

John's Love Letters: Friends from the Ranks of Strangers

1 John 4:18-21; 3 John 2-8

May 21, 2006

Members of local churches pledge to offer their prayers, presence, gifts, and service on behalf of the ministry of Jesus through the congregation. As an ordained pastor, I am a member of the California-Nevada Annual Conference and am expected to offer my prayers, presence, gifts and service through the Conference ministries. In the past six years my service has been through the Board of Higher Education and Campus Ministry. I volunteered for that board when I served the Merced United Methodist Church. Just prior to my arrival in Merced, it had been chosen as the site for the tenth campus of the University of California. This is the first research university to be built in the 21st century. As one might expect, the community had mixed reactions to the prospect. Some were hostile to the idea of agricultural land being overcome by academia. Others were receptive to the vitality and educational enhancement the university would bring to the Central Valley; thus their hospitality was offered.

Given that the university was coming, I saw the role of the church as providing a safe place away from home where students could find friendship, a listening ear, a supportive presence as they ventured into the real world. United Methodists support over 700 campus ministries at colleges and universities throughout our country. In a world that oftentimes feels overwhelming and threatening to young adults, campus ministries can provide havens of security and hope. At an age when young people are likely to turn away from the church, campus ministries help students in maintaining a connection to God. For three years prior to my coming here, we dreamed and prayed and prepared for the Wesley Foundation Merced. Last fall the university welcomed its first 1,000 undergraduate students and United Methodists have had a quarter-time campus minister present this year to serve the students.

Given my work in campus ministry, I was interested in two articles last week in *The Christian Science Monitor* about Interfaith House at Brown University in Rhode Island.¹ Interfaith House is the residence of 33 students of different faiths, including Hindu, Christian, Judaism, and Islam. The ministry offers students of faith a place of hospitality in the academic world, which can sometimes be hostile to faith. Two women, one an observant Jew and the other an observant Muslim not only live in the same house, but in the same room. Occasionally they even pray at the same time, one facing Jerusalem and the other facing Mecca. They make the effort to attend one

another's religious services and have joined Christian friends for their worship. In our world which is so bitterly torn by religious strife, these young people of faith are showing the world a way to live in harmony, preserving one's own tradition while respecting that of others. They are showing that it is possible for strangers to be friends, for differences not to divide, but rather to enhance our lives.

The letters addressed to the Johannine community indicates that there has been tension between Christians in the community. The author is very direct. Here is Eugene Peterson's translation: "If anyone boasts, 'I love God,' and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both."²

The elder is saying that the vertical dimension of loving God is unstable and unbalanced without the horizontal dimension of loving our neighbors. Love is incompatible with hate. Indifference toward others indicates that our love is not perfect or fully mature. Unfortunately many Christians have still not learned this lesson. Some who claim the name of Christ are malicious in word and deed to non-Christian and even to other Christians. Most of us are still on the journey to perfection, but there is no excuse for the blatant hostility toward others which seems to be so acceptable in our society. The author of John's letters never advocates returning hate for hate, no matter how harmful the hate aimed at his readers. Jesus calls his disciples to walk the higher way, the way of love, the way of truth.

The third letter of John encourages the Johannine community to offer hospitality to Christian missionaries from other communities. They are to be received as members of the extended Christian family. Their work on behalf of Christ even entitles these strangers to generous financial support. As the hosts embrace these strangers with hospitality, they will become co-workers with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Mutual respect and collegial relationships is what God expects of those who bear the name of Jesus Christ. Any hostility is to be converted into hospitality.

How do we move from hostility to hospitality in a society where we don't even know our neighbors? How can we make strangers into friends when we are so busy taking care of ourselves that we don't take time to care for others? How can we transform enemies into guests when we are so fearful of those who are different from us? In this world of strangers, the reality is that we are all searching for a place of hospitality where life can be lived without fear and where genuine community can be found. We all have

a common desire for safety and meaningful relationships; would that we could recognize our common goal and collaborate toward meeting the needs of the world.

Hospitality begins with an attitude, or perhaps an attitude adjustment. Welton Gaddy, President of the Interfaith Alliance, says “Most of us tend to make who we are the litmus test by which we judge other people. We establish the experiences of our lives as the standard by which to measure the authenticity of the experiences of others and the acceptability of our lives. By elevating our beliefs and practices to a level of authority that defines orthodoxy and morality, we turn ‘different’ into a moral and spiritual category.”³

I confess that I have too frequently operated from this assumption. When I meet someone who is different from me, my defenses go up. I may initially be skeptical of their ideas and critical of their unfamiliar approaches to issues. When our hearts and minds are immediately filled with prejudices, worries, and jealousies upon meeting the stranger, there is little room for the outsider. Instead of assuming that strangers are potentially dangerous, we need to create a “friendly emptiness” devoid of our own preconceived notions. We become empty in order to listen, to attend to the other, to care for the other, to learn from the other. In this friendly emptiness, we often find our common ground and may even discover a friend.

