

# BIBLE REFLECTION

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## Mission Is Ministry with the Stranger

Mission Is Ministry with the Stranger, the Witness Season reflection for July, August, and September, is written by Starr Luteri.

### Introduction

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, Give me a drink. . . The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) (John 4:79)

Most of us learn that life is a matter of looking out for our own interests. In the church, too, we can focus principally on our own interests, whether impelled by fear of survival or by desire to maintain programs that we believe to be faithful expressions of ministry. In today's consumer society, congregations are more apt than ever before to be focused inwardly, shaping their worship and their programs to meet the tastes and desires of potential members. In large churches, taking care of the needs and interests of members takes priority over other issues, because, after all, the members are the church. In many small churches, merely finding the resources to keep the building repaired, heated, and open demands all the energy the congregation can muster. Yet the gospel continually challenges us to consider the interests of those beyond the walls of our own congregations.

The stranger and the outsider help us to define our sense of mission. We often go into the world with set ideas about how we wish to serve others, but the stranger and the outsider challenge us to reconsider our ideas: For the first time, we truly begin to consider what their interest might be, from their own point of view.

But before we consider the strangers viewpoint, we need to be clear about our terms. Exactly what do we mean by the word stranger?

A stranger is any person who is a newcomer, a foreigner, or an alien, or anyone who does not belong to the group.

The word is not necessarily negative, but simply designates someone who is in a place that is not generally recognized as his or her own. The next door neighbor would be a stranger in a discussion that was meant for only family members.

A Presbyterian elder would be a stranger at a Roman Catholic diocese meeting. The Easter bunny would be a stranger at a Christmas party!

In Scripture, the word stranger is sometimes translated sojourner, indicating a person who is passing through a region, visiting, or living there only temporarily. In this sense, migrant farmworkers, traveling evangelists, and wealthy tourists are all sojourners.

Some texts, such as 1 Pet. 1:17; 2:9-12, suggest that as Christians we should all consider ourselves strangers and sojourners in the world. This metaphor is helpful when used to illustrate the idea that the Christians true home is in heaven with God. If we think of ourselves as sojourners on our way to our heavenly home, we might learn empathy and compassion for aliens and immigrants who are living here, far from their familiar homeland.

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## Defining Idolatries

How can the stranger help us to define our mission? First, the stranger compels us to confront our idolatries. If we learn to see ourselves and our actions through the eyes of strangers, we can discover a great deal about ourselves, including what we really believe as opposed to what we say we believe, and what is actually important to us as opposed to what keeps us busy. Second, honest confrontation with the stranger can expose our own limited views of the world. In this process, if we are willing, we may recognize the spirit of God that dwells in each individual, including the stranger. It is not until we consider the other that we really learn to consider the Other, who is God.

## Invisible Strangers

A major focus of the struggle to recognize strangers in our midst is the need to accept the reality that a great many strangers are invisible. We need to wrestle with the historical alienation experienced by strangers and to understand how this invisibility adds to the burden of their alienation.

As we have seen, the strangers in our midst include persons made invisible by historical circumstances native Americans, Hispanics, and African Americans, among others. The invisibility is perpetuated by a written historical record, authored by the dominant culture and distorted in its own favor. For example, little recognition or awareness has been given to the contributions to our society over several hundred years by freed blacks, or blacks of free issue who were never slaves. Contributions by slaves are even more invisible; for example, many quilts and needlework pieces of exquisite artistry, now treasured in museums, were often stitched by the slaves of wealthy Southern women. Their names were not recorded and so their accomplishments are ignored.

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Castes of strangers are created when those who define values for society religious and political leaders, scholars, and others maintain a conspiracy of silence. Such a conspiracy may lie beneath the conscious awareness of society, but it exists nonetheless. When those who define values fail to speak out against bigotry or choose not to become advocates of justice, entire groups of people can be marginalized and alienated. These persons become the strangers in our midst, and the fears or prejudices or personal interests that cause their exclusion are the idols of our culture.

