

I WAS A STRANGER

Arthur Sutherland

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). These are the opening words of the Acts of the Apostles and they indicate that Christian mission is synonymous with travel. This does not surprise close readers of Luke’s writings because Luke has already stressed that the crossing of geographical borders continually marked Jesus’ mission (Luke 4:37; 8:26; 8:37; 17:1). Luke does not ever depict Jesus as a tourist. Rather, he is shown to be a pilgrim (Luke 12:41) who takes an interest in the people he observes along his route (Luke 21:1). He marvels only at people’s unbelief and never over physical attractions (Luke 21:5-6).

Jesus belonged to that group of people whose travel is intentional. He left the north and traveled south with his face set toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). And although Luke is not like Matthew, who explains Jesus’ early life as refugee in Egypt, Luke is clear that it is Jesus’ insistence on crossing the border from Galilee into Judea that caused the outrage of his religious opponents and that this led to his death (Luke 23:5).

Purposeful and freely chosen travel is the result of will: adventurers, immigrants, tourists, and missionaries have this in common.¹ They are distinct from the refugee, the exile, and the kidnapped, because they are voluntary travelers. They do not have a sense that they are being taken from a place they wanted to be to a place they do not want to be. They are freely electing to cross borders. They are not forced, evicted, or chased by war, famine,

or natural disaster. They anticipate the future in a way that others do not. In conjunction with this, they travel joyfully even when they come into situations that have the prospect of danger.

But it is important to note that although missionaries belong to a common group, those who are engaged in mission are distinct from the tourist, the adventurer, and the immigrant in this way: for the missionary, crossing a border is a transcendent act.

It is not merely a matter of self-fulfillment, actualization, or leisure. It is an imitation of the God who came near. This means that they have a distinctly different appreciation of borders and boundaries.

Consider the following. The person who crosses a border sees the border as a sign or symbol usually designating some form of limit. This is clear when the borders are geographic. The river, the mountain, and the ocean all may designate the end of one area and the beginning of

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another. Yet, visible geographic borders are established and reenforced by unseen social, political, religious, psychological, historical, sexual, and anthropological conventions or decrees. The character of crossing a visible, marked, and known geographical border—the river for example—is different from crossing a social, political, or religious border. Moreover, borders are multivalent. There is never a single border that is crossed in any event. The crossing of a geographical border brings with it an encounter with other types of borders. Going “into Africa,” for example, is going into multiple bordered worlds, each with a landscape and terrain of its own. The variances we encounter

evoke a different response, each in turn. To complicate matters even more, borders and the crossing of borders are events of which we may not be conscious. If you wade through a river and the river designates a known border, you are immediately aware of what you have done because you are wet.

The missionary does and experiences all of the above but adds the factor of intending to disrupt and intending to disenchant those who are met once over the border. The missionary, and this is what makes missionary work both so attractive and so dangerous, seeks to both break allegiances to old or false borders and to announce the circumscription of all things in Christ. The adventurer, the tourist, and even the migrant say, "Let me visit briefly. Let me climb this rock, or see this building, or even tend this farm, and then by and by, I will be away." The missionary is never so agreeable, never so willing to pet and stroke. This is what makes missionaries able to see, really see, those they encounter.

It is convicting to me that the Gospel writers used the rare word *splagchnizomai* to describe what Jesus felt when he encountered those on the margins (Matthew 20:34; Mark 1:41; 8:2; Luke 7:13). Greek speakers understood the word to mean "to be moved as to one's bowels." We would speak of "a feeling in the gut," but it is difficult to give an adequate translation of the word. Jesus uses it once in speaking about forgiveness (the parable of the unforgiving servant, Matthew 18:21) and, significantly, twice in parables associated with hospitality (the good Samaritan and the prodigal son). More broadly, the Gospel writers want us to see that Jesus took into himself the pain and "dis-ease" of those on the borders of life. In this age where feeling another's pain is either a tagline of the trite or mimicry of the mightless, we cannot let compassion become casual. □

1. In this section I am modifying the typology suggested by *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing*, ed. Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

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I once saw a picture of a young hitchhiker as she stood on the island of a busy street. Tall and gaunt, she bore the weary expression that we so often see carried by those who feel themselves on the margins of life. Clumped beside her feet were her bound possessions that appeared as rumpled as what she wore. All of this was, unfortunately, rather ordinary. Folk of her band are as common as the cars that passed her by. What made the picture compelling was the sign she held. Written on a piece of cardboard was the word Anywhere. She asked not for Los Angeles, New York, or Miami. She asked not for home or to be taken away from home. All of this was a road too far. She simply asked, dare I say begged, to be taken not away, but in. If this is the case, that she wanted to be taken in and not just away, then she represents those who Jesus calls us to see. Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls.

—Arthur Sutherland