

## **Xenophilia**

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
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*Jeremiah 28: 5-9;*

*Ps. 89;*

*Rom. 6: 12-23;*

*Matthew 10: 40-42*

I learned a new word this past week: Xenophilia. For those of you, who, like me, have not run across it before, a clue to its meaning lies in the first line of the gospel reading for this morning, Matthew 10:40: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Here’s a second clue, found in Matthew 25: “Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” Then the righteous will answer him, “...when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger and welcomed you?” And the answer comes back, “...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Welcome — what a potent word for Christian people! I haven’t forgotten about Xenophilia. I’ll get to it. But first —

I am in the midst of a series of happy opportunities to meet with people of Trinity Church, staff and parishioners, who take part in welcoming other people to Trinity Church. Preparing for these meetings has meant delving into Biblical texts on hospitality. Some of the texts — such as the passage from Matthew 25 I have just read in part — call on Christians to practice hospitality in the Name of God. That is why most parishes have so-called “welcome” ministries. Often, though, we overlook what is at the heart of these texts, which is that all acts of true hospitality originate in God’s hospitality. It isn’t that Christians practice hospitality because Jesus tells us to. Although that is reason enough

for some. It is that Christians practice or offer hospitality because we are responding to and reflecting the hospitality that God shows us. In God there is room, space, a mansion as the Gospel of John puts it — for everyone, not just for some. And so whoever welcomes another human being mirrors in this life the eternal welcome God offers to us.

I believe, along with others, that it is the mission of the Church to welcome people, to extend true hospitality — I'm not talking about courtesy, good manners, "politesse" — I am talking about unconditional invitation to anyone who comes near because they mean Christ to us. Not because we need to get our numbers up or our pledges up or our pews filled up ... we may desire deeply that all three of those things come to pass — I certainly do — but in a post-Christian world it's slow going. And not why we offer hospitality. We offer hospitality to everyone because Christ has received us warmly, and we wish to extend that same reception gratefully — after all we are the body of Christ — as though we were welcoming our beloved Lord Christ.

St. Benedict said, "Let everyone who comes to the monastery be received as Christ."

In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Acts of the Apostles a woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God (that is, one who worshiped the God of Israel but who probably was not a Jew) who did not yet know the good news of Jesus was listening to Paul preach that good news. The Lord, the text says, opened her heart to the Gospel, welcomed her into divine love in a new way, in such a way that she desired to be baptized and immediately thereafter Lydia prevailed upon Paul and his companions to stay in her home. She is freed by the gospel to be truly hospitable and so are we. Freed to receive strangers and say, "Won't you stay with us in God's house?"

Speaking of the Acts of the Apostles, William Willimon, in his commentary on Acts writes, "... there is good evidence that early congregations attracted a surprising cross section of first and second century society. Was this because the early church, unlike our churches' all too frequent application of economic determinism to explain everyone's

situation in life, failed to take either a person's poverty or wealth with ultimate seriousness.”

For those early congregations the overriding principal was welcoming one another and the stranger into a community of shared worship, shared praise, shared care for one another and mutual responsibility. Not a bad model, especially since it is a holy one.

Now for xenophilia: in my explorations of the fertile geography of Christian hospitality I ran across the following: There is an abbey somewhere in Austria in which there is an icon from the distant past. The icon depicts an unwalled small town in the background. People are passing through the streets of the town in apparent freedom to go about daily tasks, but also to go and come from the town freely. In the foreground is a table around which several people are gathered for a meal. They are clothed as ordinary people of the day, but around each head at the table is a halo of light — that lights up the whole foreground. The icon is entitled “Xenophilia”, which means friend-love of strangers. Xeno- stranger; philia – friend or brotherly/sisterly love as in Philadelphia. Not eros, or agape or one of the other types of love for each of which the Greek has a separate word, but friend love of stranger. Love of the stranger lights up a community; frees up a community; erases walls and barriers.

Christian thinker Barbara Anderson has said that Christian communities are mission outposts, not family chapels. As mission outposts we eagerly expect newcomers and repeat visitors. We create space for them within our shared space, whether they will be with us for an hour or a day or are going to settle down and become part of us. And if they take up a little more space than expected, then we make room for them — take down the walls of our space and gladly embrace, because we practice xenophilia — love of the stranger.

It is xenophobia, fear of the stranger with which we are much more familiar, isn't it? Such fear more and more holds western culture in its death grip. When my family and I moved to the Washington D.C. area a little short of 13 years ago, one of the first pieces of

advice I was given was, “Do not look people on the street in the eye. You could be mistaken as someone challenging or “dissing” them, and you could get hurt.” And, as we heard from this pulpit only last week suspicion and mistrust of the stranger is something we are taught from a young age — of necessity — so that we can keep ourselves relatively safe.

It is the Church, however, that offers a powerful antidote, perhaps the most powerful antidote to the fear of the stranger. In this particular church, Trinity Church, simply by virtue of our location, we have singular opportunities to welcome strangers as our friends — our brothers and sisters in the love of God in Christ. And remember, we don’t have to confine ourselves to welcoming them in. We can go out to the stranger in welcome.

It is a Biblical value — hospitality or friend love for the stranger; for it mirrors the befriending God has shown people from the Exodus down through our day and will show far down the future’s broadening way. Most especially it mirrors the divine befriending that became flesh in Jesus. Look at the altar, the table of our shared meal. Look at each other and remember that around every head is a halo composed of the light of Christ, who has said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” And remember and practice this wonderful word “Xenophilia,” we are all strangers some time. We are all hosts some time. May our community, the Trinity community, be one without walls in which all can come and go in freedom, in which all of us shine with the light of Christ and in which the stranger is welcomed and loved with brother-sister love in the name of Christ. Amen.