

## SERMON: Showing Kindness to Strangers

The people of Prince Edward Island are known for showing hospitality and kindness to strangers. In 2019, Prince Edward Island had a population of 156,000 people. That same year, Islanders welcomed 1.6 million visitors. People came from around the world to visit PEI's beautiful beaches, Charlottetown's bustling downtown, and of course, our very own, Anne of Green Gables.

This year, however, all of that has changed. There are no cruise ships, fewer airline flights and the Confederation bridge remains closed to many vacationers. Today, simply seeing a non-island license plate on the road can make us uncomfortable, which goes against our very nature as Islanders! This year, showing kindness to strangers looks like washing your hands and practicing social distancing.

My grandparents have stories about a time in their lives when showing kindness to strangers could cost you your life. Most of my grandparents were born in the Netherlands. In May of 1940, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands where it was placed under German occupation until May of 1945. Melissa's great Opa was a member of the Dutch Resistance, running messages about food stores, resources and occasionally, the movement of endangered Jewish families. As a skilled worker, my great grandfather relied on the kindness of others as he went into hiding to avoid being sent to a workcamp. My great grandmother was a clever and resourceful woman. She had backpacks with a change of clothes ready at the door for her eldest son, my great Uncle Jake, to run out to any downed RAF pilots on their way back to Great Britain. My great grandmother also welcomed a displaced German Jew from Amsterdam to live with their family. The kids called her Tante Paula and didn't learn her true identity until after the war had ended.

In the book of Joshua, we're told a story about two Israelite spies whose lives depended on the generous kindness of a Canaanite prostitute, a woman who is willing to risk her life for the two strangers who have come to spy out the city of Jericho.

Last week we left Joshua on the banks of the flooded Jordan River. In chapter 1, God commands Joshua to prepare to cross the Jordan River and enter the promised land. God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous and reminds him to meditate on and obey God's word. Next Joshua orders the people to prepare to cross the Jordan in three days time. The people agree to obey Joshua's command and encourage him to be strong and courageous.

One might assume that the next chapter in Joshua tells the story of Israel crossing the Jordan River. Instead, squeezed between chapter 1, where God commands Israel to cross the Jordan and chapter 3 where God leads Israel through the Jordan is chapter 2, the story of Rahab and the spies.

While the people of Israel prepare to cross the Jordan River, Joshua secretly sends two spies into Canaan to, "Go, look over the land, especially Jericho". Joshua's first act as Israel's leader doesn't exactly inspire confidence as the text continues,

So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. The king of Jericho was told, "Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land."

Maybe Joshua didn't clarify that their mission was a secret? Perhaps they were unqualified but there were no other applicants for the positions? Joshua, on the other hand, was an experienced and successful spy. Forty years before this, as Israel approached the promised land for the first time, Moses sent Joshua and 11 others to scout out the land of Canaan. Somehow the 12 of them were able to travel throughout the land unseen for forty days.

They even managed to bring back a branch of giant grapes that were so large it took two men to carry it. Whatever the reason, when the two Israelite spies enter the city of Jericho, it seems as though everyone knows who they are and why they've come. The king of Jericho immediately sends a message to Rahab, "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land." The most powerful man in the city has sent his henchmen to find the Israelite spies and now they're trapped in the house of a powerless prostitute, a Canaanite woman.

Thankfully, for the Israelite spies, Rahab is a God-fearing, tactical genius. Before the king of Jericho sent his message, Rahab assessed the situation, brought the spies up to the roof and hid them beneath the drying stalks of flax. Rahab tells the king's soldiers, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." It would seem that the king's soldiers are no wiser than Joshua's spies. They believe Rahab's deception and follow her orders to pursue the spies outside the city gate.

With the soldiers out of the way, Rahab returns to the roof and tells the two men that she knows that the LORD has given the land to the Israelites. Rahab declares, "the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." Unlike the others living in Jericho, Rahab recognizes Israel's God as the one true God. Joshua sends spies into the land and it is Rahab's faith in God's plan, the words of a Canaanite woman, that they report back to him, "The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us."

