Welcoming the Stranger

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"Welcoming the Stranger" is the theme for this conference. As I reflected on this occasion, I thought that I must begin with a word of gratitude, for in a way my presence here is a sort of "show and tell" about the stranger being welcomed. Although I have many friends among you, I still come to you as a stranger who experiences being welcome and, with the hope that my words to you, although perhaps also strange, will not be entirely unwelcome.

I come to you as a stranger, not only because of the color of my skin and my strange accent but also because I am not and never have been a Presbyterian. I grew up and still am a Methodist. But there is also a bit of the Presbyterian in me. This is partly because I did my seminary studies in an institution that was one-third Presbyterian. Then I began my teaching and writing in another institution that was one-fifth Presbyterian. And finally, I have been married for almost four decades to an outstanding Presbyterian theologian and through her have had numerous contacts with many of you, as well as with Columbia Theological Seminary and with the Montreat Conference Center. So, I come to you as someone who has learned to love and to admire the Reformed tradition and the Presbyterian Church but also as a stranger who is grateful for your welcome.

"Welcoming the stranger" is therefore something at which the Presbyterian Church—as the entire Christian community at the best times of its history—has some experience, and to which it has shown significant commitment. And yet, it is still an important and even urgent subject, and I am glad to be able to share with you some reflections on it.

There are obviously two dimensions to the matter of welcoming the stranger. One is how the church itself welcomes the stranger, how it provides for a variety of cultures, customs, and traditions within itself. The second, just as important, is the matter of how the church as well as individual Christians use their influence in advocacy for the stranger in the society at large. The two are interconnected, for it is difficult to see how a church that does not welcome the stranger in its midst can be an advocate for the stranger in the society at large. A church that welcomes the stranger must also be a church that inspires and trains all its members to practice advocacy and promote justice for all, both within the church and beyond. And it is also difficult to see how a church that does welcome the stranger in its midst can be content while that same stranger is not welcome in the society at large. We cannot claim to be a church that is open to the stranger and not support that stranger when threatened with discrimination, violence, internment, or deportation.

I do not presume to tell you how the Presbyterian Church, USA has fared on each of these two counts. But I can readily tell you that at least during most of the second half of the twentieth century my own United Methodist Church proved itself to be much better at advocating for the

rights of the stranger within society than at receiving and empowering the stranger within the community of the church itself. Since I suspect that the same is the case with most mainline Protestant churches, and since tomorrow afternoon we shall be dealing with the ministry of justice and advocacy, this afternoon I shall focus my attention on this other dimension of welcoming the stranger: welcoming the stranger into the midst of the church.

But before we enter into a fuller discussion about how to welcome the stranger, there is a previous question that must be answered: Who is the stranger?

The answer is not as simple as we often think. Several decades ago, my own United Methodist denomination had a flourishing Latino congregation in a large city here in the Southeast. It was the time when the Interstate Highway System was being built, and since this congregation's facilities stood in the right-of-way they were taken over by the government in exchange for their fair value. As the congregation debated where to build a new church, they were approached by the denomination with a very sensible suggestion. There was a declining church nearby whose building was in need of significant repairs. If the Latino congregation would invest its money in such repairs, the two congregations would be able to share the building. This was done, and for quite some time the arrangement worked without a hitch. But eventually there were frictions between the two congregations. These grew to such a point that the bishop came to try to mediate the differences. After listening to both sides, he turned to the members of the Latino

congregation and said, "I know this is difficult for you; but after all, you must remember that you are guests in this church . . .”

The bishop was wrong on at least two counts. First, he was obviously wrong in that he did not know his facts. He simply took for granted that he knew who were the hosts and who were the guests, who really belonged and who was a stranger. A bit of research would have been in order. But he was too busy to look into the facts, and he thought his stereotypes would suffice.

