

Keeping Faith with God the Stranger

Jeremiah 2: 4-13 Hebrews 13: 1-8

My neighbors across the street are interesting. They tend to be poor, although the man in the house is reputed to have a good job. I think the woman of the house does some day care and may have foster kids, too, in addition to her own children. Kids come and go at a fairly brisk pace with changes on a monthly basis, it seems. A couple of older women help out during the day ferrying kids to activities.

One of them is “Grandma” who invariably has car troubles. A little boy will show up at my house and ask if I can help Grandma. The kids are depending on Grandma to shuttle them to their activities, so I go over to see what I can do. Usually it’s a tire change or a battery jump. She drives a different vehicle every few months until I suppose it dies, often taking up residence in the front yard which typically has several hulks parked there. Currently she’s driving a beast of a vehicle, like an old Chevy Tahoe. By Friday, I had already jumpstarted that tank twice last week.

On Friday, I had come home from getting car tags renewed. Before I could get out of my car, the little boy was at my window. Grandma needed help. I had planned to try making a late afternoon visit to Marjorie, but I figured this would only take a minute to jump yet again. Wrong.

I hooked up the cables and the engine cranked nicely but no start. We tried that several times. Had this battery – yes, the same one I had been jumpstarting all week and had not been replaced – finally given up the ghost? I told her to pump the gas while cranking which I could see her doing, but it still wouldn’t turn over.

Then she volunteered that she had put a dollar’s worth of gas in this beast and driven to town and back to the Shores. Did I think she might be out of gas? Sniffing the carburetor, I could smell no hint of unburned gas. Let’s see, a dollar’s worth of gas would be about a half-gallon at best. If that battleship got 15 miles per gallon, then it was a miracle she had made it back to the house. She may have been telling a tale about how much gas she had put in the tank, but the fact remained that she seemed to be out of gas and the kid was looking worried. He had his Saints jersey on and was looking forward to pee-wee football practice. I’d imagine the coach must be used to him showing up late.

I asked Grandma if she knew if there was a gas can around. Sure enough, she had a small container buried under several wardrobes’ worth of clothes in the back. I had a much larger container in my garage which I never use. It had about a gallon or so of several year old gas in it. I put the old gas in her small container and took my larger container to the gas station, came back, and put several gallons in her tank. Now the jump worked just fine. I gave her my bigger container and sent them on their way. By then, it was after four o’clock and I was drenched in sweat. Marjorie’s visit would have to wait.

My neighbors live a very different life from me. We don't know each other's names, yet I know my other neighbors' names. These neighbors may not be as poor as they seem, but they're living in that poverty mindset that seems to roll from one crisis to another, from one drama to another, all rather pointlessly. We're friendly enough, but we're still very much strangers, coming from very different experiences of life and living.

Yet everyone comes from a different experience of life and being to some degree, but we don't consider folks strangers once we get to know them better. I can be friendly with inmate students at the prison and they cease to be real strangers to me. I know them by name, and I'm familiar with their stories. I've gotten to know what motivates and what hinders them. I've gotten to know their personalities and their behaviors.

Strangers are, one way or another, those whom we don't really know enough to trust too well. We regard them with a certain degree of suspicion and doubt, and our interactions with them are guarded and reserved as a result. That's sensible. But it's often the case that we can be around people on a fairly frequent or proximate basis, like me with my neighbors, and they still remain strangers to us.

We've talked in recent weeks about the dynamics of the faithful's relationship with God. The prophet Jeremiah rebukes God's people with some sharp words, as prophets do. This is clearly about a broken relationship, and God is the aggrieved party. In essence, God asks why this partnership has been forsaken. No one complained about the Promised Land where their fortunes have prospered. God provided for this people. Fault doesn't lie with God.

But God's people behave like there is no relationship. They've estranged themselves from their God, exchanging the one true God for worthless pretenders. Every leadership rank in society gets condemned for this outcome, for this forsaken relationship:

*The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who handle the law [lawyers and scribes] did not know me;
The rulers transgressed against me;
The prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.*

God has been wronged by the estrangement of the covenantal partner. In forsaking the relationship, God's people have broken faith and will destroy their prosperity: *they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.*

The covenant that created the partnership is torn asunder. For this, God lays the blame squarely on the leadership. The people will suffer because of the faithless and failed nature of their leadership.

