

Sermon on Ephesians 3:1-12 and Matthew 2:1-12**Susan Verbrugge****Blacksburg Presbyterian Church****January 4, 2009**

We adults have all sorts of rules and prohibitions. Sometimes, I feel really sorry for kids around us because we have so many rules. Some of our rules really make sense on the surface without too much thinking about them. Don't touch the hot eye on the stove. Don't run out in front of that car. But, then there are others that are really good rules, but don't really present their purpose very readily. Bedtime is 8:00. Eat your broccoli.

Another of those in the latter category is: don't talk to strangers. It really is a good rule. But, it is a hard one to explain to kids. How do you tell a child that there are people in the world who aren't so nice and might really want to harm someone, especially a child? When you want kids to think the best of people and of the world, how do you say that there is evil among us?

And how would we explain this rule in light of our scriptures today? There are strangers everywhere in these passages. Start with Paul, the one writing the letter to the Ephesians from his jail cell. Paul, himself, is a stranger in the faith. Remember, he was the man who had been persecuting Christians, throwing them in jail, torturing them, killing them, before he had his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Not only is he a newcomer to the faith, now telling the faithful how God would have them live, but he is also talking of strangers here and Christ's love for them. He says that in Christ, the gentiles, the outsiders, the strangers in the faith, have become fellow heirs in the gospel. All have become one body, unified in Christ. Strangers too? Yes, says Paul. Even those who before have been considered outsiders and strangers are now a part of the body of Christ.

And remember, the wisemen in the story from Matthew come from the East, from a place far away. They are strange men from strange lands...probably with different languages, customs, and clothes. They are not Israelites, not Jews, who have been following the faith as descendents of Abraham and Sarah. And yet, it is God, Yahweh, who guides them from the

beginning to the end of their journey. God provides a star for them to recognize and follow. God leads them to Herod who doesn't understand what's happening, but calls his chief priests and scribes to figure it out. The priests direct the wisemen to Bethlehem for they remember a prophecy from the book of Micah. And it seems, although we aren't told, that Mary and Joseph must have welcomed these strange men from strange lands and allowed them into their lives. They certainly don't shield their baby and turn the men away. Upon seeing the baby, the Messiah, the men worship him and give him gifts fit for a king. Then they are warned in a dream from God that they must not go home by way of Herod. Instead they must leave by another way. God guides the strangers. God leads the strangers. God is with the strangers. God tells us profound things through the strangers.

So what does this say of our rule not to talk to or listen to strangers? It seems that God might be telling us otherwise today. Our rule, drummed into our heads from childhood, is turned on its head. It's funny how that happens with Jesus a good deal of the time. Our rules are oftentimes not the way with Jesus. But it sure is hard to let go of those rules we've worked so hard to perfect.

Who are the strangers in our lives who might have something to teach us, to tell us, to show us about how to live as the people of Jesus Christ?

I read a story recently told by an Episcopal priest named Margaret Schwarzer. She recalls a Christmas pageant that she and her twin sister Mary decided to put on when they were four years old. They were playing in the living room when the doorbell rang. The person at the door was a college friend of their big sister who had come to take her on a date. Their mother asked David, the friend, to wait in the living room while she went to get the older sister. Well, to four year olds, any adult will do as a playmate. The young twins quickly pressed David into service. They gave him a blue cocktail dress and made him wrap it around his head to use as a veil, and then they handed him a naked baby doll which served as the baby Jesus. They thought he made the perfect Mary, kneeling in front of the Christmas tree. The girls left the

room to gather their presents and get into costume so they could parade in as the wisemen bringing their gifts to Jesus. Unfortunately for David, the older sister and the mom arrived in the room just before the girls got back. Margaret doesn't remember too much about what followed except that there was profound silence for a few short moments. Then, the twins pushed past the two women and marched in with their gifts to continue the pageant. Needless to say, David and the older sister left soon afterward.

It wasn't until years later that Margaret found out that David was a devout Jew who had vehement feelings against the Christian faith's domination of the American calendar and celebrations. But never, in the whole scene did he breathe a word of opposition to their using him for their pageant. Never did he say anything to dissuade their passion or their desire to carry out their reenactment. A stranger walked in that day and taught Margaret something profound about Christ's hospitality and love.

Margaret says, "It has struck me since then that there is something appropriate in a Christmas pageant containing a conservative Jew's generosity to two little gentile girls. Christ becoming flesh and dwelling among us is at least as preposterous as a Jewish college man dressing up as the Virgin Mary" (*Preaching and Worshiping in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany*, Abingdon Press, 2005, 155). The Jewish young man offered hospitality and graciousness to these two youngsters and maybe even unknowingly revealed Jesus' love and hospitality to them.

So who are the strangers among us that have something to tell us about the Good News? For me, it has been my Hindu college roommate. It has been the story of an encounter my brother had with a homeless woman on the streets of New York. It has been an angry child. It has been a family holding their infant while she died. It has been the writings of a Muslim. It has been the poetry of Rumi. Strangers. Yes, all of them. And all of them with something to say to me about who Jesus Christ is and what it means to be his follower.

Who are the strangers in your life, in our life, who God is bringing to tell us of great Good News? For Jesus Christ has come so that all might have life. Let us welcome the stranger. Let us listen. Let us learn. Let us be changed for the glory of God, and let us, like the wisemen, go home by a different way. Amen.