

'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'
 Fourth of July Service at Avondale Lake
 Rev. Thomas Hagood Jr.
 Columbia Presbyterian Church

I remember when my family moved from Central Florida to North Florida when I was about to enter the sixth grade. North Florida was a strange land to me ... I didn't know anyone ... the town was so much smaller than the one I used to live in ... and the people in this new strange land were mostly farmers and cattlemen ... nothing like the city I had left behind.

I can also remember walking into my new sixth grade classroom on that first day of school. I was the new kid ... the stranger ... you might even say an alien ... and every eye in that classroom was sizing me up when I stood in front of all those students as I was introduced by the teacher. It was an awkward time.

You wonder at a moment like that ... will I make any new friends like I used to have? Will the kids like me? You don't even have any idea what the rules of the playground are ... those unique social boundaries well established by the other kids. It's a scary time ...

I can only imagine, though, what it must be like to leave my home country and move to a new country. I wonder ... do you have any idea what it's like to be a stranger in a foreign land? Have you ever set foot on foreign soil and made a new home in the midst of a strange culture ... hearing a language that was hard to understand ... surrounded by people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds with strange customs?

Maybe you personally never experienced that ... but there's a good chance one of your ancestors did. After all ... we are a nation of immigrants ... built by the hands of immigrants ... all poured into this great kettle known as the melting pot of the world.

With that in mind, let us listen to our Gospel lesson from Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31-46. Listen with you heart ... the Lord is speaking to you.

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

³⁵ 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, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?’

³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?’

³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’

⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’”

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

What did the disciples hear? Better yet ... what did you hear? You see, at this point in the gospel of Matthew ... these are actually the last words of instruction from our Savior ... the last thing he teaches the disciples ... you can almost hear Jesus telling us ... “If you didn’t hear anything else I’ve said ... if you’re still scratching your head about what I want you to do in this world ... than at least hear these words: feed the hungry ... give water to the thirsty ... welcome the stranger ... cloth the naked ... visit the imprisoned.

And Christ isn’t just referring to reaching out to help those we know ... such as our neighbors or friends in the church or family members. Christ came into this world not to tell us to enjoy the status quo ... but to shake things up.

It’s great to go through life attending church ... Sunday School ... making that weekly tithe ... serving on a committee ... doing all the stuff that we think is right ... Yes ... it’s good to help those we know when they need help ... but these particular words of Christ actually turn our focus outward ... turning our eyes toward people we really don’t know ... or maybe don’t even want to know.

Because when we truly come to know Christ ... when we really understand what he's telling us to do and to be in this world ... then our faith becomes intimately connected to our awareness about the world around us ... and our eyes are opened ... and we respond, out of God's grace ... in a compassionate way toward those in need ... no matter who they are ... no matter where they come from ... no matter what ... we reach out to the stranger ... the alien ... the refugee.

It's actually quite interesting that on this July 4 ... with our nation embroiled in a heated debate about immigration ... to hear once again the words of John F. Kennedy, in his book, *A Nation of Immigrants*. He writes: "Immigration or rather the British policy of clamping down on immigration, was one of the factors behind the colonial desire for independence.

Restrictive immigration policies constituted one of the charges against King George III expressed in the Declaration of Independence. And in the Constitutional Convention James Madison noted, "That part of America which has encouraged [the immigrants] has advanced most rapidly in population, agriculture and the arts."

Madison was right then ... and he is still is today. Because we truly are ... a nation of immigrants ... thanks be to God!

Now I don't plan on wading into the muddy waters of a political debate ... but rather to remind us ... all of us ... that no matter what side of the immigration issue we might stand ... whether we are Republican or Democrat ... conservative or liberal ... that the words of Jesus Christ still speak to all of us.

There is no doubt that eventually some set of new laws will dictate the process for illegal immigrants in this nation ... but no matter what happens in the halls of Congress or in the state capitals or even in our local governments ... we are still called by our Savior as Christian disciples to reach out to anyone with the love of Christ ... even the stranger ... the refugee.

You see ... There is a new family that will be arriving on the shores of this nation later this month. It is a family that I'm sure would prefer not to be here ... because they love their homeland of Myanmar ... what we used to call Burma. But the political oppression in that country has driven them out and into the safety of a United Nations refugee camp.

They are the Son family from the Ka-Wren (Karen) ethnic group ... a father, aged 64, a mother, 53, a daughter, 19 and three sons, 17, 16, and 13. A family of refugees ... soon to be an American Refugee family ... like so many millions before them ... including our own ancestors.

Through the Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services ... also known as RRISA ... Avondale Patillio United Methodist Church and Columbia Presbyterian Churches are preparing a home for the Son family ... by welcoming these strangers with the love of Christ and by furnishing an apartment for them.

Already many items have been collected and will be placed in their new home ... but we're still looking for more household items. You, too can help ... by contacting the churches for a list of what we still need. After all ... it is Christ who tells us ... "I was a stranger and you welcomed

me.”

If you, like me, can remember what it was like to move to a new city ... and start over ... then remember how hard it must be for the stranger in our land who is far from their homeland. But no matter the distance ... we are still one family of God ... and Jesus Christ calls us to do what we can ... whenever we can ... with whatever we can.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” If you don’t understand anything else ... those words of Christ are pretty clear ... and they certainly must be important ... after all ... they were the last thing Christ told us to do.

I want to share with you how one writer reminds us of what Jesus is calling us to do ... once again ... listen with your heart ...

When I was hungry, you gave Me something to eat,
 When I was thirsty, you gave Me a drink,
 When I was homeless, you opened your doors,
 When I was naked, you gave Me your coat,
 When I was weary, you helped Me find rest,
 When I was anxious, you calmed all My fears,
 When I was little, you taught Me to read,
 When I was lonely, you gave Me your life,
 When in a prison, you came to My cell,
 When on a sick bed, you cared for My needs,
 In a strange country, you made Me feel at home,
 Seeking employment, you found Me a job,
 Hurt in a battle, you bound up My wounds,
 Searching for kindness, you held out your hand,
 When I was black, or brown, yellow or white,
 Mocked and insulted, you carried My cross,
 When I was aged, you bothered to smile,
 When I was restless, you listened and cared,
 You saw Me covered with spittle and blood,
 You knew My features, though grimy with sweat,
 When I was laughed at, you stood by My side,
 When I was happy, you shared in My joy.
 “Morning Glory,” Feb. 19, 1994

Let us pray:

God of the journey, God of the traveler,

We pray for those who leave their homes in search of new beginnings and possibilities, ... may they know your presence with them.

We pray that those who seek to make a home in this country ... may find us welcoming and willing to help them find a path toward citizenship.

We lift to you the Son family as they travel to this country ... may they find the warmth and love of true Christian hospitality.

We pray that our legislators, as they craft new immigration legislation may find the wisdom and courage to enact new policies that do justice for our country and for those who would immigrate here.

And we pray for those who fan the flames of fear and discrimination against the undocumented that they may be touched with your divine compassion.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**