

Welcoming the Wandering Soul

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Luke 10:1-11

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I went to Germany when I was nineteen. It was the first time traveling alone and I did not know the language very well. Sure, I had studied it for four years in high school, but that hardly prepared me for what I experienced when I arrived in Frankfurt. I had not prepared in anyway and just thought I would find people who spoke English, or everything would be also posted in English. My world view was narrow and unchallenged. Yes, I am sad to admit I was the stupid and arrogant American your mother warned you about.

I was not going as a tourist, but to check out a calling to the ministry I was exploring. I took some of the inheritance money from my father's death to travel to Germany for three months to live in Germany and volunteer with a mission church. I didn't see myself as a tourist so didn't really take the time to read any travel guide books to help me out.

In those three months I experienced everyday life in a small town called Wesel. A town of about 50,000 people near the Holland boarder. I traveled a little and met many new friends. Unlike, moving to Grand Rapids, I knew at least knew a dozen or so people from the church already when some came to Minneapolis on another trip. I assumed because of my German heritage that it would not be a drastic difference from being in Minnesota. Boy was I wrong.

If you have ever lived somewhere for an extended length of time you learn and grow from the experience. You learn the language, the customs and overtime it may feel a bit like home. My German did not improve immensely those first three months, my friends still teased me that I sounded like I had a mouth full of chewing gum when I

spoke. I relied too much on my English-speaking friends to help me keep up. But it was a real growing and learning experience for me and my German hosts.

Either way, travelling in a foreign country is a growing and humbling experience that I encourage everyone to do. Stretch yourself, go outside your comfort zone and learn to cherish the different ways of living in the world and even understanding the world around us in different ways.

But really you don't need to spend thousands of dollars to go half-way around the world to experience another culture or language. One of the things I love most about Grand Rapids is the diverse population here. One of the principles that Amy and I live by is to support small local businesses especially owned by people of color, black or women. So, I frequent a lot of places where I will likely hear other languages spoken or I am one of the only white people in the place. What I have found time and time again is how friendly and supportive people are compared to the big box stores or national chain counterparts.

Taking time to be a learner, to not be the center of things and to be a guest in another person's home or neighborhood is a humbling experience. I wonder if that is what Jesus was teaching the disciples about when he sent them out to other towns. Jesus did this in both Samaritan and Judean or Jewish areas. He sent them out without extra supplies, so they were forced to seek help and generosity from others. When you need the help of others you quickly find out who is caring and generous and who is not. Jesus encouraged the disciples to focus on the welcoming people and to shake the dust when they experienced rejection. Good advice.

To be vulnerable and at the mercy of another is a scary and humbling experience. To stay in a stranger's home, even just for a few days or weeks gives one a deeper appreciation of the host and their culture. You see if they are struggling, how kind or difficult life has been to them. You may see below the surface of the people you stay

with and hear their deeper selves hopefully. You share food and discuss the issues of the day and hear maybe a different way of understanding issues and current affairs.

Jesus intentionally sent his disciples into new, uncomfortable situations to have them meet new people and understand the other side of hospitality. This showed them the blessing and possible risks that comes when welcoming the stranger. Being humble and dependent on others also helps us let down our pretentious guard and hopefully break down some of the barriers and prejudices that can develop over time.

Consider who the disciples were – many of them came from the Galilee area and were probably young, under twenty years old. They may have not been to Jerusalem, they probably had been warned many times not to travel through certain parts of the region. In fact we hear about that in other texts about the animosity between people of Samaria and Judea. Yet we see Jesus sending the disciples into Samaritan towns to prepare the way for Jesus to come. How many of us have had our own prejudices about others torn down because we got to know someone else. We realize that the scary warnings of others were lies and exaggerations. I too hear people warn me not to go on Division street here and yet some of my favorite international grocery stores and even my auto mechanic are located there.

Henri J. M. Nouwen from his book Ministry and Spirituality says "Hospitality is the virtue which allows us to break through the narrowness of our own fears and to open our houses to the stranger, with the intuition that salvation comes to us in the form of a tired traveler. Hospitality makes anxious disciples into powerful witnesses, makes suspicious owners into generous givers, and makes close-minded sectarians into interested recipients of new ideas and insights."

Hospitality for both the traveler and the host is an important virtue that we called to practice. Practice with new neighbors, strangers we meet, the unhoused person asking for help, do more than toss them some change, see if there is more you can do.

This principle also extends to spiritual travelers we may meet. When was the last time you went to a different church, synagogue or mosque? Have you ever been part of a different faith tradition or religion? Do you remember what it was like? Do you remember the feeling of searching for a new spiritual home? When was the last time you brought a person to church? Do you know of someone who hasn't been to church in a long time or was not raised in a religious environment who may be curious?

These are all opportunities to practice hospitality and to exercise kindness, generosity, openness to try and learn new things and to even have your assumptions challenged or even debunked. We see so much of the world, even other Christian communities creating barriers, labeling people as welcome or unwelcome and even good or bad, yet God calls us to receive and offer hospitality and to welcome the stranger, for in so doing we may be welcoming God into our lives.