## Strangers in the Shadows

In addition to minority racial and ethnic groups, other persons are rejected by our society for various reasons. As illustrated in Lev. 21:16-23 and Deut. 23.2, many prejudices against individuals have been perpetuated by religious traditions. Much of this rejection is rooted in ancient fears of deformity and illness, concern about passing flaws through generations, or ignorance about the causes of birth defects and an illness. When a community believed that a blemish or illness was caused by evil spirits, it made sense to bar the victim from sacred spaces and from significant social functions because one could not know what the demon might do or who might be stricken next. Consequently, individuals who were physically or mentally different became strangers in the community. In the same manner, other deviations from the norm were not accepted and continue to be not accepted by the community.

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Through our history, other persons have been treated as strangers on the basis of social customs and laws of legitimacy and inheritance. If the Deuteronomic standard of ten generations were enforced without leniency or forgiveness, it is difficult to imagine how the assembly of the Lord could have survived more than a few centuries.

Our modern society has unique methods of rejecting individuals and creating strangers. An example that is so widespread that it is rarely even recognized as an injustice is the rejection of heavy persons. Individuals, and women in particular, who do not measure up to society's standard of slenderness are treated as inferior, misshapen, ill, undisciplined, and undesirable. Large women are almost never seen in films, television, or print except in the before photos of weight loss advertisements.

People who are physically or mentally impaired represent such a group of outsiders who have made significant progress in becoming visible and have insisted that they be included in the mainstream of society. One step toward an end to their invisibility has been the inclusion of characters with physical disabilities in television programs and commercials. Another important step has been provision of handicapped access in public buildings.

The message of the gospel is that we are no longer strangers. Physical deformities (real or defined by fashion), sexual differences, economic or social status are not legitimate reasons for excluding anyone from the community of faith, or for reshaping the message of mission. Old fears and rejections of people who are not like us need to change.

## Seeing Through the Eyes of Strangers

In the name of mission, we can become all too narrow-minded, focusing on maintaining existing programs and institutions and forgetting the reasons those programs and institutions exist. If the organization of the church, or a certain local church building, or a specific church tradition has become important in itself instead of being valued for the service it provides, that organization or building or tradition has become an idol. We can also confuse the teachings of Jesus with the expectations and standards of society and culture, so those things may also become idols. We need others, especially the stranger, to awaken us to the narrowness of our perspectives and to help us distinguish between what is truly of God and what is merely an expression of our Western culture.

Among the strangers who can enlighten us to the peculiarities of our own culture are immigrants from other nations. Immigrants coming to North America face painful choices: they can choose to hold on to the religious traditions, language, and ways of their forebears, or they can set those things aside and acculturate, becoming as much as possible like North Americans. For many people, acculturation begins with learning American English. It may involve adopting new styles of dress, new ways of sitting on furniture, and new ways of preparing and eating food. Among the most difficult conflicts experienced by many immigrants is the pressure to relinquish their religious traditions.

## Honest Responses

There are two very different responses to the new waves of immigration. The first is the movement to severely limit or block immigration of people whose race and ways differ from that of the traditional Euro-American Western culture. Closely related to this reaction is the attitude that would accept a few non-European newcomers, but only if they quickly merge into the great melting pot, discarding their old ways and becoming acculturated as quickly as possible. From this perspective, mission outreach to immigrants would be aimed at making newcomers as much like us as possible.

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The other response regards the diversity of cultures, languages, religions, and races as a marvelous advantage and would welcome Asians, Hispanics, and others to their country. This attitude celebrates every opportunity to learn from cultures and expects Western culture to be enlarged and enriched

by the contributions of newcomers. From this second perspective, mission outreach to immigrants would communicate the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ and would encourage newcomers to incorporate that gospel in whatever ways are meaningful to them.

