

Stranger Danger!
1 Kings 17:8-24

There was once a town somewhere in the Midwest where there had been a series of teenage suicides, all at a particular railroad crossing. One death seemed to lead to another. Families were grieving. Town and school officials were concerned. Counseling was made available for all students, all teens who asked for help. The city council was meeting to discuss new safety measures. Still, parents were concerned and anxious to do something...something now- that would save the lives of their children. Something that would let all the teens know that they were loved and that they could count on adult support. A few parents began to show up at the railroad crossing after dark. They took turns...and stayed through most of the night. Other parents brought coffee in the morning. The word got out, more parents showed up...a roster was created...fathers and mothers kept watch...night after night...they kept watch...kept a fire burning, became a light in the darkness. They didn't know each other. They were strangers...living in their strange houses...they all felt vulnerable...they all felt helpless. They discovered their common bond as human beings as their pain brought them together.

This story and our Bible story for today stand in sharp contrast with what we are taught as children about "stranger danger." The people we define as strangers can be the ones whose well-being brings about our well-being.

In our Bible story for today we hear about Elijah at the beginning of his ministry. Elijah was a prophet in ancient Israel in the 9th century BCE. He is second in importance after Moses. To give you an idea of his importance, many people around the time of Jesus thought that Jesus himself was Elijah coming back. In fact, in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, we find the two prophets who appear to Jesus are Moses and Elijah. A prophet for ancient Israel was one who brought forth the word of God to the people of Israel. The main role of the prophet in those days was not to foretell the future. Their role was to help provide guidance through God's truth. They were the spokespersons for God. Elijah was not unique because of his call. There were others who were prophets at the same time. But what made Elijah unique was his ability to speak the truth of God to the powerful and corrupt king of Israel at the time, King Ahab. He was willing to risk his life to help guide the people of Israel to a way of justice and peace. What is also amazing about this prophet is that his first prophetic signs were performed not in Israel but in Zarephath near Sidon. In today's world, Sidon is part of southern Lebanon and back then that area was outside of the Jewish kingdom. The irony of this is so amazing to me. One of Israel's greatest prophets goes to a strange land and gives his healing signs to a foreign woman. This is highly unusual. What is also interesting is that this man of God has to rely on the hospitality of a stranger for his own survival. This stranger who is a woman, a widow does not have any resources of her own. In fact, she was gathering sticks to make the last meal for her and her son. This was their last meal before they died of starvation and this is exactly the person to whom God sends Elijah in order to find shelter and survive. How could the prophet believe such a thing? How could the woman invite this stranger to her home when she herself does not have enough food for her own son? What could possibly bring such two strangers together? I believe the answer is trust. Both Elijah and the widow learned to trust in God's wisdom and provision even when it seemed like the craziest thing to do. I think the lesson from the story for us today is about learning to trust in the goodness of God's creation even in the worst of circumstances. But this trust cannot come from our calculations and cultural norms. It has to come from a deep place within us that knows that God's loving care could come to us in what may seem as strange ways. It could come to us through the care of a friend or a stranger, through the love of a family member or the compassion of an acquaintance. The real lesson of this story is that we cannot put any limits on God's love. This translates into a life of deep surrender and trust. It also

translates into a life of risk-taking and of crossing the cultural barriers that separate us from others.

One of the ways we respond to adversity in life is by turning inward. In a time of economic crisis, environmental degradation, and political division, we are often urged to protect our own. Thinking about the common good or thinking about the prosperity of our enemies is deemed as highly impractical or naïve. Even though we follow Jesus and love him, in times of fear or crisis we find it very hard to follow his example. What is interesting is that our Bible story shows that this popular wisdom of turning inward and only protecting our own is really not the way God leads us. In the story of Elijah, King Ahab is married to Jezebel who is really the source of all the evil that was committed by Ahab. Queen Jezebel is from Sidon. It is no coincidence that Elijah is called to do good in Sidon. Sidon is the country of the enemy and it is precisely where God calls Elijah to go and find shelter. Once Elijah was able to cross that enemy line, he actually found a home of love and compassion.

In his book, *Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that "Nowhere is the singularity of biblical ethics more evident than in its treatment of the issue that has proved to be the most difficult in the history of human interaction, namely the problem of the *stranger*, the one who is not like us. Most societies at most times have been suspicious of, and aggressive toward, strangers. This is understandable, even natural. Strangers are non-kin. They come from beyond the tribe. They stand outside the network of reciprocity that creates and sustains communities. That is what makes the Mosaic books unusual in the history of moral thought. As the rabbis noted, the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' but in no fewer than 36 places commands to 'love the stranger.' "

The story of our faith, the story of our ancestors is very clear when it comes to our treatment of the stranger in our midst. But why does God ask such an unreasonable thing out of us? We can understand that Elijah could do such a thing because after all he was a prophet, a man of God. But do we have to follow such a scary teaching? I think at the heart of this teaching is great wisdom because it is about our ability to learn to trust and surrender to God's grace. Deep inside each one of us is the need to belong, the need to connect with others. This is truly who we are. This is truly who we are created to be as children of God. It is in the DNA of our souls. Social divisions, wars, violence against others are truly the works of our false selves. Our true nature is about the grace of God being extended to us and through us unconditionally to those who deserve it and to those who do not deserve it. In his book, *Eternal Echoes*, John O'Donohue notes that, "There is always danger in the stranger. Because we sense this, it usually takes a while before we open to let the stranger in. Strangers circle each other for a good while before familiarity begins to build. Each one of us enters the world as a total stranger. No one had ever seen you before. You came without a name and yet you entered fully into the belonging of your life." This is the wisdom of God in helping us connect with our true nature. Contrary to popular belief, our well-being depends on the well-being of others, the stranger, and even our enemies. We are not separate from others. This is not a simplistic teaching. It is not given to us by a God who does not know about practical living. It is given to us because the way we treat a stranger in our lives ultimately reflects the way we treat our souls. Our ability to love unconditionally is something that comes from deep within our souls. In our hearts, where God's presence resides, there is no room for divisions, hatreds, and cultural wars, there is only love. The more we are able to be in touch with that loving center, the more we can connect with the Spirit of God in us.

In their book, *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson and David Relin tell the story of Mortenson's learning to love the stranger and the power of healing that it brings to our world. The title of the

book is based on the proverb that says that it takes three cups of tea over many months to cement a lasting relationship. During the first cup, you are strangers; with the second cup, you become friends; and by the third cup, you are regarded as family. Mortenson has become family to thousands of Muslims in small villages and refugee camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. What transformed Mortenson into this kind of love is his experience in 1993 after being injured in an unsuccessful mountain climbing attempt. He was nursed back to health in a remote region of Pakistan. During that time, Mortenson saw the children of the village squatting outside in a makeshift school with no materials or teachers. That is when he made the promise to the chief tribesman to build a school for them. When he went back to California where he worked as a nurse, he sold everything he owned and lived out of his car and did fund-raising with all of his free time. The catalyst for his fundraising efforts was a group of children in River Falls, Wisconsin who donated \$623 in pennies towards the \$12,000 project. Mortenson has been able since the time to build many schools in that region, especially for girls where schools were banned by the Taliban. But this has not been easy for Mortenson. He has received many death threats and has been kidnapped for his efforts. But many are catching Mortenson's vision for peace in that part of the world, a vision for peace through education and lasting relationships. This kind of love for the stranger can only come from that deep place within our souls where God's love resides. This is the kind of love which crosses the boundaries of hate to turn enemies into friends and strangers into family. May the Spirit which guided Elijah and the widow to care for the stranger be the inspiration of our lives as models of selfless service and hope for all of God's creation. Amen.