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THE PLACE OF THE STRANGER - MICHAEL ABMA

Ephesians 2:11-22 and various passages from the Pentateuch

INTRODUCTION

I am the son of immigrants from the Netherlands. When my parents came to Canada, they saw it as a strange land filled with strange people. This shaped the way my parents talked about the Canadians that lived around them. The way my parents talked about the Canadians seemed to be the way the Israelites must have talked about the Canaanites. The Canadians were a different people, a strange people, that one was best to be a bit wary of.

Perhaps because I grew up in a Dutch immigrant enclave, I fell in love with the novels of Chaim Potok. Potok wrote novels about what it was like growing up in a Jewish enclave in New York. In his novels there are lots of tensions between one Jewish group and another, between the Hasidic Jews and the Orthodox Jews (something akin to the tensions in my own upbringing between Christian Reformed and the Canadian Reformed). But when it came to the Gentiles, the goyim, (for my context, read “Canadian”) why, they were to be avoided at all costs.

All these influences, of course, color the way people read the Bible.

I grew up assuming that the Law, the Torah, acted like a fence.

- * it kept the strangers out

- * and it kept God’s holy people in.

To reinforce this view, I looked at how often Israel was warned not to intermarry with the various Canaanites, and thought, “See, you have to beware of strangers.” I read about all those wars against the Canaanites, Amalekites, Midianites, Hittites, and all those other “ites” out there and assumed that the Old Testament’s basic posture toward strangers and aliens was hostile, or at the very least, suspicious.

THE PLACE OF THE STRANGER IN THE TORAH

But lately, as I have been reading the Torah, I have begun to see another current running through its pages. I have begun to see that the Torah did not create a solid wall between the Israelites and the people surrounding them. In fact, there are a number of . . . let’s call them gates, or doors, or openings . . . in the Torah that assumed strangers would be a part of Israel and that assured that these strangers and aliens would be protected, provided for, and even allowed to participate in holy practices. (A good resource for Old Testament material is Johanna W.H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice*. Eerdmans, 2005.)

PROTECTED. I would like to walk through some of these passages with you. We will start in the book of Exodus.

Within chapters 20-23 of Exodus, we have what people call the Book of the Covenant.

What is interesting in this Book of the Covenant is that of all the social regulations that are stipulated, there is only one that is repeated. That is the law regarding the stranger.

It occurs first in Exodus 22:21-24:

“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.”

A form of this law regarding the stranger comes up again in Exodus 23:4-9:

When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free. You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

In both these passages, there is a general principle at play. The principle is this: strangers, aliens, and foreigners are not to be oppressed or abused or taken advantage of. Strangers, aliens, and foreigners are to be treated with kindness, with dignity, and with hospitality. Even if the stranger is an enemy, even if the stranger is someone who hates you, nevertheless, you must treat them with kindness. They had to be protected from injustice. Why? Because Israel knew what it meant to be strangers, to be aliens. They had been strangers in the land of Egypt.

PROVIDED FOR. The Torah not only makes sure the stranger is protected, but it also makes sure the stranger is provided for. This is made clear in Leviticus. Leviticus is a book we often do not visit, but it is a book that outlined how Israel was to be a holy nation. One of the ways Israel was a holy nation was by providing for the poor and the strangers in their midst. Listen to what Leviticus 19:9-10 says:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

It wasn't that the stranger simply had to be provided for and tolerated. No, Israel needed a charitable, loving attitude toward the stranger. Again, this is based on the principle that Israel love aliens or strangers because they themselves were once strangers in Egypt. Again, listen to Leviticus 19: 33-34: When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

ALLOWED TO PARTICIPATE. The book of Numbers tells the story of Israel's hopeful start from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land and then its disappointing refusal to enter that land. The result is Israel wandering in the desert for 40 years. Within this narrative are many clarifications and explanations of the laws given in Exodus and Leviticus. Numbers 9 explains the need for all Israelites to celebrate the Passover. What is striking is that any stranger or alien who wished to participate in Passover, that holiest of observances, was allowed to do so.

Listen to Numbers 9:14:

Any alien residing among you who wishes to keep the Passover to the Lord shall do so according to the statute of the Passover and according to its regulations; you shall have one statute for both the resident alien and the native.

Allowing the aliens or strangers to participate wasn't only with respect to Passover. The stranger was also allowed to bring burnt offerings and grain offerings to the Lord, according to Numbers 15:14-16: An alien who lives with you, or who takes up permanent residence among you, and wishes to offer an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord, shall do as you do. As for the assembly, there shall be for both you and the resident alien a single statute, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you and the alien shall be alike before the Lord. You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance.

This kind of permission for the stranger to fully participate in the life and worship of Israel is found throughout the book of Numbers.

SUMMARY: God's Love for the Stranger

Deuteronomy, which repeats so much of the Law just before Israel enters the Promised Land, again addresses this subject of strangers. Here we have reiterated the principle that Israel must love strangers because they themselves were once strangers in Egypt. But there is another emphasis: Israel was to love the stranger because God himself loved the stranger. Listen to Deuteronomy 10:17

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Contrary to many of my false assumptions, the Law, the Torah, is much more gracious, hospitable, and welcoming of the stranger. The Law protected them, provided for them, and allowed them to participate even in the holy rituals. The Law made room for the stranger and called on Israel to make room for the stranger because 1) God loves the stranger and 2) Israel had to remember that they too were once strangers in Egypt.

NEW TESTAMENT: WE WERE ONCE STRANGERS TOO

In the New Testament there is similar language regarding showing hospitality to the stranger. What was expected of Israel of old is now expected of the Church in the new covenant.

