.² Wondering at why it is God gives each person such different gifts, why it is we are all so very different, she finally figured it out.

It was to make sure we were all dependent on one another. To make sure we'd all need each other.

Because that would be the only way we would remember that we were all one.

Different, strange, just plain weird to each other. Abrasive, or alienating. Exotic or enticing. On the side of the road. In our own families. Everywhere, everyday, these strange, beautiful opportunities to remember - we are strangers, so that we can know, how much we need each other. We are all different, so that we will always remember, we are all the same.

May it be so, amen.

² From Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue*. She wouldn't agree that it was her "theory," despite my phrasing it that way. She voiced this as God's words, directly. In *The Dialogue*, God says God gave humans diverse virtues in order to make them dependent on one another.