

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Now, the last two weeks have helped us set the stage for our preaching series, *How the Church Loves its Neighbors*. We heard about Philemon and Onesimus and how we had a lot to overcome around culture and norms and all that if we are to become faithful Christians and love each other dramatically, equally, and forgivingly, and that we have to leave the boundaries of our minds in the past if we are to have a future.

We then went on to explore what that future means, that we all get a little out of practice sometimes on whether or not we even remember the promises of God much less can start to think about and do them. We reviewed that God is future oriented, but hope-focused in our present circumstances so that we have the volition to band together in faithful communities for worship and prayer, learning, wisdom, and mutual support.

And so we come to today's scripture which reminds us of how we are God's people, chosen and blessed. And

yet we are reminded that even though we have this close relationship with our creator and those who came before and will come after us, we too were once strangers in need of help from others who might not know God (the Bible uses the term ‘strangers in the land’).

Are neighbors strangers or friends? Both, yes, that’s right, but I can tell you when I first moved to NH in 2004 it took several years to get the currency to move beyond stranger to the ones who lived near me. I invited them to parties, plied them with liquor and stories, and then my wife died and they felt sorry for me and even then it was not an easy thing for them to welcome me, the stranger, the one who bought the house that the builder of the neighborhood and his wife had occupied for 20 years. I was a stranger in the land.

The Bible uses the term “*ger*”, a slight variant of the verb which means “to sojourn as a migrant”. In the Book of Deuteronomy, there are instructions that the *ger* should not be oppressed, just as we would not oppress a widow or orphan. Deuteronomy goes on to say that if we did oppress *ger*, they would cry out to God and God would be pretty upset and answer them, and maybe be

akin to the family avenger who would kill us to make sure we felt the pain of our oppression by giving us a set of widows and orphans for whom to care. Yeah, it says that.

Ouch. OK, God, you have our attention. So let's figure out who these *ger* are so that we don't run afoul of God by ignoring how we practice God's promises, OK?

Strangers, like widows and orphans, lack the kind of family support that can protect them from mistreatment. Migrants, and particularly undocumented ones, fly even closer to the sun and have no safety net because they lack citizenship. So without social support, the *ger* must rely on structures *outside* of the family, and put their trust in the government and institutional structures.

That can be a problem. The Bible doesn't really ever define the word oppress used in this context, but I think we can safely assume it means that rights that are more or less identical to other persons are subsumed, rightly or wrongly, to others who have more status or are more and better known to the community. Widows, orphans, and *ger* can easily, even today, lose their rights and their property to fraudsters and bullies. Hence the warning not to mistreat them you don't want Yahweh to get mad.

But interestingly, there is a link to God's anger and the vulnerable, right? That link is there so that Israel is less motivated by fear of divine judgement and more reminded that God will get involved on an individual level if we don't remember that the *ger* are vulnerable and in need of our empathy.

God uses our past to force us to consider a future for ourselves if we don't treat the migrant stranger well. We might very well become like the Egyptians and act as they did, welcoming the Hebrews for many generations after Joseph saved Egypt from famine, but then enslaving the very people descended from Joseph in the end. We would not be beneficiaries of emancipation of God from Pharoah in that case; we would be villians against which the drama would repeat itself. Over, and over, and over.

Do you see how this works in today's world as we decide who to welcome in our modern times? The Bible doesn't clarify the origins of *ger*. They might be other Israelites from other clans. But most likely they were foreigners from another land. Curiously, too, the Bible doesn't distinguish between poor and non-poor *ger* in their treatment of strangers. But we know folks did, and

do, stay in one place for a long time, and so generating wealth was hard to do in a lifetime much less across generations. Most *ger* would probably have been poor, with little or no opportunity to have a secure place in the economic system because they are wanderers, not members of the tribe, clan, or family. They were not from Townsend. So why are they here?

But just because there are haves and have-nots in the Bible, owners of land and merchants have social obligations. They cannot hoard, they have to give offering and tithes and are expected to share with each other and God freely and joyfully. And once every 50 years all the land is returned to prior owners and debts are wiped out to prevent anyone from getting too far ahead or too far behind, a practice known as Jubilee. Now, there's not evidence the Israelites ever did a jubilee year; that would require the rich to give up too much. But it's there to remind us that justice among us, all of us, irrespective of our origins or social relationships, is something close to the heart of God. And the heart of God is what? Right, love. And we should love...how? Right, love one another as (Christ) has loved us.

I want to remind us of my experience the Sunday before I came to TCC. He was a large man, sweaty from a hot morning when he wandered into our church in Wilton. We had about 10 minutes left in the service when he walked up the aisle and said loudly, "I need some scripture". No one knew who he was. But no one dared question this stranger, this *ger*.

I read him 1 John 4, about how God's love is for everyone and that means the whole world. And I stood with him during the closing hymn and we walked out together and I asked him to wait a few minutes while I did my pastor thing at coffee hour. We got him a little food from the refrigerator and we talked a bit. He had walked from Fitchburg to see his grandmother's grave, and asked if he could have a ride up to the cemetery about 2 miles away because he was tired. His name was Richard, and he asked me where I would be serving next Sunday as he had heard I was leaving for a new call.

I told him Townsend. He bristled. "Townsend! I'm not welcome in Townsend. You got a tough one there." And he proceeded to tell me how he would get called on from all kinds of folks and the cops would come get him.

And they would drop him on the edge of Town each time telling him not to come back unless he had business in Townsend. We are a strange bunch, we Townsendites. Particularly when it comes to the *ger* among us.

I'll leave you with these final thoughts. The scriptures today remind us how we are God's chosen, but that we need to be more mindful of God's grace and mercy before getting too full of ourselves. We are fast losing the social "us" in our modern society, and when that becomes the more primal "me" we forget that we are all in this together. We remember the *ger*, the stranger and neighbor in our midst, because we get caught up all too often in our mindset of law and order, telling ourselves, "Well, Richard is loitering, he broke the law, didn't he?"

But that kind of thinking is entirely unbiblical. The Bible reminds us that Israelite law must serve to protect the vulnerable from the strong. In fact, any just and true nation's laws protect the weak first and foremost, since the "haves" are the incumbents and the *gers* are always playing catch up. Christianity reminds us that strength is not in how much we have, but in our maturity in our

attitude toward others. We show mercy because we were first shown mercy compassionately from God. We ask to forgive sins of others because we were first forgiven freely by God. We cannot fall into legalisms of who is in and how is out, because the biblical *ger* never appears as a hostile problem to the community but a welcome guest reflecting a redeemed people's gratitude.

With whom then do we identify? Do we remember when we were *ger*? If Richard walked into TCC today, 5 years after Townsend took him to the borders, would we have exchanged our hearts of stone for a heart of flesh? What would we do?

Thanks be to God, Amen.