What we as Christians need to see is that where the people of Israel were once strangers and aliens in Egypt, we, the Gentiles, were once aliens, outside of the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of the promise. But now, as Ephesians 2 says so powerfully, through the blood of Christ we have become citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God. Because we were once strangers to Christ ourselves, we are obligated to treat all strangers with love and respect. Like Israel of old, we are obligated to protect them, to provide for them, and to allow them to join with us. We need to love them and welcome them, just as Christ loved and welcomed us (Rom. 15:7).

The New Testament word for this is hospitality.

In Greek it is philoxenia. In typical Greek fashion, this is actually two words put together:

- philos, which means love (remember Philadelphia, city of brotherly love).
- and xenos, which means stranger (xenophobia=fear of strangers).

Hospitality is literally a love of strangers. It is a love so deep that we even see Christ in the face of strangers. (A good resource is Christine Pohl, Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition. Eerdmans, 1999.)

HAVE WE FORGOTTEN THIS CALLING?

I now come to the place in the sermon that asks, “Are we doing this?” Are we showing love to the stranger? We ask this of ourselves, personally. Do I seek out and welcome the stranger? We ask this as a congregation. Is our congregation a hospitable congregation?

We also ask this of ourselves as a society and a nation. Are we as a nation showing love to the stranger? The answer, I am afraid, is unsettling. Anyone who has read the newspaper in the last while knows there is a refugee crisis in Europe today.

Thousands of people are fleeing Syria and Iraq.

Thousands of people are fleeing North Africa.

Life has become so dangerous, they are ready to risk everything to get away.

The numbers are so large, people are calling it a human tsunami.

And what are we doing?

One politician says, “The answer is not for us to increase the number of refugees we take in.”

Another says, “There’s only so much we can do. We have to fix our own country first.”

Is that the proper, is that the Christian response?

But it is not only a question of welcoming the refugee, the alien, the stranger into our country and into our communities. It is also a matter of how we treat the foreigners who already live among us. Our views of those different from us, those from another country or culture, are too often negative. According to a Pew Research Center poll, when asked what one word first comes to mind when thinking about immigrants in the U.S. today, the word “illegal” is offered by more people than any other word. (Noted in Pew Research Center, September 28, 2015.)

Then there are the refugees, the aliens, the undocumented workers who find themselves in prison for one reason or another. The journalist Daniel Zwerdling spent several years investigating the treatment of non-American citizens who found themselves in American prisons. There are more than 200,000 non-citizens arrested and detained each year by the Department of Homeland Security not because of crimes they have committed but mainly because of immigration violations. In his report, Zwerdling documents handcuffed detainees being attacked by guard dogs. He documents handcuffed detainees being beaten by guards. This is not happening in simply a “bad” prison here and there. It is happening in prisons throughout the country. Zwerdling describes these abuses of detainees, then notes that these detainees have very little recourse because they are non-citizens. He even mentions a number of detainees who have died while being detained, usually because they were not given the medical attention they needed.

The absolutely disturbing theme of this report is that there seems to be an acceptance that these aliens, these strangers, these non-citizens, can be treated with negligence at best and cruelty at worst because they do not enjoy the same rights as citizens. Again, we, as Christians, have been remarkably quiet, embarrassingly quiet, sinfully quiet, in light of these horrendous actions.

IT COULD BE, SHOULD BE, DIFFERENT

Must it be this way? Does a post-9/11 world mean we must be mean to strangers? It could be different. It should be different. There was a time when we treated prisoners, even enemy prisoners, with dignity and respect. At the end of the Second World War, Belgium and England and Scotland were full of German prisoner of war camps. What is remarkable is how many of these German prisoners were treated. People from surrounding churches would bring them Bibles, begin Bible studies, and even bring in some of their own rationed food to help feed these hungry German prisoners of war. (For an example of this type of hospitality to POWs, see Gregory Jones, "Welcoming the Stranger" in *Christian Century*, January 19, 2000 and also "A Collection of Memories of the Algona, Iowa, Prisoner of War Camp, 1943-1945," compiled by Wes H. Bartlett.)

One of the most prominent theologians of the twentieth century was once a German prisoner of war. His name is Jurgen Moltmann. He lived through the Second World War. He fought for Hitler's Nazi army. He was captured, I believe near the Dutch city of Arnhem, and spent several years in various prisoner of war camps. At the time he was not a Christian. But two things changed his life forever.

A kindly army chaplain gave him a Bible while in a prison camp. He writes that at the time he would have preferred cigarettes. But he read the psalms and the gospels, and he came to see Jesus as his divine brother, who suffered in order to bring prisoners like himself the astonishing hope of the resurrection.

The second thing that changed him forever was the kindness of church people. They treated him and the other German prisoners with a hospitality that shamed him profoundly. There were no reproaches, no accusations, no humiliations. They simply treated the prisoners with the dignity of fellow human beings who deserved kindness and forgiveness. Moltmann was so moved and so changed that in one of his letters back home to Germany, he confessed that he had begun to see his whole imprisonment experience as a great church-going.

What has happened to us in the last 60 years?

How could a prison for foreign enemies 60 years ago be compared to going to church?

Why is it that now our prisons for foreign enemies are compared to being in hell? Have we forgotten who we are?

Have we forgotten that in Jesus Christ, God turned the light of his face on us strangers so that we might be welcomed as his children, members of his family?

Have we so forgotten our place that we have forgotten the place the stranger has among us?

What can we say except Kyrie Eleison—Lord, have mercy.

Amen.