Rahab urges the Israelite men, "Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you." The Hebrew word used here is "hesed". It's the same word that God uses to describe himself when he made the

covenant with Moses and revealed himself to him at Mount Sinai in Exodus 34. "Hesed" means merciful, gracious acts of loving kindness. When Rahab hid the spies and deceived the king's men, she was risking her life for the sake of her guests. She risked everything to protect two strangers from an invading nation. Rahab was exhibiting the character of God through merciful, gracious acts of loving kindness. She asks the spies to repay her and her family in kind. Rahab asks the people of God to show her family the mercy and steadfast love that God has shown to them.

Using a scarlet rope, possibly one made of flax stalks, Rahab lets the Israelite men out of the city through the window of her home, which is built into the wall of the city of Jericho. She counsels them to hide in the hills for three days before returning to Joshua. The spies tell her to bring her family into her house and tie the scarlet cord in the window in order to be saved. In chapter 6 we read that just as God passed over the homes marked with blood on the doorways in Egypt, Rahab's home and family were spared when she tied the scarlet cord in her window.

God continued to shower Rahab and her family with his steadfast love. In the book of Ruth, we hear the story of a Moabite widow who, like Rahab, acknowledges Israel's God as her own. Ruth tells Naomi, her Israelite mother-in-law, "Your people shall be my people and your God my God." When Ruth goes out to gather grain, she meets Boaz. Boaz shows kindness to Ruth by offering protection, food and water. Ruth asks,

"Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?" Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

I wonder if Boaz learned about God's loving kindness from his mother. In the Gospel of Matthew, we're told that Rahab is the mother of Boaz. Perhaps this is why Boaz was able to see God working in the kindness of Ruth, a Moabite widow. Boaz marries Ruth and becomes the father of Obed, who is the father of Jesse, who is the father of King David. And from David's line, comes Jesus, the promised king. God reveals his steadfast love to Rahab by including her and her family in his great plan of salvation.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. Just as Rahab, a Canaanite woman, showed loving kindness to the Israelite spies at great risk to herself, the Samaritan man from an ethnoreligious group despised by the Israelite people, took care of the injured stranger, brought him to an inn and paid for his expenses. Both Rahab and the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, extend merciful, generous acts of loving kindness to complete strangers.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus revealed his Father's heseed love to the world. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry and forgave sinners while ushering in the Kingdom of God. As John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

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So... how can we extend merciful, gracious acts of loving kindness to others today? COVID-19 has negatively impacted many of the ways we are used to caring for and supporting others. How can we reveal God's steadfast love to those who are suffering around the world?

When my family and I started attending Zion Presbyterian Church, I was delighted to discover that this congregation is a strong supporter of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Both my grandpa and my dad were involved as their churches'

representatives of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Over the years, they donated their time coordinating, planting and harvesting fields in Canada in order to provide food to feed hungry people they'd never meet. Nearly twenty years ago, my grandparents had the opportunity to travel to Africa and see first hand how the Canadian Foodgrains Bank responsibly distributed food to those who needed it most. This trip left a strong impression on my grandparents and encouraged their continued advocacy and support of the Canadian Food Grains Bank.

The World Food Program warns that the millions of people facing the highest crisis levels of hunger could double due to COVID-19. The Executive Director of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank adds that 2020 could see the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. Our church support is needed more now than ever. Donations from our church are used to plant and harvest crops here in Canada. The money from the sale of the crop is matched 4-1 by Global Affairs Canada and then used to purchase food for hungry people around the world. In addition, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank supports farmers in third world countries by providing seed, wells, equipment and necessary training so that they can begin growing food for their own communities. You can make a donation to the Canadian Foodgrains Bank through the donate page on our website. Simply leave a note saying that your donation is for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. On our website, you will also see other mission agencies that our church supports. Giving to these agencies helps those in need, both locally and abroad.

Just as the generations before us, we're called to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'."