

“Can You Say Shibboleth?” © Rev. Erika Hewitt
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Reading: Judges 12:4-6

Written just before 1000 BCE, the book of Judges in the Hebrew Testament contains “the oddest assortment of rogues, outlaws, and lowlifes in all of the Bible.” The name “Judges” refers to the leaders Israel had after the Israelites had conquered Canaan — “there was no king in Israel” and only chaos reigned.

Jephthah is one of the riffraff in the book of Judges – a “mighty warrior” who connives and battles his way into power. In our reading, Jephthah’s forces – the Gileadites – are fighting a bloody civil war with the Ephraimites. Jephthah and his army are victorious, but know that fleeing Ephraimites will attempt to cross the river back into Jordan. Jephthah comes up with a simple blockade that will pick out members of the Ephraimite enemy.

Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, “You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh.” The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead asked him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he replied, “No,” they said, “All right, say ‘Shibboleth.’” If he said, “Sibboleth,” because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

Sermon

Nothing like a little Old Testament blood and gore to wake you up — am I right?

Can you say Shibboleth? What that phrase has come to mean, in modern times, is:

Can you prove that you are you who say you are?

Can you pass the subtle, unexpected tests that pop up when you try to cross borders and circles of belonging?

Can you prove that you’re one of us?

I notice these Shibboleth moments on a regular basis. Having lived in Maine for less than two and half years, I’m still relatively new. Just when I pat myself on the back for finally learning how to pronounce names like Presque Isle, Calais, Sagadahoc, Arrowsic, and even Bangor... I’ll be thrust into a situation where — as if it weren’t already clear — I reveal myself to be “from away” because I don’t pronounce something correctly.

The Gileadites said to him, “Say Shibboleth,” and he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him.

Fortunately, Mainers aren't *that* harsh. In fact, Mainers are some of the most solid, kind, and fair-minded people I've ever encountered... which is why I've chosen to make my home here. It's why I want to belong.



Inclusivity and fellowship are what we human beings crave, and are worthy of. “A sense of belonging is a precious, precious thing,” says the Rev. Rona Tyndall.¹ “Belonging helps us to become who we are meant to be.” It's true for me, and I bet it's true for you: we move through familiar circles of belonging all day long, reminding us who we are, and whose we are:

- I open a UU meditation, and feel comforted by its language and perspective.
- At the co-op, the cashier says, “I know you're a member” before she even sees me holding my green card.
- I walk into my Bath YMCA, and the person at the desk asks teasingly, “Where were you last week?”
- Walking from the waiting room to his office, my doctor says, “I always like seeing your name on my schedule.”
- An email arrives, inviting me to a party for my fellow Maine wedding professionals, and I smile at the list of friends who have RSVP'ed with a “yes.”

These are a few of the daily reminders that I belong; that I have community. No matter what “hat” I'm wearing, there are people who know me. *To belong means that we matter to someone else.*

Much of the time, I take these moments of belonging for granted. The thing about belonging is that it's most noticeable when it's *not* happening. We don't notice all the ways we're connected and known and understood... until we're *not*. Until we're asked to say Shibboleth, and we can't quite pass the test, and feel stuck on the outside.

“To be a stranger,” observes theologian Cathy Ross,²

is to feel out of place, to be unsure, to experience dislocation. To be a stranger is to feel vulnerable, to make mistakes, to be dependent, to have needs. To be a stranger is to lose control. To be a stranger is to be ‘other.’ To be a stranger is to need a host – but on whose terms?

¹ <http://www.gloucesteruu.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/03/Becoming-and-Belonging.pdf>

² Dr. Cathy Ross, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ete/edinburgh-2010-study-group/educating-for-contextual-mission-cathy-ross>



How do we respond when a stranger enters our world? When someone approaches one of our circles of belonging and tries to be included, do we ask them to say shibboleth? If not, and we admit them to our community, do we expect them to become just like us? Or do we allow them to be who they are?

About five years ago, in early December, a member of my congregation called me on Saturday night. She told me that she'd struck up a conversation with a man panhandling at the local shopping center. "He's really a very kind man," she told me, "and he's been sleeping near the highway overpass. But after a day of panhandling yesterday, he got jumped by a bunch of other people who knew he had cash in his backpack. They beat him up and took the money. We have to help him. I'm bringing him to church tomorrow."

Sure enough, the next morning my genteel, elderly "church lady" walked up to the sanctuary door guiding not one, but *two* people: Jesse, the homeless man she'd talked about, and his girlfriend Danielle. They were both in their 30s, shy, guarded but smiling, happy to be introduced. And when Danielle took off her baggy coat, it became apparent that she was pregnant.

Jesse and Danielle joined us for worship, and by the time coffee hour was over, the good people of my congregation had whipped together a plan to help them stay safe and warm for the time being. The Board resolved, on the spot, that Jesse and Danielle might bring their possessions to our campus and sleep in our cottage — a warm, converted garage with two couches and a restroom. The proverbial hat was passed to provide them with grocery money. My congregants practically took out tape measures, that they might pull clothing from closets and attics to give to Jesse and Danielle.

