

Guest appearance: The grace in being the stranger

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

According to Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, the Hebrew Bible contains only one commandment to love the neighbor but no less than 36 commands to love the stranger. Throughout Torah, the reason given for this moral teaching is that the Israelites themselves were strangers once. “You shall not oppress a stranger,” reads the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of Exodus 23:9, “for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Empathy is key, in other words. Those who have been lost in faraway places where they could not read the street signs, who have endured the stares of children as they walked through a strange town, who have held out a handful of foreign coins to a merchant without the slightest idea how many it takes to buy a loaf of bread—these are the people who know best how strangers feel, and who are therefore bound to use that knowledge by welcoming aliens instead of deepening their alienation.

In Christian tradition, these commands are honored in the practice of hospitality. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” directs the letter to the Hebrews, “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” This shifts the stimulus from human empathy to angelic ambition, but thanks to this saying and others straight from the lips of Jesus, Christians have long placed high value on showing kindness to the strangers with whom Jesus himself identified.

While some people no longer feel safe opening the doors of their own homes to those they do not know, they still practice hospitality at church. They show visitors where the restrooms are and make sure that they do not stand all by themselves at coffee hour. They host events for newcomers. They adopt immigrant families newly arrived in this country. They share their worship space with fledgling congregations that cannot afford their own.

Since I have done many of these things myself, I know how gratifying they are. To welcome the outsider in is to stand very near the heart of God. The only catch is that the gratitude flows in my direction, so that I am the chief beneficiary of my own hospitality. When I am the host, I get the good karma. People write me thank-you notes, not the other way around. The only real risk I run is that someone will not like the food, or will go away as essentially unknown as when he or she arrived.

When I pay closer attention to the hospitality of Jesus, I notice a couple of things. The first is that any time he was in a house, it was someone else's house. With no permanent address of his own, he was a perennial guest, although one with such a knack for memorable conversation that he never lacked invitations. When he was at table, no one went away unknown.

For this reason there were some places he was never invited back, but there were others where lives were changed because he came to supper. If he sometimes seemed to preside at tables where he was in fact a guest, then it was not because he owned the table or could afford to provide the food. It was because he knew how to open people up by opening himself to them. The hospitality he exercised was the radical hospitality of the heart.

Something else I notice is how many of the strangers he encountered were religious strangers. Because I first learned their stories in church and have heard them there so often, it is often hard to remember that the Greeks, Romans, Canaanites and Samaritans who crossed paths with Jesus were not cardboard characters set up to make him look good. They were religious aliens in the land who did not worship Israel's God. Some of them were hostile to Jews, while some Jews treated others with contempt. They all spoke with accents.

In a few stories, Jesus' own prickliness toward them shows, but the stories survive because his alienation does not. When he is faced with a mother's love for her sick child, a leper's gratitude for his healing, or a centurion's concern for his ill servant, Jesus cannot seem to stay focused on the religious otherness of these people. He focuses on their humankind-ness instead, even when that means going against some of the teachings of his own faith—but only some. I like to think that the teachings closest to his hospitable heart were those about loving the stranger, for he knew how the stranger felt.

When I study his example, I understand why being a guest has changed me more than being a host ever has. If I am able to offer any kind of hospitality at all, then it is thanks to the Jewish couple who invited me into their home for Shabbat and overlooked my gentile gaffes. It is thanks to the Muslim cab driver who picked me up at the Istanbul airport in the middle of the night and took me to the address I held out to him though I could not pronounce the words. It is thanks to the Pentecostal African-American church who asked me to preach though they knew I could not whoop and who showered me with “Amens” they knew I did not deserve.

In such gracious hosts, I have both met the Christ and been welcomed in his stead, to the point that being a stranger seems to me no longer like something to be avoided but like something to be sought. Whichever side of the door I find myself on, faith is the risky decision to open wide, on the pretty good chance that I know who is standing on the other side.