

A Place for Strangers and Strange Ones

I betray my age by being able to name that tune in about seven notes, or maybe even 3. In the 80s, *Cheers* became everyone's favorite local hangout, a place where Carla could be brash, Coach could be clueless, Cliff could be odd, and Diane could be annoying, a place where Norm would walk in the door and everyone called out his name, a place where strangers and strange ones felt at home, a place where everyone wanted to go, a "place where everybody knows your name."¹ There is something powerful and even sacred about a place and a people who know our names, our quirks, our favorite place to sit, our favorite team, our favorite comfort food, a place and a people who ask if our week has been ok or if our job is still harder than we'd hoped.

I recently spent a week with the Well, a group of clergy colleagues discussing papers and sermons, stewardship, and officer training. We also stayed up too late, went for runs around Carlisle, ate good food (and not-good-for-us food), and laughed and cried about family and churches and everything in between. This was the eleventh time the group had gathered; I have been with them for eight of those gatherings. They know my name, and more. Like most groups we have developed a kind of short-hand, jokes and stories that cause us to laugh or sigh or squirm when the first phrase or word is mentioned. This group has become essential to me and to my life in ministry. I cannot imagine doing church without them. But it takes time and risk to reach that point. When I first met with them in Montreat, North Carolina, they knew my name, but I did not know theirs. They already knew the inside jokes and the shorthand. I did not. They already knew one another and each other's stories. I knew two of them and was not sure what to expect of the rest. Nor was I all that sure if I could live up to what they expected of me. I cannot remember how I first introduced myself, but I'm fairly certain it had something to do with how and why I wound up on this crazy, sacred journey with Jesus.

I am not Paul, of course, but that's where he starts, too. In the book of Acts, we hear the story of Paul as told by the writer of the gospel of Luke. We hear that he is a powerful Jewish leader who watches as others stone Stephen, one of the first to die because of his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. He is described as one who

¹ <https://youtu.be/o7U3lo80YrQ>

leads the persecution of early Christians with the high priest's blessing, one who heads to Damascus for that very reason, and is knocked to his feet and called to a new path by the voice of Christ himself. That is how another voice describes him, but here, in Romans, we hear him describe himself.

These first few verses of Romans sound like the openings of other letters of the time, those written by Paul and by other writers. It follows certain conventions, including a greeting, thanksgiving, and an introduction. And yet, the content is unique to Paul. He wants to make it clear that he longs to visit them and for his sake and for theirs and for the sake of the gospel. He knows that to be in community with one another, to sit side by side, to break bread, to share joys and suffering, laughter and head-shaking moments are essential to living and embodying the gospel he and they have been called to proclaim. He knows that neither he nor they can do church or faith on their own, that they need one another not simply as names on a list but as companions on a journey. But first—before they can be in community together he has to introduce himself, to share a bit about who he is and how he came to be who he is. And to begin to build a common shorthand with them, an understanding that they are in fact in this church business together.

Unlike the other letters he writes, this letter to the church in Rome is to a community he did not start, a church he did not plant, so he is starting from a different place. He cannot lean on shared experiences or point back to a common memory of being together, so it would make sense for him to share his dramatic conversion story, to lift up his moment on the road with the risen Christ. Instead he points to something they already share, to common ground, the gospel, the gift of grace that they have all experienced, the life-changing power that has broken in and changed all of them forever.

Paul has no doubt that it is grace that has brought him to this moment. As he states in other letters to other churches, he is saved only by the astounding grace of Jesus Christ. Because if anyone deserves Christ's condemnation, he does. And he knows it. And yet he is grateful for people who know his name and his story and those who do not. He says he is indebted "to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish."² I don't know about you, but I have a fixed image of what a barbarian—or a troglodyte as we discovered this week—looks like and acts like. I picture someone more than a bit rough around the edges, someone I'd likely

² Romans 1: 14, NRSV

duck my head and pretend not to notice on the street. But the Greek word here simply refers to Gentiles who did not speak Greek. Greek was the language of the empire, the language of those who were learned and powerful, insiders. In his introducing himself to the Roman church, Paul proclaims that he is indebted to all who share in faith and faithfulness with him, whether they speak or act or look like him or not. He is indebted to perfect strangers, imperfect people like him, people who know his name and people who do not for the richness of this life of faith, for the ministry to which he has been called. And so am I.

Yes, I am grateful for those who have directly shaped and nurtured me in faith, for Sunday school teachers and pastors and colleagues, for elders and deacons and mentors and friends, but I am also indebted to perfect strangers, imperfect people, to rough-around-the-edges-unnamed saints who forge ahead and show me what it is to live a life of faith in and for the world. I am indebted to the woman who prays even as she braves the desert to try to seek a better life for her child, pushing me to wonder how I might be even the smallest bit responsible for her having to escape her home in the first place. I am indebted to Valerie Castile who donated funds to wipe out lunch debts for students at a high school in Minnesota in memory of her son Philando. I am indebted to Civil Rights leaders who marched and gave their lives not just because it was a good thing to do, but because their faith would let them do nothing less. I am indebted to women who answered the call to serve in ordained ministry even when the church said they had it all wrong. And I am indebted to Rachel Held Evans, a writer and theologian who died at the age of 37 earlier this month. Evans once wrote:

Imagine if every church became a place where everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable. Imagine if every church became a place where we told one another the truth. We might just create sanctuary.³

Because the church is not *Cheers*; we're more than that. Yes, we are called by name into this community of faith, but the community of faith is not simply a place to escape, to get away from the world. Instead, as Paul says, in Jesus Christ "we have received grace *and* apostleship."⁴ In Christ we are saved by grace and made apostles, sent out like the twelve to live and share the Good News in and for the world God so loves, the world Jesus died to save. So I am indebted to people whose names I will never know, who certainly do not know

³ <https://www.newsweek.com/remembering-rachel-held-evans-quotes-faith-god-and-church-progressive-1415735>

⁴ Romans 1:5, NRSV, emphasis added

mine, strangers and strange ones who have shown and continue to show me what that means. Because of them, I am reminded of the breadth and depth of the grace of God and the power of God's saving ways for all. Because of them, I am given courage to embrace my calling to live and share that great Good News not simply with my nearest and dearest, but with strange ones and strangers, too.

And I am also indebted to Paul. Someone wondered out loud in bible study this week if Paul had any idea that people would be reading his words two thousand years after he wrote them. I have no idea, but I, for one am grateful that he wrote what he did. He had no way of knowing if his words would last or who would read them if they did. He simply knew he had a story to tell, a message he was compelled to share. And through him, the church hears a blessed reminder that in Jesus Christ we are saved by grace and called to a new way of life, that in Jesus Christ we are claimed as God's own, not because of who we are but because of who he is, that in Jesus Christ we are given a language, a place and a people where all are welcome, known, and loved beyond measure, that in Jesus Christ strangers become family and strange ones find a place to call home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.