Yet, we should also realize that God is the ultimate stranger. We would all likely admit to the unknowable nature of our God. With God as the ultimate stranger, who was God's son, but another who came to be regarded as the stranger as well?

The son, Jesus the stranger, was the inspiration for a movement focused on the promises of God's Kingdom. These followers formed communities and they were regarded often in the beginning as strangers in a community. Their beliefs were at odds with accepted understandings among both Jews *and* Gentiles. In the letters in the New Testament, we read the correspondence from faith leaders who are struggling to cope with the issues that many communities are facing.

We don't read too often from Hebrews. We don't know who wrote it, or if it was really to "the Hebrews," and best guesses say that it was written near the end of the first century. This would be nearly 70 years since Jesus crucifixion and resurrection, and the start of the earliest church

The early church was fully estranged from Judaism by now, so they could count on Jews regarding them with open hostility. The Romans found Christians to be strangers, disloyal to Caesar, having nothing to do with the gods of the empire, and often being among the dregs of society. Christians were a source of imperial disdain and dismay, the target of persecutions, some from the emperor and others from regional and local officials. Living in the empire meant frequent trouble.

In this situation, the soundness of the community was critical, and maintaining its strengths amid hostile conditions was challenging. The writer of Hebrews in the last chapter has some words of exhortation for fellow Christians, knowing that their circumstances are fraught with dangers. It recaps what was said earlier in 10:32-36. That passage begins: *Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a hard struggle in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and other times you stood side-by-side with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.* You'll hear this echoed as the writer brings the letter to a close.

Chapter 13 starts: *Let mutual love continue.* When trials come to the faith community, don't let mutual love get sacrificed amid blaming, acrimony, and self-serving behaviors. Mutual love is their best strength, their solid bond.

There is caution taken with strangers. That's normal, of course, but the community cannot become reactionary and unthinking. *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Hospitality remains the hallmark of the Christian community, but it is a community that is besieged and suspicious. The notion of the church providing sanctuary for those being persecuted by authorities is at the heart of this admonition.

Naturally, the next one concerns those of the faith who are being punished. *Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.* This, too, is the mutuality of love, that the community shares the burden of each one together, and

shares it fully as one body. There are to be no strangers among them. They need to stand together.

Reminders about proper relationships come next, among those who are married, and in regard to money, wealth, and possessions. These items address concerns that can divide the community, break the bonds, and generate divisiveness. Keeping to these maxims of community life through all kinds of troubles will enable them to continue to bear mutual love for another.

From their unity as the body of Christ, they *can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"* The author quotes Psalm 118:6, a verse which begins *In my anguish, I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free.* And then: *The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*

After calling to mind the leaders, the martyrs and witnesses of faith who endured for the sake of the covenant promise of Jesus, the writer posits that one thing is always constant and true: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* We may not know him intimately and personally, being the son who is stranger, of God the stranger, but his constant presence means we're never alone, just as it is with a close friend.

Tough times shared by a whole community can bring it together, revealing its flaws, faults, and failures on one hand, but also demonstrating the community's inherent strength, its compassion and consideration, its mutuality and generosity.

Think about the way Floridians can be when disaster strikes. Most often, it's like our doubts and suspicions of others get set aside, at least briefly. There's the sense that we've **all** been beset by a calamity, and we share the experience. We recognize that we're stronger together, willing to work together, willing to give and even sacrifice for the sake of mutuality. A sense of community gets awakened that takes away the strangers and the strangeness, at least for a while.

This leads us to reflect on God and Jesus. There is no arguing that frankly they're strangers and are characterized by strangeness. They're unlike any we could possibly know, and we can never know them fully. Yes, we raise up their love, grace, and peace, but it's all so different from what we can comprehend, much less practice.

Yet in the strangeness of these divine strangers, we are to keep faith. We had admitted that "Strangers are, one way or another, those whom we don't really know enough to trust too well." With God and Jesus, the usual lack of trust for strangers must be met with faithful trust always. It's an interesting dilemma.

May we keep these thoughts before us as we always seek to keep faith with God, the stranger.