

To Welcome the Stranger  
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
Preached Sunday, February 2, 2025  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: 188 Come, Come, Whoever You Are; #217 We Are Not Our Own; #121 We'll Build a Land. Choir: No Other People's Children, by Elizabeth Alexander. Piano: Deep River, arr. Mark Hayes; Somewhere (There's a Place for Us), by Leonard Bernstein.

Personal Reflection by Dawn and Lu (after the sermon)

Part 1, Readings: Leviticus 19:33-34 and Gospel of Matthew 25:35-40

We haven't heard a reading from the Holy Bible since Christmas Eve, so today I have two, as you can see in the order of service. They are listed there so you can look them up at home and not worry about taking notes right now. But first I have some comments about them.

In spite of what you hear from leaders of Christian White Nationalism, the Bible does *not excuse* the grinding poverty of this nation's economic inequality. The Bible does not endorse repression of the bodily freedom of women, girls, transgender persons, or those with nonbinary identities. Moreover, the Bible has something useful to say about how to treat immigrants, refugees, and seekers of asylum.

Depending on the translation of scripture at hand, when referring to immigrants, the Bible uses the words foreigner, alien, and stranger. The title of the service today is "To welcome the stranger." Hospitality to the stranger is an ancient ethical and spiritual concern. It is rooted in the primary scriptures of Western culture.

The Book of Leviticus is part of the Jewish Torah, and for Christians it is part of the Old Testament. Leviticus includes purity codes and rituals of sacrifice, dietary rules, and ethical commands, which God spoke to the Israelites. Today's reading is from Chapter 19. In the King James Version, it says: "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. *But* the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I *am* the Lord your God." A fairly recent translation of this command is a bit clearer. It reads: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself."

The Christian tradition inherited these concerns. For example, the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews reads: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

And we will give the last word to Jesus Christ. This verse from Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew is part of a vision of the Last Judgment. Jesus foretells that in the last days, he will say this to those who showed mercy to the vulnerable, including to him: "I was a stranger, and you took me in."

Personal Reflection by Dawn and Lu (printed after sermon)

## Part 2, Sermon

The rural town of Bean Blossom lies in the hills of south-central Indiana, where people travel to see colorful trees in the fall and to attend a bluegrass music festival in the summer. Down the road from the music park is a white-painted wooden Protestant church. The glossy black letters on the sign above the door say *Bean Blossom Mennonite Church*, and below that the sign says: *Strangers Expected*. When I go to Indiana to visit relatives and old friends, I enjoy driving by that sign. On Sundays when I'm back home, I'm usually headed to a UU church, but I do hope to visit that Mennonite church one day. After all, they are expecting me, for I'm a stranger to them. I wonder if that's merely an old-fashioned way of saying "Visitors Always Welcome." Perhaps it means this: "If you come in for service, we'll greet you and introduce ourselves. We'll move over in our seats to make space for you. We might steal a glance at you sideways if we've never seen you before. But we will welcome you."

Who knows? Strangers Expected! Perhaps the sign is making a spiritual point about the human condition. Maybe it means: We are all strangers here. All of us. And we are expected to cross the boundaries between ourselves and our neighbors. We are called to connect with one another and to find our common humanity.

The 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew has been a touchstone for Christians involved in works of mercy, compassion, and social justice. In this gospel's version of the Last Judgment, Jesus announces that the nations of people that will be selected for a heavenly reward will be those who have shown compassion to "the least of these, who are my siblings." These words inspire so many people toward acts of generosity and solidarity with the most vulnerable among us, such as people who are hungry, or in prison, or without enough clothing to protect them, or those who are strangers.

Yet it's worth noting that by these words, Jesus is putting himself in the situation of the vulnerable ones. He says: "I was in prison, and you came to visit me. I was a *stranger*, and you took me in." *This* Bible passage does not make Jesus the chief outreach coordinator of social services, it makes him one of the needy ones.

