

Rev. Rachel Cornwell
Woodside UMC, July 2nd, 2006
Deuteronomy 10: 12-22

The book I'm a Stranger Here Myself by Bill Bryson is a collection of reflections by this writer/humorist who returned to the US, to Hanover, New Hampshire, after living for 21 years in the UK: "I was as dazzled as any newcomer by the famous ease and convenience of daily life, the giddy abundance of absolutely everything, the boundless friendliness of strangers, the wondrous unfillable vastness of an American basement, the delight of encountering waitresses and other service providers who actually seemed to enjoy their work, the curiously giddy notion that ice is not a luxury item and that rooms can have more than one electrical socket."

Other things that had changed since he left the US were: 1-800 numbers and seemingly obvious warning labels on every consumer product (for example: "Do not reuse as a beverage container" on a bleach bottle!)

And things he had forgotten that he missed: "baseball on the radio, the sound of a screen door slamming, insects that glow, really big snowfalls, Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, Jell-O with stuff in it, the pleasantly comical sight of oneself in shorts..."

What Bryson finds is that coming home to a country from which he has been away a long time (reverse culture shock) is not that different from (culture shock) coming to a place for the first time. Some things are curious, some are down right baffling; some things are new and exciting, others are terrifying; some days feel like a new adventure, some days are tiring and lonesome. I am sure that any of you who have come to live here from another country or have traveled or lived abroad somewhere else know what that feels like.

Cindy Wright was telling me and a few other folks the other day a wonderful story about her most recent trip to West Africa. One day her guide was taking her through a marketplace and she saw the women there carrying things—water and wares and purchases—on their heads. Cindy, who told me that she loves traveling in Africa, decided that she would like to try it. So she did! And the people around her were a bit surprised but also delighted that a stranger wanted to experience their real life.

It can be fun to be a stranger, to try new things and learn about a new culture, especially when the people there are welcoming, but it can be hard and scary, too.

In this passage from Deuteronomy that Marie read for us this morning, Moses reminds the people as they return to their homeland to remember what it feels like to be "a stranger here myself." It is one of the fundamental lessons God wants them to learn. Moses is speaking to the people as their wilderness wandering is coming to an end and they are finally close to entering the promised land. But before their journey is through God wants to remind them what it means to be God's people. And so Moses reminds the people of all that they have learned from their journey: of the 10 Commandments given

to them on Mt. Horeb; of the ‘shema, the foundational prayer of the Hebrew people: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone”; and of their obligation to the strangers—the aliens and foreigners in their midst—that they should welcome them, because they too were once strangers in Egypt. In fact, the texts says “love them”—and offer them basic necessities like food and clothing, because they know how hard it is, how it feels to be on the outside—to not know the culture or the language or the customs. And they also know what it means to be oppressed, exploited, and discriminated against.

Ten years ago I joined a mission program through the UMC called the Mission Intern Program and I spent a year and a half in Okinawa, Japan working with a Christian Peace organization. I went knowing only two phrases in Japanese: “Hello. How are you?” and “Where is the bathroom?” And I knew little about the culture, although the one thing I learned before leaving home was that Japanese people remove their shoes before entering the house (a vital piece of information that I completely forgot the moment I entered my host family’s house for the first time. But my Okinawan hosts were very gracious with me—they allowed me to make mistakes, helped me learn the language and culture, and although I felt like a stuck out like a sore thumb sometimes—after all the word for foreigner in Japanese literally means “outside person,” it was in the end one of the most important and life changing experiences of my life.

As difficult as it can be sometimes to be the stranger, it can also be challenging to be the host—to welcome the stranger into your home—because strangers bring new ways of doing things, unfamiliar customs, language, behaviors, and expectations. To welcome the stranger means that our community will need to adapt and will be changed. That can be a good thing, but it can also be a hard thing, too.

Jesus often got into trouble for it, too—for his radical inclusiveness of all people. For some people (like the Pharisees) the boundaries of the Jewish community was pretty cut and dry. It was clear if you were an insider or an outsider depending on what you ate, how you dressed, what language you spoke, what God you worshipped. In fact, some people were so concerned with keeping the community in tact and the culture and religion pure, the seemed to have forgotten that instruction God gave them way back in the wilderness—love the stranger, because you, too, were once strangers. So when Jesus would go to have dinner at the home of a tax collector or touch a leper in order to heal him or welcome the anointing of a “sinful” woman, the religious folks got pretty upset. If any one was welcome, then what would happen to them, to their unique relationship with God? And welcoming outsiders would certainly lead to change and they didn’t want that. So they rejected Jesus instead.

This morning I once again know what it means to be “a stranger here myself.” Although I have been the co-pastor at another church for the last four years, and doing all those pastorly things like preaching, teaching, marrying, baptizing, making visits, burying, administrating, I know that this is a new community, with a different history, and different culture, new ways of doing things, new faces, names and stories. I am so excited to be here, to be your pastor, but, I have to be honest, I am a little nervous, too.

But Marcus, Nora and I have truly received a warm Woodside welcome. The parsonage committee worked extremely hard—with limited time and funds—and made our new home really beautiful, and we are very grateful. I am thankful to the SPRC for introducing us to the community and for their support and excitement. In fact, everyone that I have met has shared with me their enthusiasm and hopes for our shared ministry here at Woodside. Your hospitality and openness has made us feel that we may be new, but we are welcomed.

And yet, I know that as we get to know each other we may find that there are some differences that need to be worked through. There is a strong culture here—as in any church or community—and I know I will need to learn it and work within it. And there may be things about the culture that we know need to change, but implementing those changes may present challenges.

One piece of advice that I got from a mentor about coming to a new appointment was to be aware that I am the stranger. He cautioned me about leading change in the church and to be sure that it was a change that many people agreed needed to happen, and not to change something just because I felt uncomfortable with something. He said “think of it as being invited into someone’s home, and saying to them, ‘this is a really beautiful room, but you know, that couch would look much better over on that wall. Here—grab an end and we’ll move it.’”

I hope that as we move forward together you will let me know if and when I am just “moving the furniture.” But I also hope that we can work together to rearrange, or even rebuild, where that needs to happen, too.

Eventually I know we are going to grow to love and appreciate to each other and I will no longer be a stranger to you, nor you to me. We will all be changed and adapt and learn to work together. But I hope that the strangers will keep on coming—new people with new ideas and different gifts and new parts of the vision that God has for this church. And I hope that as they come we will keep on welcoming them, loving them, offering hospitality, but also an openness to the changes that God has in store for us through them. I hope that like Jesus we will welcome everyone, even those that some people say should not be allowed in. I hope that we would be so open to welcoming new people, and breaking down the barriers between “insiders” and “outsiders,” and allowing ourselves, our perceptions and community to continue to be changed so that all of us, on some level, might always feel like saying, ‘I’m a stranger here myself.’”

Thanks be to God.