All of this, just a few weeks before Christmas. *At no point* was it lost on me that we were echoing the ancient Bethlehem narrative: our UU congregation was the innkeeper, offering a spartan but serviceable space to an expectant couple who had nowhere to go, for the homeless shelters were all full.

I watched, with no small degree of pride, as the congregation that I served stepped forward to offer hospitality to a couple in need. There was no shibboleth: no test of their worthiness, no requirement that Jesse and Danielle prove themselves deserving of our help. They were in need, we had a space, end of.

Funny, though, how the gospel of Luke doesn't flesh out what kind of guests Mary and Joseph were, or what kind of relationship they formed with the innkeeper. As we "innkeepers" learned, an entire other set of questions awaits on the other side of hospitality and welcoming:

When we extend a welcome to strangers, do we expect to receive something in return? Will those strangers end up belonging with you, and to you, or is welcoming at times a transitory gesture?

Is it possible to extend hospitality with no expectations?

If you welcome a stranger (or two and a half of them) into your midst, can you really expect them to conform to your ways?

“To be a stranger is to feel vulnerable, to make mistakes.”³ Think back to the last time you were a stranger. It could have been at a dinner party, or at a festival halfway around the world. Do you remember the vulnerability of being “other”? Do you remember the bewildering knots of unstated rules? And some of you remember, painfully, how easily and unwittingly you failed to say Shibboleth, and were kept on the outside.

For my part, I remember committing a cultural *faux pas* in Europe years ago: I offended my hosts by pouring myself a glass of wine. In their culture, women don’t do such a thing. How was I to know? Strangers often don’t know the terms of hospitality until they’ve blundered past them. Hospitality can be fragile.

“To be a stranger is... to be dependent, to have needs. To be a stranger is to lose control.”⁴

Jesse and Danielle were guests of our congregation. And they raised eyebrows. Homeless people — unless they have a car — don’t have a storage space, and so along with Jesse and Danielle came heaps of their belongings in industrial black trash bags. Accustomed to cooking over the open flame of a camp stove, the couple attempted to do so inside of our tiny cottage. Giddy with grocery money and fatigued from the standard homeless meal of starch-starch-and-more-starch, Danielle and Jesse used our gift of cash to buy food that you or I might deem impractical.

If you welcome a stranger (or two and a half of them) into your midst, is it fair to impose your values onto them? Or is the true nature of hospitality inviting a stranger in... and then allowing them to be exactly who they are, even if it’s different from who you are as a group?

There are no easy answers to those questions. As their hosts, we as a congregation had to discern where to draw the line (the fire code was a good one, we decided, and put the kibosh on their cooking indoors). We had to confer about how long we could give up our meeting space, and how to broach with Jesse and Danielle the topic of “when it’s time for you to move on.” Hospitality must, at times, be finite. Shortly after Christmas, a

³ Again, Dr. Cathy Ross, University of Oxford, Theology Faculty

⁴ Ross.

small but disturbing incident occurred — a loud, sustained fight between Jesse and Danielle — that heralded the end of our arrangement.

Life is complicated. Kindness can be complicated, too. There's great honor in extending thoughtful hospitality, but there's no shame in applying limits. "To be a stranger is to need a host – but on whose terms?"⁵



"Let's imagine," says my colleague Marilyn Sewell,⁶ "people who might actually visit our church... and to what extent they might feel welcomed:

- young woman, with an infant in her arms [who] begins breastfeeding
- a man from a Pentecostal background waves his hands in the air during the singing of "Spirit of Life"
- a beautifully bedecked woman in a flowered dress, with matching high heels and purse—she is 6'4" tall, and clearly transgender
- a person who speaks out of turn and can't follow the hymns—he seems to be mentally ill
- a well-dressed couple—the man has an American flag in the lapel of his suit—and they have their Bibles with them
- a woman with a guide dog

Would we ask any of these people to say shibboleth? — to speak the magic password, or execute a secret handshake, to earn our warmth and our welcome? What if they failed to do so? Could we genuinely make room for them among us for a Sunday — or more?

Hospitality takes effort; it requires intention. Hospitality is welcome, curiosity, and generosity that overlooks a stranger's inability to pass the tests that we might consciously or unconsciously toss out.

And yet, perhaps this is the difference between hospitality and true belonging: the former is a temporary state, in which the roles of "host" and "guest" are fixed, and power is not equal; the latter is a mutual enterprise between equals.

Hospitality is just the beginning of what it means to invite belonging... and yet, it's belonging — the deep knowledge that you matter to someone else — that "helps us to become who we are meant to be."⁷

⁵ Ross.

⁶ in "Radical Hospitality." See <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermons/142769.shtml>.

⁷ Tyndall.

As you move through this week, as both insider and stranger, ponder these closing words from the Rev. Don Skinner:⁸ “The scope of who it is that God means to invite to the feast... is not ours to define. We are not put in charge of the guest list.”

We are not put in charge of the guest list. We are merely in charge of putting the feast on the table, and pulling up as many chairs as necessary, making of every stranger a guest.

⁸. In *A Passage through Sacred History*. Skinner is Chaplain Emeritus at Allegheny College.