These words represent the vulnerability of being "the stranger." The stranger is one who needs hospitality and kindness, but who can't know if any will be provided.

I think it's important to remember that all of us are both needy *and* capable of helping others in need. We are fragile in various ways, and we have a variety of ways that we can comfort and protect others who are fragile. It's easy to overlook our own vulnerability when we get caught up in helping. Sometimes we jump into meeting others' needs (or meeting what we *decide* are their needs). We may do this as a way of avoiding our feelings of helplessness. It's a way of keeping at bay our sense of being a stranger in the world. But the words of Jesus dignify the person who feels vulnerable or needy. "I was a stranger, and you took me in."

I think most of us have aspects of our lives which make us feel strange, different, needy, and unwelcome. The fear of bringing these aspects out of the shadows can keep us being strangers to ourselves. And when we can't welcome all of who we are, we may feel that others won't welcome us too.

I don't think I'm the only one who has had thoughts like: "I doubt that anybody else could possibly feel the way I do." I had such feelings as a young person. But what cleared them up over the years was getting involved in communities of trust and acceptance. Through this I

have learned what I have in common with others, and I have come to accept what is different about me. It is a relief to *befriend* the stranger *within*.

For those who have been at UUSS for a while, you know that Reverend Lucy and I encourage you to introduce yourself to one person you do not know every time you show up. For those who are new to UUSS, that is what we recommend to you as well. For example: “Hello, in case we haven’t met, my name is Roger.” To be sure, doing this can involve some discomfort. To introduce yourself is to *make yourself* a stranger, and this can bring discomfort. Likewise, it can bring tension to arrive at a place for the first time—this place or any new community. But working through such discomfort can be an opening to a true sense of belonging.

In a sermon at a UU fellowship where I served as minister many years ago, I said that a number of people there had told me that they didn’t fit in at the congregation; they didn’t really feel that they belonged. The reasons for these feelings? Well, they were all over the place. In my sermon I said: “You know, if I could get every person who feels like they don’t quite fit in here, and put them all together in one room, we would have a sizeable congregation.”

Perhaps that is what the sign above the Bean Blossom Church really means: Strangers expected... because we’re all strangers. We’re all vulnerable.

As I see it, one of the purposes of a spiritual community is to be both challenging and safe. First, it challenges you to deepen your life by exploring your own story, your values, and your commitments. At the same time, it promotes a safe space to express who you are, what you think, and what you truly care about. It provides the invitation to us to be open, and it provides acceptance when we are open.

I say that “*it*” provides these things, but in a community, there is no “it.” There’s only *us*: you and me. There is you, plus everyone sitting around you. There is you, plus those who show up on the same Zoom screen or Facebook feed as you. So, as part of a spiritual community, our purpose is to invite others to be present as they are. And we embody that invitation through our own authentic presence, our own vulnerability.

This is part of what it means to say we are “building the beloved community.” We nudge the shadowed parts of ourselves into the light. The common and uncommon features of our identity contribute to our shared humanity. Gradually, we grow into a sense of belonging. At the same time, however, in building the beloved community we cannot forget the ancient call to welcome “the strangers” who literally come from other countries.

In this country, it has been the law that if a foreign person shows up at a border station or other entry point of the United States and applies for asylum, they have to be given due process. The government must give them a hearing and then rule on whether their fear of persecution or violence is a credible one. The last presidential administration did this awkwardly, with a smart phone app that crashed when many desperate people attempted to make appointments, as they were instructed to do. The new administration, however, has halted the asylum process. It is also intending to cancel refugee resettlement programs.

Moreover, our government is looking for undocumented immigrants, whom it seeks to round up, put in detention facilities, and deport. In its zeal, the government is likely to seize holders of permanent resident green cards as well, and even likely to take immigrant American citizens. Not only is all this a waste of taxpayer money. Not only do mass deportations threaten

industries which rely on low-paid and hard-working undocumented immigrants. Not only is it counterproductive; it is also heartless.

