

Not so alien

'Three-minute' hospitality provides welcome for strangers

By Jan Johnson September 05, 2008 [Episcopal Life]

I wanted to talk to a friend after the church service, but I remembered the "three-minute guideline" presented at a leadership meeting. For three minutes after the service, we were asked to talk to folks we didn't know. So I looked for newcomers.

I spoke to a man I didn't recognize, but he seemed nervous and put off. Since he hadn't been to church in a long time, I tried to make him feel comfortable, joking about the crowded parking. He seemed more at ease.

At first, I thought the three-minute guideline was superficial. I enjoy deeper friendships – besides, how many folks can we really know anyway? Why make ourselves so uncomfortable?

But after abiding by the three-minute guideline, I saw how it eased me out of my shell and gave me eyes for folks I'd otherwise overlook. In fact, it gave me a new understanding of what it means to have the welcoming heart of Christ with persons the Scripture calls "strangers" or "aliens."

Without such emphasis, it's easy for us to focus on our inner circle of friends. The more different a person is from us, the more we distance ourselves. These "different" people are often those we forget to extend a welcoming hand to, particularly those invisible people who are quieter and less conspicuous. Maybe they differ from others in the congregation in clothing, skin color, language or lifestyle.

But to have the heart of Christ means to be truly present to each person I meet, especially "strangers" God brings across my path. To ignore strangers renders me dead to the possibility that God may use me in that person's life or may speak into my life through this person.

Jesus showed how a welcomer of strangers plays host in a conversation, honoring the other as a guest, even on the guest's home turf. Sitting by a well in the mixed-blood territory of Samaria, Jesus initiated a conversation with an indigenous woman of questionable reputation. Placing her in a power-up position by asking her for help, he took a leap in the dark for this stranger. Would she be courteous to this Jewish man who did not belong in her neighborhood? Would she believe he wanted to drink from a cup she had touched, or would he take it and smash it to bits? Jesus' extraordinary behavior toward those ordinarily excluded shows us that in us-versus-them situations, the them are strangers.

A welcoming spirit is what hospitality is about. We offer a sense of home to others, taking God's invitation to "come to him and make our home with him." We pay attention to them and invite them to unfold themselves.

No doubt Jesus knew how awkward this would be for us, so he gave us this tip: to see him in the eyes of every stranger. "When I was a stranger, you welcomed me."

Imagine Jesus as a refugee and immigrant, fleeing the political persecution of King Herod for the safety of a foreign nation, Egypt. To welcome baby Jesus' family today, we'd need to look not only to our own interests, but also to move outward to care about the interests of other folks.

Why I avoid strangers. Feeling uncomfortable. When two couples who had worked together on a church project for several years needed a break, they were asked to split up and train another couple each. But they refused. They were "too comfortable" in their clique, and so the project died.

Doing what makes us comfortable is often our guiding principle of behavior, forcing us to exclude strangers. Shyness. As a recovering shy person, I battled that three-minute guideline, wondering, But what will I say? But I remembered that others, especially newcomers, feel just as awkward and uncomfortable as I do. So I made a list of possible opening comments to use to start conversations. Then I took a deep breath to rescue these nervous strangers.

Territorial attitudes. When our church began chaining our parking lot on weekdays to keep out the cars of parents who were dropping children off at the adjacent school, I grieved. The school's parking lot was minuscule, and I saw many near-accidents. I mentioned this to church leaders, but they told me they'd just repaved the lot and wanted it kept clean. Finally, our leaders' minds were changed when a church across from another nearby school put up this sign:

Public Parking Welcome - except Sunday 6:30-11:30 a.m. Join us Sunday at 8, 9:30, or 11 a.m.

We're often reluctant to invite the stranger into our world because keeping places neat and clean can become more important than meeting the needs of people, especially strangers.

One way to start looking to the interests of others is to make it easy for newcomers to navigate situations at your church. So many prayer requests and announcements include the words "Everyone knows..." Maps to homes where activities occur aren't drawn up because everyone knows where so-and-so lives. So often I haven't known what and who everyone supposedly knew and have had to ask a lot of questions. I wince to think how many folks are excluded this way.

These experiences have inspired me to do such things as park in the back of the church lot to leave room for visitors and older folks. Newcomers feel strange after years of not attending church. They wonder if they're dressed right. They don't know when to stand in the service. No wonder they might turn around and go home if they can't find a parking place easily.

At its core, welcoming strangers is about dying to self, often in little ways. Such things as parking in the back are no big deal, but they've become concrete ways to train myself to put someone else's needs ahead of mine. We may live in a world where taking the best parking place is the normal thing to do, but as we are nurtured by Christ, we become radically different people -- welcoming ones.