

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14, Mark 12:29-34, Ephesians 1:3-10, 2:17-21

Sermon Title: **“Weird”** — Lucus Keppel

My brothers and sisters, think back to the last time you felt like an outsider to any group. Maybe you were meeting a new group of people for the first time or at a church on vacation. It might have been an old group of friends that had somehow discovered a new interest without you being aware, or a gathering where your politics were different from everyone around you. In all of these cases, you likely felt... weird. Different. Like you had a sign around your neck, large flashing arrows pointing you out as the Weird one. The ancient Israelites felt Weird like that too, both individually and collectively through their history. The Torah exhorts: “Remember that you were Strangers in Egypt” - Strangers being easier to write than “Weird outsiders who believed differently from the norm” - and this collective Weirdness gave them part of their identity. Please, join me in prayer, as we remember our own “Stranger in Egypt” moments.

Holy one, we are a community built of individuals with our individual differences. Help us to use our Weirdness to further Your will for the world, and not to pull us apart. You have adopted us, into your family, Holy One, and we therefore ask that you comfort us when we feel estranged, protect us when we are attacked, and love us when we feel alone. Bring us more fully into your Community, and open us to your Word, and to finding new ways to doing Your work, or rediscovering old ways that may have been lost. In the name of the Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth, we say together: Amen.

After the experience of being strangers in Egypt, the ancient Israelites had many opportunities to remember feeling outside the norms, and their laws show that they tried to protect even their own outsiders as a result! Three categories of outsiders are specifically named in the Torah over and over again - the Stranger, the Widow, and the Orphan. All three of these groups had a tendency to get overlooked in societies around Israel, but none more so than the Stranger. Why would tight knit communities want to change to accept new people and potentially dangerous ideas? It was safer to keep out strangers, to ostracize them and in some cases, pretend they didn't exist. But the God of Israel commanded that they, at least, would care for and protect the Stranger in their midst. Grain would be left growing at the edge of fields, which would allow the poor and the traveler alike to gather food as they would need it - a sort of early soup-kitchen. And travelers had only to ask to stay with someone, and they would usually be given both a place to stay and a meal or two. The commandment to Love your Neighbor was supposed to extend to the stranger as well.

We can use some of this same spirit of hospitality in our world, though not as directly as planting grain in fields. Our communities today tend to be wide and shallow, but there is no reason that we cannot dig them deeper by asking questions and learning about the people in our lives. Just as we have felt weird at times, so do others in situations where

we feel comfortable. Watch for the moment that others may feel weird, so that you can help them become a part of the activity or conversation. Also learn from each other - really listen to their concerns, and remember how you feel when others do not listen to you.

But moments of feeling weird are only part of the story. There are also people in our lives who ARE weird to us. These people think differently than we do, or weigh differently the information they have than we would. Maybe they belong to several communities, and have different experiences than we do. The Israelites had this experience also, when they were exiled by Babylon. Again, they were strangers in a country not their own, but this time they had the Torah and other writings around which they could focus, no matter how Weird things got for them. They continued to be a community for over a hundred years of exile, working together with their memories and stories and hope for a future promised to them by God.

The passage from Jeremiah that was read earlier was a song of hope from this exile. Jeremiah specifically calls on the Lord to bring all of the people out of exile; no matter how “weird” they would have been to the community. What hope to the people of Israel, to hear that the Lord will bring about their release, even for the outsiders of their community! And after they get home, everyone will party together, not just the priests, the young, or the old, but everyone together - their weirdness acknowledged, accepted, and loved by God and all the people. What a homecoming that would have been!

Jeremiah may have been talking to the ancient Israelites about a specific event in their history, but we can learn from his words, too. We can celebrate when diverse groups of people work together to accomplish a goal. We can celebrate the Weird in our lives, who help make our community interesting, fresh, and complete just by being themselves. We can hope, and share our hope, that together we can do God's work in the world. Each of these celebrations may not seem like much on its own, each time it occurs, but by celebrating together, we encourage more events worthy of celebrating. By Jesus' day, the Homecoming celebrations had definitely ended. Not only had Israel been forced to follow the rules of one Empire after another, but the people of Israel were attempting to protect themselves by isolating themselves from the Strangers in their land. The Scribes and Pharisees were symptoms of this fear of the outside, fear of the Weird, taking ever more strict views on the law, and punishing those who broke their interpretation of the law by difficult or expensive purity rituals. They couched their interpretations in terms of “Tradition”, and looked down on those who refused to follow along.

Jesus, in contrast, shook up these traditions by returning to the spirit of the Law - taking care of each other, no matter how Weird. In the story of the Woman at the Well, Jesus ignores the prohibition of speaking to the weird Samaritans, showing love for those outside his community. Later, Jesus calls for the children to come right up to him, despite the view of the day that children were worthless unless they were doing work, and should stay out of the way of adult discussions. He kicked the money changers out of the temple, respecting the holy ground as worthy of all, not just the rich who could afford to change their money. Jesus even healed people on the Sabbath day, doing meaningful work because it was the people, no matter how Weird, who mattered. The two great commandments, Jesus claimed, were love God, and love each other - not do everything possible to separate yourself from the world and follow traditions blindly.

Jesus was obviously not above being Weird if it meant helping someone in any way. We can take this lesson, and work with those who need our help, in whatever way we can provide. Similarly, Jesus proved tradition as useful, but not sacrosanct. Just because something has “always been done” in one way or another does not mean that it must always be done in that way. In fact, when the tradition becomes repetition without understanding, it can do more harm than good. We sometimes need to change our traditions to understand them better. Is there something in your life that you do because you’ve “always done it that way”? Try being a little weird with it next time you do it, and see if it doesn’t change your understanding of the task. If something has changed already, without your help... try to look deeper into the change, and find what significance it holds for you. Why did the change affect you, and what is the meaning of your action in the first place?

Introducing change into our lives can seem counter-productive. If we’re used to doing something in one way, changing that way can seem wrong. But sometimes, that change - that weirdness - needs to take place for us to find a new comfort. The apostle Paul brought about huge changes in the early Church by introducing a very weird concept - that through Christ’s death and resurrection, all people of earth are saved, regardless of their heritage or background. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us that we have all been “predestined” by God to be adopted into God’s family, regardless of our personal weirdness, or status as Gentile or Jew. This is huge! God, according to Paul, desires us all to be God’s children - wanted, loved, and never alone. He goes on to write that we are NO LONGER strangers, but citizens and members of God’s household. Think about this for a moment - if we were instructed to take care of Strangers when there was no hope of them joining in our community, how much better care should we take of the weird ones in our midst... who also happen to be our brother or sister!

Today is a day of the celebration of communion within the celebration of Christmastide - when we simultaneously remember Jesus birth and death, when we strengthen our bonds as a community and rejoice in the homecoming of all of God's people. Let us remember that there are no Strangers among us, no matter how weird anyone seems - that we are all Children of God, and that we rejoice in our connection with each other and with God. No matter how much of an outsider we may feel through our lives, we are connected at the core by Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. Show love to those you've never met, rejoice in our success of doing God's work in the world, spread the hope of a world-wide homecoming party everywhere you go, and remain at peace with one another - and you will be fulfilling God's will of the Torah, the exile, the Gospel, and the Church.

~~Lucus Keppel