

“TALKING TO STRANGERS”

Matthew 8:5-13; John 4:7-15, 27-30

July 18, 2021

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In an effort to understand more fully what it means to follow Jesus, this summer, we are looking at the things that Jesus said and did as told to us by the four gospels. This morning, I have chosen two stories where Jesus talks to strangers, but they only represent a small sampling of stories where Jesus interacts with people beyond the circle of his faith community.

According to Matthew, while still a very young child, his parents fled with him to Egypt, where they lived as refugees for a number of years. He could not have avoided interactions with Egyptians. Though he wouldn't have had conversation with them, the gospel writers connect him with the Magi who likely came from what is presently Iran, and with Simon, a black man from Cyrene, who carried his cross. He talked with a Samaritan whom he had healed of leprosy. He had an odd conversation with a Canaanite woman from Syria, whose daughter he healed. John tells of some Greeks who wanted to meet him. He shared meals with sinners and tax collectors, spoke with prostitutes. And in today's readings he heals a Roman soldier's servant, and carries on the longest conversation recorded in the gospels with a Samaritan woman who had had five husbands.

When we read Luke's version of the centurion's story, the conversation is carried out with messengers. The centurion never makes an appearance. And we are not surprised that Jesus heals the servant because the crowd has informed him that the centurion was a great friend to the Jews, having provided funds for the building of the local synagogue.

But Matthew either doesn't know that part of the story or doesn't see it as a motivation for Jesus' action. The centurion's generosity doesn't influence Jesus' decision to heal the servant or his words concerning the centurion's faith. In fact there is some suggestion in the text that the centurion understands that Jesus might come into some disrepute if he entered his home. Some scholars speculate that the servant may have been his "partner."

So Jesus may have crossed some social and religious boundaries even in talking to the man. But he goes a step beyond that in lifting up the centurion as the greatest example of faith he has yet seen even in all Israel. What comes of the conversation? The discovery of faith beyond his own faith community!

I've preached quite a bit on the woman at the well, and yet it seems like there's always something new to learn from it. I've taken out the middle part of the conversation in order to see the story more simply. The heavy theology in the text sometimes obscures the basic thrust of the story. Instead of the content of the dialogue, I want us to think about what it means that Jesus is even having this conversation.

He's not supposed to be talking to her. She's a woman. She's a Samaritan. And she's been passed around to various husbands perhaps because she's barren? She's not chasing men. She's being rejected by man after man after man. Why? Because there's something wrong with her. If we had any doubt, when the disciples return, their behavior makes clear that Jesus has violated norms and customs, religious and cultural, in speaking to her. At least for a moment, his reputation is tarnished in the eyes of his disciples.

As I said there's so much to unpack in the conversation, but the question relevant to today's topic is: "What comes of the conversation?" The discovery of faith beyond his own faith community! She goes into the village to tell her neighbors about Jesus; the very same village from which the disciples have just come to gather food. Even before his followers begin to spread the news of Jesus, this woman does so and brings people to him who will themselves become followers. The woman outside the faith community understands who Jesus is and what the appropriate response ought to be. His own disciples do not.

There's another odd story in Matthew's gospel. Jesus is in Syria when a Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter. It's very odd that Matthew describes her this way. Canaanite was archaic. No one used that term anymore. But Matthew wants his readers to know that this woman would have been not just a stranger to Jesus, but an enemy. So he uses the word that describes Israel's ancient enemy.

At first Jesus won't even talk to her, but when she breaks through the protective barrier of his disciples to make her request face to face, he explains that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It is wrong to take the children's bread and serve it to dogs. People are shocked when they read this story because it sounds so unlike Jesus.

Despite his denigrating tone, she persists. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table," she says. Jesus then applauds her faith and heals her daughter. Setting aside the out-of-character conversation, if we ask what comes of it, we get the same answer. The discovery of faith beyond the community of faith.

So what are we, Jesus' followers today, to make of the fact that Jesus talked to strangers? He talked to people who had authority over him. He talked to people who had left the faith. He talked to people who were his enemies. And in each conversation he discovered a deep faith.

I don't see this as a call to become a social butterfly, to become the extrovert I never wanted to be. I do see it as a warning about what happens to the faith community that refuses to cross boundaries. We need strangers to keep growing. The conversation with the LGBTQ community has made the Presbyterian Church richer and more faithful. It has deepened our understanding of what love is and is not. It has opened our eyes and our hearts to faith where we did not expect to find it.

We are discovering faith in our black and brown brothers and sisters. As we listen to stories of their experiences, we deepen our understanding of the things that make for peace, justice and equity.

We are discovering faith in refugees making a home among us after fleeing war, famine and violence in their own country. We might discover faith among those released from prison as they adjust to life on the outside.

If we bothered to listen to the earth, we might even discover faith there. It goes on believing that God will renew it. And God will with or without our help, with or without our presence.

The stories of faithfulness are boundless. But we need to get out of our lanes and go beyond the communities in which we shelter ourselves. We need to talk to strangers.

In fact, we do talk to strangers. According to Malcom Gladwell in his book *Talking to Strangers*, we don't do it very well. When we are in familiar space with people who are like us, we assume that they're telling us the truth, that their interactions are authentic; but when find ourselves in unfamiliar territory with people who present as different to us, we become suspicious. Society is healthier, he claims, when we trust each other. So when law enforcement is trained to approach all encounters with suspicion and politicians demonize their opponents, when the poor are characterized as cheaters and black men seen as threatening; we see encounters between strangers go badly.

When you add to this our presumption that we can assess a person's character by their demeanor and facial expressions, our failure to learn from past experience, and to see people in the context of their experience; we should not be surprised that our communities of concern remain so small.. Gladwell writes, "The first set of mistakes we make with strangers – the default to truth and the illusion of transparency – has to do with our inability to make sense of the stranger as an individual. But on top of those errors we add another, which pushes our problem with strangers into crisis. We do not understand the importance of the *context* in which the stranger is operating" (p.280).

The cultural barriers that existed between Jesus and this woman in Samaria invite him to be suspicious. Instead he observes that she has something to draw water from the well and he is thirsty, so he asks for a drink. When she replies suspiciously by reminding him of the social protocols Jesus should be following, he invites her into a deeper relationship by offering "living water." When she reminds him again about the differences that separate Jews and Samaritans, he acknowledges the context in which they are living, but tells her that it won't always be this way, that it doesn't have to be this way. Just to repeat myself, the result of this conversation: the discovery of faith beyond Jesus' on faith community.

"Strangers are not easy," (p.50) says Gladwell. Jesus shows us that talking to strangers is an essential skill in telling the good news. I would argue that it is crucial if we are to partner with God in shaping our world into the world God intends for all creation. There is

no other way to eliminate the barriers created by racism, sexism, and the host of other “isms” we embrace to maintain that small world in which we are comfortable.

We don't have to be naïve or invite trouble, but most strangers are not dangerous. Most strangers do not wish us harm. And many of those strangers are filled with a deep faith. We might know that if we only talked them. Amen.

Bell, John. *10 things they never told me about Jesus*. GIA Publications, Inc: Chicago, IL, 2009.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know*. Little, Brown and Company: New York, Boston, London. 2019