But this was not his only error. He also erred theologically. He forgot that in the church we are all guests. We are all unworthy guests who have been welcomed and continue being welcomed by the grace of God. The church does not belong to us. We may have paid for the building. We may pay the utilities and hire the pastor. My grandmother's name may be on one of the stained-glass windows. But still, it is not our church. This is a fact of which we are reminded whenever we celebrate communion and say and hear the words: "This is the *Lord's* table. Our Savior invites those who trust in him to share the feast which *he* has prepared." The church is built around the *Lord's* table, and it is therefore the *Lord's* and not ours.

Thus, when we speak of "welcoming the stranger" we must begin by acknowledging that we are *all* strangers. We may be strangers who have come to the feast a bit earlier. We may be the instruments the Lord is employing to set up the feast. But we are still strangers. The table does not belong to us, and neither does the church.

Our reason for welcoming is not that we are nice, friendly people. It is not that we feel pity for the stranger. Our reason for welcoming is that we, too, have been welcomed. Paul says it quite clearly in well-known words in Romans 15: "Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you."

But there is more. Surprisingly, the only one among us who by rights is not a stranger is the one who "was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own did not accept him." The NRSV says "his own people did not accept him." But the Greek does not say that. The Greek actually says, "he came to what was his own, and what was his own did not accept him." It is not merely a matter of his own Jewish people rejecting him; it is a matter of a cosmic rejection. Jesus was made a stranger in that which was his, in the world that was made through him. We are part of that creation, which was his, and yet received him not. We are among those who made the Lord a stranger—who constantly and repeatedly, through our sin, by our many rejections, continue making him a stranger. We are not hosts welcoming strangers. We are strangers who often refuse to acknowledge the host. And yet the Host who is repeatedly made a stranger continues inviting us to his table and into his church.

And then, to complicate matters still more, the Host gives us a chance to receive him as if we were the hosts and he the guest. "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me . . . [for] just as you did to one of the least who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Who, then, is the stranger? We must respond to that question at several different levels—levels that may seem contradictory but are not. First, we are the strangers. We are the ones who are constantly welcomed; we are the welcomed people of God—welcomed, not because of who we are, but because of who God is. Secondly, the Lord is the stranger, the one rejected by his own, and just as it is through his death that we all live, so it is through his rejection that we are welcomed. And finally, one might even say that the stranger is the Lord; the stranger is the opportunity the Lord gives us to welcome him. The way he puts it in Matthew 25, we either welcome the stranger, or we reject the Lord. There is no other option. Thus, the theme of this conference is not just for an inner circle of particularly committed Christians, for people who are particularly interested in issues of immigration and of transcultural communication. We may have the impression that here we are preaching to the choir. And that may be true. But the message is for the entire people of God who must heed it lest it be also true of them, that he came to his own, and his own received him not.

But in the theme for this conference, "Welcoming the Stranger," it is not only the "stranger" who needs to be redefined and clarified. We must also look at the matter of "welcoming." If we look again at Paul's words in Romans 15, it is clear that the welcoming to which he refers there is a welcoming after the style of Jesus Christ: "Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you." "Just as Christ has welcomed you" does not mean only that we are to welcome others because we have been welcomed. It certainly means that, but it means much more. It also says something about the nature of Christian welcoming. It is a welcoming "just as Christ

has welcomed us," after the manner of his welcoming. He welcomed us who were strangers by himself becoming a stranger. Quite often welcoming is not just receiving a stranger but also becoming a stranger. When the church welcomes the stranger in terms of advocacy and of seeking justice, quite often it finds itself treated as a stranger in its own community. Indeed, I suspect that this is one of the main reasons why so many individuals and churches refuse to become involved in ministries of justice and advocacy for the stranger: Their good standing in their own communities is more important to them than welcoming the stranger.

