

One of the early Christian expressions that did not survive was what we call Gnosticism, an umbrella term for a variety of beliefs rooted in the notion of secret knowledge. Christian gnostics believed that *Jesus* had brought secret knowledge. You can see traces of their existence in the New Testament letters written after Paul, in which the author warns against “false teachers” who want people to neglect their bodies and despise all things physical. A common gnostic belief was that the physical, material world had been created by a rebellious spirit, but that a spark of the divine resided in some human beings. Those human beings felt like strangers in this world because they were. But they could be freed of their physical bodies and drawn back to the real, spiritual realm by means of ascetic practices and secret knowledge that would make sense only to these special people.

This is a strikingly resonant idea. I myself just threw away my college alumni bulletin without reading it because there was an article on how many tigers are captive in little roadside zoos across the nation—the subtitle was “caged proof of a society gone haywire”—and I thought, “Oh, I just can’t stand it.” So cruel, so casually cruel—this is not my home. This is not where *I* belong. That kind of experience is actually at the root of Gnosticism: profound alienation is a spiritual experience.

The letter to the Ephesians assures the listeners that they are *not* strangers to one another or to God. But why is this important? Because strangerhood was so built into their lives—as a spiritual experience, but also as a social, political category. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the

whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” A lot of this vocabulary comes straight from the political life of Greek society: strangers, residents, fellow citizens, free access, foundation. The words seem to come from a ministerial decree regulating the granting of visas. But here they are used to describe the link between Christians and Christ, or Christians to one another. The author is speaking about a new way of belonging in the world, a way of belonging even more fundamental than what our passport can establish.

When the author says of Christ, “He is our peace,” it is in contrast to the Pax Romana, the so-called peace established and perpetuated through force and terror by the Roman government. On state occasions and festival days such as the birthday of the emperor, when the emperor's "lordship" would be celebrated, the emperor as "peace-bringer" would be lauded in public speeches. Those who were seen as undermining the government's authority were, as we know, made examples of: they were crucified as a visible warning to anyone who might entertain similar thoughts, and that is typical of how the Pax Romana was kept. “Pax,” or peace, was the absence of open warfare.

What is being claimed in Ephesians is that despite all the swaggering claims of Rome's emperors, true peace has been inaugurated by a man whom the empire *crucified*. Our citizenship, our fellowship of peace with God and neighbor, was brought about on the cross when Jesus put hostility to death. Real peace is not the absence of open warfare, but the rejection of hostility at all. *That's* what creates “one new humanity in place of the two,” putting hostility to death through the fearless absorption of violence that was Jesus' willing death on the cross.

So this is our ontological reality, if you will: we are *not* strangers in essence; we are *not* alien spirits from another realm imprisoned in physical bodies. We are *not* different in kind or in substance from other human beings. We *are* all citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God. But we are still strangers in another sense, in terms of life experience. We do experience ourselves at odds with the world of caged tigers and casual hostility. As Elie Wiesel wrote, “Man, by definition, is born a stranger; coming from ‘nowhere’ he is thrust into an alien world – one which existed before him and did not need him to survive. Yet a stranger goes through life meeting other strangers... and, estranged from both this world and himself, his very existence lies in doubt...on the sociological level...the stranger is someone who suggests the unknown...the stranger represents what you are not...the stranger is the other...” And we’ve all been that. I think we’ve all been abundantly aware that the world did not need us to survive, and that we are frequently called on to prove ourselves trustworthy or worthy in any sense, because we are strangers among strangers.

But Wiesel goes on—and this is the money quote, okay, the genius at the core of this sermon— “For the Jew, however, the stranger suggests a world to be lived in, to be enhanced, or saved. One awaits the stranger; one welcomes him...in our tradition, the stranger may well be someone very important: a prophet in disguise...or even the Messiah. With every stranger we hope to receive a fragment of his secret...to live without strangers would result in an impoverished existence...to live only amongst ourselves, never facing an outsider to question our certainties, to look beyond the boundaries, to look through him towards God...”

*Meeting* the stranger, welcoming the stranger, is the way we discover and push past our own limits. And strangers who come together are saints and members of the household of God who are discovering just how much bigger God's house is than they had been able to see on their own. Reuben Zellman, the first openly transgender person to be admitted to rabbinical school, was invited to preach at a predominantly gay and lesbian synagogue, and afterwards was approached by a man who expressed his appreciation for the sermon and then said, "But Reuben, we're a gay and lesbian synagogue. Why are you here?" The man was genuinely welcoming, and he genuinely did appreciate the sermon. But, Zellman says, "for him, I might as well have represented the competitive crossword puzzle community. It simply did not occur to him that the transgender community might have experiences that he himself shared, or that might be important to his own life story." [http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/No\\_Longer\\_Strangers.pdf](http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/No_Longer_Strangers.pdf)

Zellman goes on to say that one of the gifts that the trans community offers the rest of the world is a shattering of binaries (my words, not his). That is, trans people cannot fit into the binary categories of male and female, and yet they exist—and so we are compelled and empowered to question the very structure of the way we've come to conceive of existence. His immediate point is that insisting on gender binaries is bad for all of us, and limits our appreciation of God's range—and that's true. But it's also helpful for us as a way to remember not to split other parts of reality into binaries. As Parker Palmer says, sometimes two conflicting truths are not in conflict, they are a paradox. And when we tolerate or welcome paradox God transforms us.

The author of Ephesians uses all these political terms to express how the Jews and Gentiles of the congregation have been put together into one new humanity, but at the end of this passage he switches to horticultural language. “In him the whole structure is joined together and *grows* into a holy temple in the Lord.” A narrow-minded person might accuse him of mixing metaphors, but I’d like to think that he’s modeling for us a departure from binary thinking. We are being asked to imagine ourselves as something very new and different, a building that grows. So in the spirit of just imagining, in the spirit of God who does far more than all we can ask or imagine, let me close with some images. \*\*\* Let us pray: Lord, help us to live out your word: to lead a life worthy of our calling with humility, with gentleness, with patience, with love, honoring and upholding unity and peace. May we do this in the grace you have given us, grace that can overcome all manner of adversity, grace that inspires and sustains your gift for us that helps to unite us in love. Amen.