The attitude of hospitality is a perspective on life that involves an openness to others and receptivity to new relationships. It is a relinquishing of our own limited experience as the criterion by which we evaluate others. Hospitality is an openness of heart and mind to our neighbor.

In addition to an attitude, hospitality is an activity. It is the creation of a free and friendly space where the stranger can reveal her gifts and become our friend. If we spend all our energy building barriers, we will never tear down the fence to build a bench on which to sit and listen to the other. Hospitality is creating a free, friendly, safe environment into which others are invited for the purpose of getting to know them and become friends with them. Such a setting may be a physical place or a personal relationship.

Creation of a safe place for the stranger has been a hallmark of Christianity from its earliest days. Sociologist Rodney Stark notes that Christianity was an urban movement, but those urban areas were dreadful places, filled with social chaos and chronic misery. At the end of the first century Antioch’s population was 150,000 within the city walls or 117 persons per acre. Compare that to New York City today, which has a density of 37 persons per acre

These Greco-Roman cities were not settled places whose inhabitants descended from previous generations. With high infant mortality and brief life expectancy, these cities required immigrant newcomers to maintain their economic output. As a result, the cities were made up of strangers who were well treated by Christians who, again contrary to assumptions, were often anything but poor. Through a variety of ways of caring for newcomers, financially secure Christians hospitably welcomed the newly arrived.

The religious reasons for being inclusive were unique. Their hospitality was based upon the revolutionary principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe. With new kinds of social relationships, Christians provided a response to many urgent urban problems. Welcoming the stranger has been inbred in Christianity since its beginning.⁴

My prayer and hope is that this and every church of Jesus Christ is a safe place where people can come to explore the questions of faith, to practice living the Christian life, to find models of faithful discipleship, and to be challenged to express Christ's love in the world. I pray that our hearts and our homes would even be so wide as to listen to, seek to understand, learn from, and befriend persons of other faiths and cultures. That's the Christian tradition of hospitality. That is the calling of Jesus Christ, who was welcoming of saint and sinner, of insider and outcast.

I began telling you of my ministry in campus ministry, which has now led me into a new leadership role in higher education. Yesterday I participated in commencement at the University of the Pacific, my alma mater, as a member of the Board of Regents. I am a symbolic representative of the Methodist pastors who founded the university in 1851. Earlier I mentioned the hostility persons of faith might feel in the world of academia. I wondered how my position might be received by business and academic leaders. I have been astounded by the hospitality with which I have been greeted by the university administration, faculty, and fellow regents. With every new meeting or event I have attended, someone has been present to greet me with a gracious welcome. A wealth of information has been provided to assist me in learning about my role. Already the unique gifts that I bring are being sought out. I've felt warmly welcomed and valued in the university community.

I pray that every person who comes on this campus, whether they come to worship or to sing or to learn English as a second language or to a Futures Explored program, might feel a warm welcome and a genuine sense of hospitality. May all who come to learn or seek or pray or grow might find the resources they need for their journey. May all who embark upon this

holy ground might feel valued for who they are. May this be a place of hospitality and our hearts places of prayer for all God's people. Amen.

Creator of the human family and the web of nature, we lift our voices in praise to you for the fascinating display of creatures you have crafted. We applaud your vision for an interdependent connection among all of life, for all have gifts to offer and all have needs to be met. We stand amazed at the wondrous beauty and creativity with which you have fashioned your world. We are grateful beneficiaries of your gift of life and your awesome works. Receive our gratitude and praise, O God.

Receive our sorrow, as well, for the things that we have done and the things that we have left undone which have damaged our human family and your natural world. Too often in our ignorance we have not cared appropriate for one another. In our greed, we have taken advantage of the weak and vulnerable. Sometimes we have hurt, even killed, those whom we feared. Forgive our foolish acts which have harmed your human family and pierced your heart, O Loving Father. Stretch our hearts so that we may love as you love, without boundaries, without condition, with a motherly love that seeks the full potential of each and every life.

Receive our heartfelt prayers, Source of Love, for those around our world in pain and suffering. We pray for the people of Darfur in Sudan, that their suffering might cease and life be restored. We pray for those rebuilding homes, cities, and emotional well-being following floods in the Gulf Coast and New England. Be present with those who flee from natural disasters in Indonesia. Strengthen those who long for recovery after the great earthquake in Pakistan. Hear our prayers, O God, for the people of your world of every race, creed, and nation.

Anchoring our love in your love, we pray for our families, for healthy relationships among our family members. We lift into your peaceful presence those who feel stressed by caregiving, employment, financial or health concerns. Guide our children and teens through their years of development, planting within them strong values and faith in you.

¹ *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 15 and 16, 2006, p. 20.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), p. 2228.

³ C. Welton Gaddy, "Responding to Outsiders: A Spiritual Challenge, A Personal Pilgrimage," *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 2004, p. 20.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), summarized by James F. Keenan, S.J., *The Living Pulpit*, October –December 2004, p. 25.

The Rev. Lori Best Sawdon, Lafayette United Methodist Church, Lafayette, CA