Too often we think of welcoming as merely an act of opening our doors. But welcoming is much more than that. Welcoming always requires an adjustment on the part of the host. During these days here at Montreat we are staying with friends whom we have known for almost forty years. Actually, the opportunity to visit with them was part of the attraction of this event. We feel welcome in their home, and we are grateful for their welcome and their friendship. And yet, I am certain that welcoming us required some changes in their daily routine. I don't know what those changes may have been. Indeed, part of our sense of being welcome is in the suspicion that we are the cause of at least some modifications in their daily lives and yet not being told what those modifications might be. They have had to make adjustments in their lives, and for that we are grateful.

The same is true when we speak of welcoming others in the church. Some years ago, Catherine and I were visiting at a Sunday school class in which the subject was evangelism, and the guest

speaker was a distinguished Presbyterian theologian. The first thing he told us was that the Presbyterian form of government is so well developed and so refined that one has to be at least a second or third generation Presbyterian before one could fully understand it and see its beauty. Clearly unintentionally, but in fact, he was calling his hearers to go out and invite people to join a church in which perhaps their children, but more likely, their grandchildren, will finally fit!

I do not know whether what he was saying is true or not. I suspect it was something of an exaggeration. But to the degree to which it may be true, welcoming the stranger may well require some adjustments in the system of government—just as in order to receive us in their home and to make us feel welcomed, our friends must make some adjustments. Welcoming is not simply saying: "Here we are. We think we have something good to offer you. Come and enjoy it. But do it on our terms. Become one of us, and then you will be welcome."

Welcoming the stranger requires our willingness to allow the stranger to remain who she or he is as long as he or she wishes to do so. Expecting or demanding that the stranger change and become like us in order to be welcomed is to say that we welcome the stranger just as long as he or she is no longer a stranger!

Welcoming is a dialogue. As with any dialogue, someone must open it. Welcoming the stranger certainly must begin with words of welcome. Without such an opening, there is no welcome.

But the opening itself is not the welcome. It is only the beginning. The words of welcome must be an invitation, not only to be there but also to be oneself and to express who one is.

But if we are really interested in welcoming the stranger, we must be aware that we are not on an even playing field. No matter how much we might wish it were not so, we do not speak as equals. In this dialogue, some have a stronger voice than others; the host has a stronger voice than the guest. This is practically true in every culture. Those who receive hospitality are expected to conform to those offering it. One does not go into another's home and demand that the furniture be moved around. If you are sitting in someone's living room, you do not complain that the chair is uncomfortable. It is up to the host to discover that you are not sitting comfortably and invite you to change your seat. Part of the task of a good, welcoming host is to try to discern signs of how the relationship may be improved. It is only after that relationship has been established on a solid foundation of trust that the guest will feel free to suggest changes. By then the guest, although probably still different, is no longer a stranger.

This is also true of churches seeking to welcome the stranger. Certainly, we need a welcoming committee, people to greet visitors, and so on. But we also need to be attentive to unspoken realities that may make the stranger feel welcome or not. And when we are attentive, this may require some changes on our part.

There are many examples of this. On the positive side, I know of an urban church that has received a fairly large number of recent immigrants from a violence-torn region in Southeast Asia. Someone in the church realized that these immigrants were mostly farmers, and that some of the many things they missed were their own foods and particularly growing their own food. After some conversation, a large section of the church's lawn was plowed up, and now passers-by must wonder at this strange church that has a vegetable garden almost at the very side of the street. And if they stop and look more closely, they will be even more surprised at the strange variety of vegetables growing there, in the yard of a church that a few years ago was entirely Euro-American.

But then, there is the negative side. Hospitality always challenges us. As we gather for worship, I often sit behind some of these Asian sisters and brothers. They are doing their best to learn English and are struggling to learn how to read a language in which spelling is based more on tradition than on logic. And then we give them thick blue books from which to sing; books loaded with "Thou," "Thy," and "Thine." And we tell them that the lines are not to be sung in the order in which they stand but rather first the first line in this pentagram, then the first on the next, and so on. After a while, with some effort, they learn the drill. But then we come to a hymn that does not end at the end of the page but rather has the strange letters "D.C."—which does not mean the District of Columbia, but rather *del capo al fine*. And then we are surprised that some of them would rather go to a church where the words of songs are in plain English and projected on Power-Point!

