

Xenophobia and The Church

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, November 26th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 25:31-46

The 2002 film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is of interest to Joy and I, first because it was filmed in Toronto right in our neighbourhood, and secondly, because our son had a bit part in the film. He was one of the guests at the wedding. It is the story of Toula, a young woman in a Greek family struggling to make her own life. What you have to understand is that her father Gus is not just very Greek, but fanatically Greek. Their house is modeled after the Parthenon, (the house can be seen if you travel up Broadview Ave. north of the Danforth). You can't miss it, a large white house complete with Corinthian columns and statues of Greek gods. And the garage door sports a larger-than-life-size Greek flag. Gus believes there are only two kinds of people in the world: Greeks and those who wish they were Greeks! When Toula meets and falls in love with Ian Miller — who is in no way, shape or form Greek, but a nice Anglo-Saxon boy, you can imagine what a stir it causes. Gus is distraught that she doesn't want to marry "a nice Greek boy," but a "xeno." In Gus's own words, "A xeno with long hairs on his head."

The word "xeno" is probably not one you're familiar with. It is the Greek word for "foreigner" or "stranger." It's the source of our word "xenophobia"— which means an irrational aversion to people who are perceived to be different from oneself. In ancient times, to the Greeks everyone who was not Greek was a "xeno." But that's okay, because to the Jews everyone who was not Jewish was a "gentile dog." And everyone who wasn't a Roman was a barbarian. You get the idea: if you're not one of us, then you're less than us.

While we may pride ourselves on being so "modern" and "advanced" in our civilization, I'm afraid that principle of human behavior is still true for a lot of folks. Make that most folks in this country that has become rapidly multicultural over the last 50 years.

One of the fundamental principles of our faith is the inclusion of all people in the community that bears Christ's name and is formed by his work of reconciliation. That's not a modern innovation; St. Paul the Apostle was convinced that it is a major implication of Jesus' death on the cross. We who were alienated and estranged, who were without hope and without God, we who were far away have been brought near and every barrier to our full participation in the household of God has been removed. St. Paul affirms that the cross of Christ means that God's *shalom* — God's peace that brings new life—has been extended to all people, without exceptions, qualifications, or omissions! As we seek ways to help our congregation find new vitality, it seems to me that this view must take center stage. Need I say it again?: having a thriving church is not primarily about strategies and techniques, but about hospitality as the basis of our *quality of life*.

But what we're talking about here isn't covered by the *"Miss Manners Manual"*. The kind of hospitality we're talking about is something the Bible reinforces over and over again — "it is a matter of welcoming, caring for, and befriending the stranger, the poor and needy, the homeless and destitute, the unloved and unlovable, the weird, the disagreeable and the strange." We're not talking about the kind of hospitality that calculates the number of finger sandwiches needed for a reception, but rather a way of life that flows naturally from our experience of God's generous grace and mercy and love extending to others who might not think as do we, or act, or resolve issues as do we. We're talking about a quality of life that makes a congregation a place where God really *lives*.

We live in a world where grace and mercy are foreign concepts. In our world, we're much more comfortable with posting a sign like "No strangers allowed" that reflects the suspicion and fear of our time. But perhaps it is time for us to acknowledge our fear, confront it, and turn that very slogan on its head. "No strangers allowed" means that we refuse to acknowledge the barriers and boundaries that divide our world. "No strangers allowed" means that we acknowledge that the one God loves and accepts all persons through Jesus the Christ, and therefore we do too. "No strangers allowed" means that in the Kingdom of God nobody is a stranger, therefore in this congregation nobody is a stranger. One of the greatest gifts of hospitality we can offer is to invite someone else or help a newcomer feel genuinely welcome so that he or she receives what we have received. The true gift of hospitality is a quality of intentional spiritual welcome and the opening of our church and ourselves to receive others because God has sent them among us. Intentional hospitality continues to ask how we are doing at inviting, welcoming and supporting new people among us and how we can improve.

My favourite seminary professor told us the story about a student who spent a summer working in a Benedictine monastery that was a place of refuge for the poor in a large city. They worked all day handing out food and ministering to other human needs the best they could. As one particular long day was drawing to a close, the student and one of the monks were finally taking care of the last person in line that had come for help. As they were pushing the big oak door closed for the night, they looked out and saw yet one more needy soul shuffling his way up toward the monastery. The tired student looked out at the man shuffling toward them and carelessly swore, "Oh God! Not another one, Jesus Christ!" The monk replied, "Could be, could be. We had better open the door."

When we are living and modeling holy hospitality, it becomes an obvious and compelling hospitality that is alive in this place. And a culture of holy hospitality is noticeable because it stands out, it reaches out, it invites, it welcomes, it waves other in, and it makes a place in the pew and the Boardroom for all people.

The church is a concrete symbol of the Holy Hospitality that invites all people to have a place of belonging. May we continue to share the spiritual gift of Hospitality well in this place. This is the Good News of God this day. Thanks be to God.