Refugees and immigrants with or without legal documents participate in our community, city, and state, and across our whole nation. They include some of our family members and in-laws, our friends and neighbors. They include construction workers and farm workers, and providers of care to children, disabled persons, and the elderly. With or without documents, they include our school children, college students, and medical students. In the Sacramento area, they include people from Afghanistan who served the U.S. military and U.S. government and then had to flee after their country fell to the Taliban. Though they have come from other countries, they are far from strangers anymore.

In the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, divine punishment awaits those who display cruelty and those who do not help the most vulnerable, including the strangers in our midst. In this light, the refusal to consider a plea for asylum is, plainly, sinful. Also sinful is the targeting of people for deportation.

“If a stranger sojourn with thee in your land,” the Bible commands, “ye shall not vex him.” *To vex* means to provoke, afflict, or trouble a person. Presidential statements and executive orders of the past several days have caused confusion and fear among many kinds of people across the land. Chaos and threats by the government are an intentional tactic to wear down our morale. For immigrant families, the result is terrifying.

For the past 10 years, U.S. immigration policy discouraged enforcement agents from intruding upon what are called sensitive locations to arrest immigrants, locations like schools, health care facilities, and houses of worship. These used to be called places of sanctuary. The new administration, however, has revoked that policy.

For nine years, UUSS has had a Refugee Support Team. Its volunteers have helped newcomers to learn English, look for places to live, and navigate bureaucracies of education, health care, and social services. We have looked for immigration attorneys. We have been raising money. We don't do this because the Bible says we must, but personally I find it reassuring to remember that ancient call to welcome the stranger. We do this because we feel our common humanity, we feel for people who have given up everything to build a new life and live in peace. We celebrate people who seek to belong and give back to their new community.

Because of renewed hostility by the US government, we are called now to do even more. Members of our team have been learning about the rights that people have when they are approached by agents of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. We know immigrants who have been law abiding neighbors, patiently waiting for their asylum hearings for two or three years. Now these neighbors are afraid that they will be snatched by ICE agents while they are walking into buildings for asylum hearings or other official appointments.

We are inviting you to help out. You might attend a training session with us. You might consider joining a team to provide accompaniment to people like them. Not only will our presence provide reassurance to them, but we will also be able to bear witness to any encounters with ICE agents. (For example, we have the right to record immigration agent encounters with our smart phones.)

In these times of chaos and cruelty, there is much to learn. And there are many ways to help. After the service, feel free to stop by the Refugee Support table near the front entrance.

You can sign up to learn more about joining a team to provide accompaniment, refuge, legal assistance, a place to stay, or other help. If you don't have time to sign up today, feel free to call me.

The stranger is one who needs hospitality, mercy, kindness, and understanding. We *all* need these gifts, and we all can share them with others. In various ways, we are all strangers, and we are all expected to cross the boundaries between ourselves and our neighbors. We are called to find our common humanity. As members of one human family, we belong together.

We long for everyone to be safe, to be at peace, and to be known and loved as they are, as we are. So may we strive to live, now and in the days to come. Amen.

### Personal Reflections by Dawn and Lu

Dawn: Sometimes there's a hard reality in our lives, and we're faced with a choice, do I rail against that person or that thing, or do I find a way to welcome them in?

I'm in that place when it comes to people who support the current administration – all 77 million of them.

I can't find a way to open my heart to them, to engage with them. And I don't particularly want to. It's not that I wish them ill. I just want nothing to do with them.

My spouse has chosen a different path. And we thought it might be useful to let you hear from someone who is opening a door that I am currently inclined to keep closed.

Lu: Lu spoke without notes, so Roger recommends that you watch their brief, enjoyable, and inspiring presentation on the YouTube recording of the service at this link: <https://www.uuss.org/sermon/to-welcome-the-stranger-within-us-and-among-us/>