But the solution is not that simple. There is value in our hymns and in the poetry of Charles Wesley and of Isaac Watts. There is value in the music of Bach and of Beethoven. It is not just a matter of letting go of all these things that are dear to us, things with which our ancestors praised God, and that our parents and grandparents taught us to love. It is a matter of each group helping the other understand what they value and why they value it, to the point that eventually those values are shared. Again, it is a matter of dialogue, of genuine dialogue, of a dialogue in which we listen with particular attention to those whose voices we can most easily ignore.

This can be done. Some years ago, at a meeting with a group of Roman Catholic priests, they told me about a parish in which there had never been more than ten Catholic families. This was in Appalachia, right in the middle of the Bible Belt, where most everybody is Baptist. The Roman Catholics were quite used to that situation and even content with it. Then, in the 70s, things began to change. Chicken farming and other such activities, coupled with war and violence in Asia and Central America, brought a large influx of Roman Catholic immigrants. Soon there were conflicts. The Euro-American members were ambivalent, happy that their parish now had a large membership but disturbed at the changes that were taking place. The Guatemalans wanted their particular Virgin at the center of the apse. When the Vietnamese had a meal in the fellowship hall, the others complained about the strange smell.

The parish council decided that the best way to deal with the situation was to have a series of congregational meetings focusing on each of the various components of the parish. These meetings would include the typical activities of food, folk dancing, and the like. But then they got down to business, moving beyond mere curiosity and folklore. At each of these meetings there was a special time when the people of the particular group on which attention was focused on that day would speak about their faith in the context of their culture and experience, and about what they valued and why.

On the night devoted to the Vietnamese, and elderly gentleman stood up and, with the help of a translator and with tears in his eyes, explained that to him the high point in the mass was the *Gloria*, because that was what they were singing when a paramilitary group broke into church and kidnaped his father. He never saw his father again. At that point, someone in the congregation suggested that this man teach them the Gloria in Vietnamese. From that point all–Euro-Americans, Central Americans, and Vietnamese–would often sing the *Gloria* in Vietnamese. Most of them knew what they were singing only because they knew the hymn in their own language. But for all of them, no matter what their language or their culture, the *Gloria* gained new significance.

This is the nature of true dialogue. That man had been in the community for years. He had something unique to contribute. As long as he had not been given a chance, it remained something private, or at best something to share with other Vietnamese. His light had been

forced under a bushel. But when he was invited to speak and to share, when he was given a voice and an attentive ear, his contribution enriched the entire community. Singing the hymn in his language was not a mere concession out of a shallow hospitality; it was a valuable experience for the entire congregation.

Without such dialogue, misconception reigns, nurtured by prejudice and stereotypes. There are many examples of how this works but allow me to give you only two.

The first has to do with the field in which I have worked most, theological education, and particularly the theological education of Latinos and Latinas. A few years ago, when I was visiting a United Methodist Seminary, I asked why there were so few Hispanics among its students. The immediate answer was that Hispanics felt that the Methodist seminary was too liberal and preferred to attend a more conservative seminary nearby. That evening, I was meeting with the Latino and Latina Methodist students in that other seminary. When I asked them why they were enrolled in that other school and not in the Methodist seminary, their response was "We would much rather be over there. This seminary is a bit too conservative for us. But the Methodist seminary has not shown much interest in having us there."

The point is clear: Each of the two parties had misconceptions about the other. An open and frank dialogue was necessary, and apparently no one took the initiative to begin such a dialogue. But another point is also clear: Given the asymmetrical relationship between an

established seminary and an immigrant community, the responsibility to take the initiative belonged primarily to the seminary. And its failure to take such an initiative, and to rely on its own stereotypes about Latino Protestants, meant that to some degree the Hispanics who had decided to attend the other seminary were probably not completely off the mark when they declared that the United Methodist institution had no interest in them. In that congregation in Appalachia, the Vietnamese brother with a moving experience would never have expressed it had he not been invited to do so.

