

“Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak”
James 1:17-27

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September 2, 2018

There are times when reading the Bible feels like we have so much interpreting to do that we are in danger of missing the intentions of the original writers. We begin by asking questions of cultural and historical context. We analyze the origins of the root words and re-interpret the God language, including masculine pronouns and imagery, to better translate for our world today. We have to remind ourselves of who James was and who he was writing to and what he was writing about as we attempt to pull out these few verses in the middle of a much larger book.

When this was written, I can tell you that James did not have any of that on his mind. He was focused on sharing a message about Christ to his fellow church members that would inspire them, challenge them, and ultimately help them go deeper in their relationship with God. He never imagined the amount of head scratching and interpreting we would have to do before getting to the good stuff.

This reminds me of the 1960s classic novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, written by Robert A. Heinlein. It's a science fiction story about a human who was born and raised on Mars and is the only survivor of the first human expedition to Mars. Twenty five years after Earth loses contact with the original explorers, another ship is sent to Mars and it's at that point they discover, Smith, this human Martian. They bring him back to Earth and the book is the telling of how he must become acquainted with Earth's gravity and physical environment, as well as all the customs and relationships of humans. As he learns human ways, Smith turns his observations into actions and begins to live as humanly as he can like those around him.

One of the genius things about this book is just how skillfully Heinlein was able to capture humanity in ways many of us take for granted. From language to interacting with others to gravity and breathing to learning how to learn, the reader is able to take a step back and notice for even just a few moments what it means to be a human in a particular time and space. We get a chance to notice our basic level assumptions as Smith learns them for the first time.

And then, as we embark with Smith on his journey to live into his human self, the way he goes about it doesn't flow quite as naturally as it does for the rest of us who've been human on Earth all our lives. We see the clunkiness of his efforts. The absurdity of some of our beliefs and practices become evident when we observe someone brand new trying to fit into our cultural norms that we don't even notice are at play. For example, early in his time on Earth, one of his doctors asks Smith if he feels like breakfast. Smith takes a moment to assess whether he feels ready to be eaten, which is what one does with breakfast.

Even though this book was written in the 60s, the story could still be told with the same relevance today. Taking even just a quick snapshot of what it means to be human in 2018, it'd be kind of absurd to try to explain it to a human Martian needing to adapt and thrive on Earth for the first time. I think we'd be inclined to tell a different story than what a human Martian would observe, right?

We'd want to talk about how humans enjoy things and love people and learn lessons and create art, yet observing the world for even just a few minutes would almost make liars of us. When we hear about random or targeted killings in public spaces, that wouldn't match the stories we'd want to tell. With our failing educational systems and prisons profiting on the downtrodden and politicians lining their pockets and religions shaming and condemning the very people they're called to protect and with corruption at every level, it would be difficult to make sense of

things to a Martian among us. If we're honest, it doesn't even make sense to the humans among us.

After being steeped in these kinds of trends for so long, the stories no longer shock us. We become desensitized to the violence and numb to the exploitations. In recent years there has been a huge push for people to WAKE UP and call out these injustices so that what we say we believe about humans and the systems around us might actually be reflected in our practices. Even as *Stranger in a Strange Land* progresses, Heinlein rightly identifies our human tendencies to fear what, and who, we don't know. The more human Smith attempts to be, the sensationalization of his Martian self diminishes and Smith's differences in his efforts to be human become a threat to those around him.

That part deeply resonates with me. In our efforts to be the humans we're called to be, it's sometimes at odds with what society would rather us be, which can have painful and even deadly consequences for some. Let's just be honest for a second; is there anyone in this room who hasn't felt like a stranger in a strange land at some point in their lives? If there is such a person, I'd love to take your photo and get your autograph; you are about as rare as a glittery unicorn.

We all have moments of strangerliness, some of us for more extended periods than others, but it's an experience to which we can all relate. That fact makes it all the more baffling that we aren't able to live lovingly and peaceably with the diversity among us. Heinlein's book points that out in ways that we can readily see in society. Is that really the human condition; our inability to love each other through the differences? Or perhaps we just haven't fully learned how to embrace difference in meaningful and life-giving ways.

James gives us a couple nuggets of wisdom in this brief snippet of text from his letter. If we pay close enough attention, this scripture clues us into how we can go about living more in tune with what we say we believe and value. In his own words, “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.”

Gosh, how might this world look if we all took this posture of being quick to listen and slow to speak? What would happen across the globe if we practiced the art of being slow to anger? What if we spent more of our resources ridding ourselves of all sordidness, or in regular people words, nastiness and injustice? While this may seem like an enormous task, one that doesn’t always feel doable, there’s tremendous hope because of what James says right after that.

Instead of letting the fear of our differences seep in and allowing it to shape our nasty and unpleasant responses to others, we have to retrain ourselves to “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save [our] souls.” Basically, James is telling us that we already have what we need to do this countercultural work of harmoniously living with strangers among us. We already have the seeds of God’s love implanted within us so that we might truly learn to be quick to listen and slow to speak and anger.

And when we forget how to access those seeds that are already at work within us, we have to look toward that Someone whose life and teachings show us how God’s love looks in action. This Someone who walked this Earth a couple thousand years ago, a stranger even in his own home town, showed us what it truly means to be human; showed us how to be human in the godliest of ways even as it went against the grains of society. This Someone taught and continues to teach us how to love when it’s easier to hate. If we open ourselves to it, this Someone is

continually drawing each and every one of us - in all of our diverse complexities - into God's abundance so that we, in turn, can be radical in welcoming others into that same abundant goodness.

This is one of our challenges as a faith community that claims Christ as our guide. If, indeed, a Martian were to walk in through these doors today, how might they make sense of who we are and what we do and why we do it? Would they find love in action? Would they discover a welcome that goes beyond what society expects of us? Would they experience God in and through their interactions with us? As people who know what it's like to be a stranger in a strange land, I hope the answer will always be yes. I pray that we can challenge and encourage each other, especially in times such as these, to learn to see and hear each other through the strange and different ways we express ourselves as the diverse human beings we're called and created to be. Empowered by the Spirit, we already have within us what it takes to make it be so.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.