## Expanding Mission Perspective

A fascinating incident in Jesus' own ministry reflects this same spirit-directed expansion of awareness. Matt. 15:21-28 describes an unnamed Canaanite (Syrophenician) woman who comes to Jesus asking for her daughter's healing. Jesus ignores her, but she persists, so he rebukes her with a remark that grates on our own non-Jewish ears: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. . . . It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. But she persists, beyond all reason and propriety (respectable women did not speak with men in public, let alone argue!), declaring, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. At this point, Jesus not only relents and heals her child, but also commends her faith (see also Luke 18:18).

What has happened in this passage? Like Moses pleading with Yahweh for the debauched Hebrews at the foot of Mount Sinai (Ex. 32:11-14), the Canaanite mother refused to give up until she had changed the mind of Christ. In what seemed to be a reversal of power, Jesus realized that his mission extended further than he had expected. Where he had previously seen a Gentile, a stranger, a person not quite human and not eligible to receive the grace of God, Jesus suddenly saw a person of faith. His community transcended the racial border separating Jew from Gentile. (See also Luke 7:110.)

Another barrier is transcended in John 4:7-30. The division between Samaritans and Jews was both racial and historical, dating to the time of Ezra and the return of the Jews from captivity. While the Samaritans claimed to be true native Jews who were either never displaced or had been repatriated at some earlier time, the later returnees claimed the Samaritans were foreign colonists with no true understanding of Jewish tradition or worship. Through his conversation with the Samaritan woman and the following events, Jesus made it clear that God's community of faith included both Samaritan and Jew.

Both of these incidents illustrate the breaking of yet another barrier, that of gender. Jesus did not hesitate to speak publicly with women, to teach women (Luke 10:38-42), or even to entrust the preaching of the gospel to women (John 4:28-30, 20:17). Indeed, his conversation with the unmarried woman at the well eliminated marital status as a condition of divine acceptance. In a culture in which women were rarely educated, could not own property legally, could not enter the sacred courts of the Temple, and could not even give testimony in civil court, Jesus' behavior was incomprehensible (see John 4:27). The startling nature of Jesus' acceptance of women can easily be overlooked because of our unfamiliarity with first-century customs.

What do these examples of Jesus' behavior mean for mission outreach? They certainly mean that we should expect our limitations to be challenged. Whenever we try to determine who is and who is not worthy of receiving mission assistance or who is or who is not qualified to represent Christ in outreach ministry, we can expect the Holy Spirit to utterly demolish our boundaries. These passages ought also to serve as warnings to us that as we step out to minister in the name of Jesus, we can never really know what might happen.

## The Great Reversal

God has shown strength with God's arm;  
God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
(Luke 1:51-53)

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the world.

These verses are taken from the passage known as Mary's Magnificat. It echoes Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2:18, which proclaims the reversal of the normal social and economic order when the powerful and the powerless will change positions.

The same themes are found in Jesus' own proclamation of his ministry in Luke 4:18-19 when he reads from the text of Isaiah. Clearly, the mission of Jesus involves the reversal of the expected order of the world.

Both of these passages point toward the expected reign of God. It is striking that both quotations in Luke speak of grace and healing without including the vengeance so clearly stated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Mary's song resembles Hannah's in extolling the greatness of God and declaring the lifting up of the poor, but unlike Hannah, Mary does not deride her enemies. Instead of killing and shattering the proud, Mary's God merely sends them away empty. Jesus pointedly closed the scroll before reading Isa. 61:2b. God's grace and mercy toward the poor and God's willingness to forgive and restore have supplanted God's vengeance.

This theme of God's liberating compassion must be the motivation for all mission. It is this vision of God's reign, which is so radically inclusive that it is always on the verge of the scandalous, that we are called to proclaim. It cannot be weighted down with distractions concerning any particular society's culture or any certain denominations' doctrine. It must be simple and direct and accessible to every person without exception. Anything else is less than the truth.