The second example also comes from a United Methodist situation. It was back in the 80s. A fairly large, mostly Euro-American congregation, had decided to begin work with a group of Central American immigrants who had come to this nation fleeing the violence of the proxy wars that the superpowers were fighting in Central America at the time.

I was talking with the pastor, who had tried to be as welcoming as possible, and asked him if there were any problems. "Well," he said, "there is one, and I don't know how to tackle it. People in the congregation are complaining that when they go to use the restrooms, they find soiled paper piled up in a comer. They say that if these Central Americans don't know proper hygiene, they should be asked to leave. When I meet with the Central American leaders, I don't know how to bring this up."

Any of you who have traveled there know that in much of the region there is a problem with water pressure, and therefore, in order to avoid clogging, next to every toilet there is a waste basket in which you are to dispose of toilet paper. Thus, there were reasons for the strange, and apparently anti-hygienic, behavior of the Central Americans.

But to me the tragic irony of the entire situation came the next day, when I was meeting with the small Central American group, and one of the ladies said: "We thought that people here were very clean. But would you believe it? They don't even have a waste basket by the toilets!"

Here again, lack of open dialogue, and that lack reinforced by stereotypes, was leading to misunderstandings that could put an end to that congregation's very sincere desire to welcome the stranger. To welcome means, first of all, opening the doors. Then, it means trying to understand the stranger by giving him or her the opportunity to express himself or herself. And this has to be followed by building a trust such that disagreements and differences can be discussed sincerely and with an openness for change. What was happening in that congregation was that they thought all they had to do was open their doors, and the necessary dialogue leading to trust and then to open discussion never took place.

All of which leads us back to the earlier point, that welcoming requires change. It certainly requires change on the part of the stranger. As we know, there are many today who simply say, "Why don't they learn English?" But the truth is that we do not really have to worry too much

about that. The stranger will have to change. That is in the very nature of being a stranger. In order to survive in an alien environment, you have to learn and adopt at least some of the practices of that environment and much of its culture and language. The question is whether the host will see the need for change and be willing to change in order to be more welcoming. Lest we think that this is only a matter of language and culture, let me be clear that this includes also issues of economics, class, and polity. And lest you think that I am simply criticizing the Presbyterian Church and its polity, allow me to take an example from my own United Methodist Church.

Quite a few years ago, as I was working on an early draft of what eventually became the *United Methodist National Plan for Hispanic Ministries*, I noted that at that time, according to officers in the New York Conference, for a church to be viable it required a minimum annual budget of $100,000. In that same year, the Bureau of the Census reported that the average annual income of a Latino family in New York was $10,000. Thus, for a Latino church to be barely viable, as the Annual Conference defined "viable," it must have at least a hundred tithing families. I doubt if at that time even the largest, most prosperous Anglo-American Methodist church in New York had a hundred tithing families. Thus, by definition, a congregation made up of average Latino families was simply not viable.

To put it bluntly, this means that most Latinos and Latinas in the US simply cannot afford to be United Methodists. And I suspect that it is a bit more expensive to be Presbyterian than to be Methodist...

The United Methodist Church has faced this situation in a number of different ways. Most commonly, what actually happens is more or less the following: A jurisdictional committee in charge of new church development has funds to subsidize a certain number of new churches a year—let's say, three new church developments. The usual practice is to subsidize such a development on a decreasing basis for a limited time—let's say, four years. The committee is well aware of the need to develop new ethnic minority congregations and sets aside funds to develop a new ethnic minority congregation in a poor immigrant neighborhood and three mostly Euro-American congregations in new suburban developments. At the end of four years, the three new suburban churches have become financially "viable," while the ethnic minority church is still highly dependent on subsidies. What are we to do with this year's funds? We better invest them where there is a higher possibility of returns, that is, of developing a "viable" church. And so, new church development in poor immigrant communities begins to lag. Then, every once in a while, there is a new church development in an ethnic minority community that succeeds, and a new church becomes "viable." Most probably this is not because its pastoral leadership was more able, or its people more dedicated, but simply because this particular ethnic minority community is middle-class and can thus afford to be United Methodist.

