

Luke 24:13-35

Think for a moment about a time you were blessed by the help or even the simple kindness of a stranger. I immediately think of one afternoon when I was in St. Louis and had been in such a rush to get where I was going that I failed to get gas and ran out right in the middle of the freeway as I was moving onto a ramp between highways. I pulled to the side but there was only half a shoulder, so I was blocking one of the lanes. I was terrified and realized it wasn't safe for me to be in or with my car or near it or even to walk farther down the ramp and cross lanes. I was so mad at myself for my stupidity. Car after car after car whizzed by me – some honking angrily. I was standing outside and scared, trying to figure out what to do – trying to call for help - when suddenly a young black woman pulled up and yelled, "Quick get inside my car and I'll help you!" She stopped – putting herself at risk of the fast traffic driving near us – and I jumped in and she drove me to a nearby gas station. She was kind, sympathetic and even commiserated with me about how terrible it is to run out gas. I thanked her profusely – and I will never forget the kindness of that stranger – whoever she was. God bless her!

In our culture we tend to be rather afraid of strangers. The term "stranger" has even become almost synonymous with something sinister. We teach our children never to talk to strangers and we often follow that advice ourselves. There is, of course, some wisdom to this concept, particularly in regard to small children, but I believe that we've taken it way, way too far. And in fact, maybe you've noticed that since COVID things have become really strained. Even the modest interactions I used to have with strangers seem to be missing now. My fiancé, Mark, who is a professor of Communications, often describes how concerning this is and says that "These little polite interactions between strangers is at the very foundation of civilized cultures." It has made me really re-think how I interact with strangers – am I pausing to smile or greet or thank them? Do I acknowledge the stranger that waits for me in traffic or lets me in? Do I wave to thank them? Do

I speak kindly and cordially with those who wait on me or serve me in some way or who are waiting in line near me? And, taking it a step further, do I actually engage in hospitality towards strangers?

We live in an individualistic society where living in relative anonymity has become a way of life. It's easy to ignore strangers because they're...frankly...all around us. And we don't tend to grant a lot of generosity in our thinking or our actions towards strangers. It's easy to ignore them and it's certainly easy to get irritated with them when they get in our way or annoy us. But don't you wonder how many missed opportunities each of us have experienced due to our habit of ignoring the strangers around us?

I will never forget the confession I once read by a serial killer, who said that one morning, as he was preparing to go on a carefully planned killing spree, he went to eat breakfast at a nearby diner. And on that particular morning, the waitress was kind and "smiled at him" and because of this, he decided not to go kill that day after all. That small act of kindness towards a stranger totally changed the destiny of other people's lives. Truly, we never know what our actions, great or small, might do or how they might impact someone else. I once had someone tell me to just assume that any time someone is rude, that they're probably dealing with something awful in their lives- and to just be gracious with them. I know when I'm stressed out or in grief, I am not always pleasant – but I always hope strangers will be gracious to me anyway.

In our Gospel story today, we read about a pivotal encounter between strangers. Two followers of Jesus are walking along the Emmaus Road in a sad and dejected state following Jesus' death. Jesus joins them, but they don't recognize him and are focused instead on their grief. When Jesus asks them about what they're discussing, I think there's a hint of annoyance in Cleopas's answer to him, do you hear it? "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

So, the conversation continues. And this “stranger” proves to be wise and insightful and begins to shed light on the Scriptures about the Messiah and he explains the entire Scriptures to them. But still, they don’t recognize this stranger to be Jesus. And then they do something unexpected -they extend hospitality and invite this stranger to come and share a meal with them. Can you imagine the missed opportunity if they hadn’t made that invitation? Because that meal was transformative. And they suddenly recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. The text says their eyes were “opened” and this Greek word means the opening of one’s mind and even soul. So, it seems that because they were open- their minds and souls open to the stranger – they were provided the opportunity to see Jesus...the risen Lord. And we too are called to have this kind of openness to the other....to the stranger.

So, when a stranger comes along our path, what do we do? Ignore them? Look away? Smile? What if they talk to us? What if they irritate us? What if they’re the person who is slow in front of us at the checkout line or in traffic...how do we respond? What if there’s a stranger in need? Mother Teresa once said that a person in need is actually Jesus in his most distressing disguise. Are our hearts and souls open enough to the stranger to see Jesus?

The Benedictines place hospitality at the forefront of their religious life. In fact, the Rule of St. Benedict states: “Let everyone that comes be received as Christ” ... It emphasizes the preeminent position which hospitality occupies in every Benedictine monastery. When I lived in Thailand, I was always blown away by the incredible hospitality everywhere I went: upon entering a stranger’s home, I was immediately given something to drink and eat, and was treated with the utmost respect. And I’ve often wondered how we can begin to engage strangers in a more hospitable and Christ-like way as followers of Jesus?

There’s a wonderful book called “Praying for Strangers” by River Jordan. River shares about the way she decided to ask God each day to show her one stranger she could pray for. And often she would let the stranger know that they were her “stranger for the day” to receive prayer. Her book is filled with amazing encounters of how these exchanges with strangers could become transformative. One story involved a woman she spotted at a hotel during a book conference at a wine bar. She walked up to the stranger – the woman- and told her that she was her stranger that day and that she felt moved to pray for her. The woman responded to River saying, “How bizarre. How really bizarre. Do you know what today is?” And of course, River didn’t know, and she says, “It’s the forty-fourth birthday of my daughter who just passed away. This is the first birthday I’ve had without her.” They continue to talk but the woman is filled with gratitude and awe and tells River, “I can’t wait to go home and call my other daughters to let them know about this, they’ve been so worried about me that they’ve been calling all day to see if I’m okay.” River reflects on this event and writes, “...tomorrow will be a little brighter, a little less painful for her. ...Our paths cross in this magic, amazing, bittersweet life. If only we knew how important we are to each other. Even as- particularly as- strangers. “

The beauty of hospitality and openness to the other, to the stranger, is that it is not only a blessing to the other, but we too are be blessed by it, just as the followers on the journey to Emmaus were that day. We too will find that as we welcome strangers and begin to pay attention to the strangers around us with kindness and openness, that we are often in the presence of Christ or that God simply wants to widen our vision and see Christ in their eyes. This Easter season, I invite you, all of us, to practice resurrection by seeing the Resurrected Jesus in the eyes of the strangers around us – and to treat them with the kind of charity and kindness that we would have for Jesus himself. And maybe – just maybe – you really will see Jesus. AMEN.