

When my grandfather moved to America from Belgium in 1910 to work in a glass factory, his father purchased a home in a neighborhood of other Belgian glasscutters. When it came time to marry, my grandfather married the daughter of a Belgian, and on every Saturday night for decades another Belgian couple, Jules and Alice Bouillet, would come to their house and visit and talk and eat Belgian cookies called *gallettes* that looked like little waffles and watch *Lawrence Welk*, whose parents came from the city of Odessa in the Ukraine, though my grandfather was certain Lawrence Welk had been adopted and was actually from Belgium.

My grandfather's family were Walloons, from southern Belgium, and spoke French. When I was pastoring at Irvington Meeting, there was a woman in our meeting who had grown up in France and had met and married an American GI during World War II and moved to Indianapolis. Her name was Ginette and one day she and her husband were working in the flowerbeds at the meetinghouse and Grandpa met her and they began speaking French, the language of his childhood, and my grandfather became very emotional. My grandmother had died several years before and I could tell Grandpa was smitten with Ginette. He kept saying to her, "Are you sure you're not from Belgium?"

Like many of us, my grandfather felt most at home when he was among people like himself. We like and trust people who are most like us. Think about that. What is one of the first things we teach our children? *Don't talk to strangers*. This, despite overwhelming evidence that most child abuse is inflicted by someone the child is related to or knows. But we teach our children not to talk to strangers, that strangers are the real risk. Strangers. Isn't that an interesting word! Strangers. Strange. Odd. Weird. Bizarre. Strangers are, by definition, strange.

Fortunately, I wasn't raised with that understanding. My father would engage anyone, talk to anyone. If Jeffrey Dahmer had moved in next door to us, my father would have invited him to a cookout the first weekend and asked him to bring the meat. He would routinely invite total strangers to spend the night in our home, roving motorcycle gangs, and regale them with stories about his life as a bug spray salesman. So I learned not to fear strangers, that strangers were friends I hadn't met.

We've been talking about the lesser-known dimensions of Jesus, those aspects of his character that transcend our first perceptions of him. So far we've talked about Jesus' healthy skepticism of religious and societal institutions, his personal integrity without regard for the judgment and opinion of others, his willingness to acknowledge virtue wherever he found it, and his careful attention to those around him.

Today, I invite you to think about Jesus' ability to relate to a diverse group of people. While many of us are most comfortable around those who are similar to us, Jesus engaged and befriended people who were vastly different from him—people outside his nationality, his religion, his gender, his economic status. Born a Galilean, he noted the kindness of a good Samaritan. Born a Jew, he celebrated the faith of a Roman Gentile. Born a man, he numbered several women as friends. Born poor and powerless, he counseled a rich, young ruler and a religious leader named Nicodemus, whose influence could not keep Jesus from being executed alongside two thieves. From the start of his life to the end of it, Jesus engaged and befriended people vastly different from himself.

Now doesn't it stand to reason that the religion which began as a consequence of his life, should be a religion that says, "No one is a stranger. Everyone is welcome. Reject no one. Befriend all." A woman in a meeting I used to pastor would stand in the meetinghouse doorway and ask each visitor, "Why are you here?" Finally, thank God, the woman died, no one replaced her at the door, and strangers finally felt welcome. Our parents might have taught us never to talk to strangers, but the church should teach us just the opposite. Welcome the stranger. Open the door wide. Show them to a seat. Include them. Love them. Care for them. For whatsoever we do to them, we do to Jesus.

There was a couple who used to attend a meeting I pastored. They were fun people and we enjoyed spending time with them. Then the man lost his job and they moved to another state to work, where they began attending another church. Every year at Christmas, we would receive a letter from them. After awhile, we noticed the longer they attended that church, the more caustic their annual letters became. They began identifying certain groups of people—Muslims, gays, atheists, immigrants—they believed threatened our nation. Before long, it became obvious that anyone who wasn't like them, everyone who was a stranger, was a danger.

You know the problem with that? Everyone is a stranger somewhere. You put me in a roomful of doctors or attorneys or mechanics, and when they start talking their doctor, attorney, or mechanic language, I feel out of place, like a stranger. When I order Chinese and I go in the restaurant and it's just the Chinese family and me, I feel like a stranger. When that Chinese family goes to the Hendricks County Fair, I know they feel out of place, too. We've all felt out of place. So if you're going to make it a habit to fear, reject, and scorn strangers, before long, you will fear, reject, and scorn everyone. Because everyone is a stranger somewhere. But no one should be a stranger in the church.

Met an old Mennonite farmer not long ago, well up into his 80's. He told me, "When I was young, I was taught to fear Negroes. When the preacher told us to love our neighbor, I thought he meant white folks, but he told us it meant Negroes, too. Then World War II happened and I was told to hate the Japanese and the Germans. But one day the preacher told us we had to love the Japanese and Germans. He got in trouble for saying it, but it turns out he was right. Then I was told to hate the communists, but it turns out we were supposed to love them, too. Now we're being told to fear homosexuals, but my grandson is one and I'm not afraid of him. All my life, folks told me who to hate and fear, and every time they were wrong."

You know, friends, that's the way it's supposed to work. We spend our lives in the church and eventually learn that since no one is a stranger to God, no one should be a stranger to us.

I was at a church conference not long ago and someone was giving a speech on diversity and tolerance. That's the big thing now. Diversity and tolerance. Even the Baptists are talking about it. Let me just say that I think it's wrong for anyone in the church to tolerate people who are different. I think it's wrong. But we hear that all the time. We're supposed to tolerate that person or this group. We're supposed to have tolerance.

I hate tolerance. It requires so little of us. “Well, I don’t love you, but I will tolerate you.”

Knock yourself out there, fella’.

No where in the Gospels does it tell us to tolerate people. We’re not supposed to tolerate anyone.

We’re supposed to love them.

Toleration says, “Well, I don’t like you, but I’ll put up with you.”

Love says, “I will seek the best for you. I will care deeply for you. I will care as much for your interests as I will my own.”

When Jesus met someone different from him, he didn’t tolerate them. He loved them. As his friends, let us do the same.