All of this results in what a Presbyterian pastor who is also a good friend once called "the Kentucky Fried Chicken theology of mission." When deciding where to open a franchise, KFC does not ask who needs chicken but who can afford chicken. The mission of KFC is not to feed the hungry, but to sell chicken and thus to make the franchise viable. This is one of the reasons why you often find, practically next door to a KFC franchise, a Popeye's and a Church's Fried Chicken. It is also one of the reasons why you so often find several churches almost next to one another and then no more churches for a long stretch.

The problem is that, just as KFC does not give away its chicken, the KFC theology of mission implies that the church is not terribly eager to share the gospel with those who cannot afford its own brand. As a result, there are few mainline churches among the poor, no matter of what race. Again, most poor people cannot afford to be United Methodists, or Lutherans, or Episcopalians, ... or Presbyterians.

Thus, it is not surprising that our membership is declining. The reason is not only that we have lost our evangelistic zeal—although it is true that we may have lost much of that. The reason is also that our evangelistic zeal and our spirit of welcoming are not sufficiently strong to lead us to the changes that are required today. After all, we are "mainline" churches. I know that the origin of the term "mainline" has little to do with social class or respectability. But in today's usage that is precisely what it means. "Mainline" churches are not like those fringe groups with storefront churches that cause so much confusion. But, I beg you to consider, in a society and in

a world in which ever greater numbers are being marginalized, is it legitimate for a church to call itself "mainline" and "Christian" in the same breath? Can we really "welcome the stranger" if we are not willing to become, once again, the pilgrim people of God, the people for whom, as an ancient Christian writer said, "every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers"?

To become a stranger for the sake of welcoming the stranger will require different things in different settings, but not one of them is really easy. When it comes to issues of justice and advocacy, to be discussed tomorrow, it may well imply going against the grain of commonly held opinions and values. It may even require going against the grain of the law. When it comes to issues of welcoming the stranger into the church in which we ourselves are no more than welcomed strangers—that is, the issue on which I am focusing today—it implies placing mission ahead of polity, and faithfulness ahead of prestige. Placing mission ahead of polity means that, if at any point our polity hinders our mission, it is the polity, and not the mission, that must give way. And placing faithfulness ahead of prestige means that we must not treat our name as Methodists, or as Presbyterians, or as Lutherans, as if it were a brand name to be protected, much as Kentucky Fried Chicken must protect its brand, but rather as a blessing to be shared, much as Jesus fed the hungry.

There are many examples I could give of this, and I will be happy to discuss it further during the question-and-answer period. But allow me to explain some of what I mean by referring again to

my earlier example of a United Methodist committee planning the planting of new churches. What is actually happening in that committee is that it is afraid of failure and that it allows polity to limit what it can do in mission. We must be certain that a new church follows all the parameters and meets all the expectations of our denomination. We must make certain that it can have a pastor with a certain education and a certain salary, and a building that looks like a church. Otherwise, we risk our good name. A church that is afraid of failure will not endorse anything whose success is not fairly well assured. And because it allows polity to limit mission, it also allows polity to limit imagination, and precedent to limit creativity. If something risks failure, it should not be done. If it is not in the Discipline—our Book of Order—it cannot be done.

But in so doing we forget that we are to welcome the stranger just as Christ has welcomed us—that same Jesus Christ who put the need of the sick ahead of the Sabbath laws, and whose victory came through the utter failure of the cross. Again, and finally, "Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you."