

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JULY 12, 2020**  
***“BRAVING THE WILDERNESS”***

**Song of Focus**  
***No Strangers Here***  
**Words and Music by Ed Varnum**

1. We gather as one from a world that's divided,  
for in Christ every barrier that divides us will fall.  
We gather to worship as your people unite,  
lifting our prayers together to the one God of all.

*Refrain:*

In Christ, God welcomes us all in one Spirit.  
No strangers or outcasts, God's grace brings us near.  
Let us join now in worship, lift voices in praise!  
All are welcome in Jesus! There are no strangers here.

2. Christ, you are the life to those near and far,  
on earth below as in heaven above.  
We are broken, imperfect, yet we come as we are,  
embraced by your Spirit, made one in your love!

Refrain

In Christ, God welcomes us all in one Spirit.  
No strangers or outcasts, God's grace brings us near.  
Let us join now in worship, lift voices in praise!  
All are welcome in Jesus! There are no strangers here.

**The Scripture**  
**Acts 11:1-18**

*Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance, I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely, I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was*

*pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*

**The Message**  
***Braving the Wilderness: With Strangers***  
**Mark Briley**

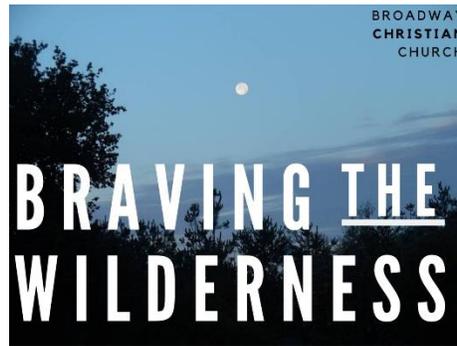
Synopsis: If all of humanity is made in the image of God, we must believe in inextricable human connection. Brene Brown says, *"That connection – the spirit that flows between us and every other human in the world – is not something that can be broken. However, our belief in the connection is constantly tested and repeatedly severed. When we lose sight of that Something greater than us, Something rooted in love and compassion, we are most likely to retreat to our bunkers, to hate from afar, to dehumanize others, and stay out of the wilderness."*

Linus, of *Peanuts* cartoon fame, said, *"I love mankind... it's people I can't stand!"*

This divide is not new. As the movement of faith grew following Jesus' ascension, it was only a matter of time before expansion (who could be tolerated, accepted, even welcomed?) became an issue in the church. The Spirit didn't discriminate. Whether the disciples liked a particular person or group was of no consequence. This reality only continued to rise, and it does still today.

Peter wrestled with who could be *"in"* ... and who should remain *"out."* His wrestling shocked more than a few... but may be the only reason we are included in the movement today.

*"If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17)*



“Don’t be a stranger!” “He never met a stranger!” “Stranger danger!” We do love alliteration, don’t we? Netflix offered a popular series a couple of years ago called, *Stranger Things*. I haven’t seen it, but it has certainly developed quite a following. I laughed the other day as someone said to me, “I’ve finished Netflix.” “Oh, like a series?” I asked. “No... like all of Netflix. All of it.” There was a sitcom from my childhood that I don’t remember watching much, but the name came quick to mind. It was called *Perfect Strangers*. First airing in 1986, in that coveted time slot between *Who’s the Boss* and *Moonlighting*, the show followed the relationship of Larry, a budding photographer from Wisconsin, who started life in Chicago, and his unknown-to-his-distant-cousin, Balki, who shows up



from the Mediterranean island, Mypos, fully intending to live with Larry. Balki knows little about America other than his often out of context recollections of American pop culture. “America: Land of my dreams and home of the Whopper!” he’d say. While resistant to taking on this “project,” Larry comes around to the idea of helping Balki experience and navigate life in America. Their common day adventures get them in troubling situations but nothing that couldn’t be resolved in about 23 minutes on a Wednesday night; often ending in Balki’s famous, dance of joy. They were the perfect strangers – two totally different people, surprisingly thrust together, awkwardly attempting to tolerate their situation all the while growing to learn and grow and enjoy the company of the other. Isn’t this often the case for the relationships in our lives?

Everyone you are in relationship with was once a stranger – a person, by definition, with whom you had no previous acquaintance. Your best friend. Your prom date. Your spouse. Your dentist. Your minister. We are born a stranger to the world – only finding our way through encounters with other strangers born just the same as us. One day your spirit is totally hanging with God and then, thump – God drops you off in Columbia, or Iraq, or Punta Cana, on the day of your birth, surrounded by strangers, many of whom were doing a dance of joy the first time you saw one another. Life is

strange; isn't it? And we were once strangers, thrust together in attempt to find meaning and purpose and connection. Such is truly an amazing thing.

If all of humanity is made in the image of God, we must believe in inextricable human connection. Dr. Brene Brown says, "*That connection – the spirit that flows between us and every other human in the world – is not something that can be broken.*" Can't be broken. But here's the important part. She says, "*Our belief in the connection is constantly tested and repeatedly severed. When we lose sight of that Something greater than us, Something rooted in love and compassion [Something we would call God], we are most likely to retreat to our bunkers, to hate from afar, to dehumanize others and stay out of the wilderness.*"<sup>1</sup>



Linus, of Peanuts cartoon fame, said, "*I love humankind... it's people I can't stand!*"

This divide is not new. As the movement of faith grew following Jesus' ascension, it was only a matter of time before expansion (*who could be tolerated, accepted, even welcomed*) became an issue in the church. Peter wrestled with who could be "*in*" ... and who should remain "*out*." His wrestling shocked more than a few... but his willingness to wrestle with

welcome may be the only reason we are included in the movement today. We are concluding our *Braving the Wilderness* series today with what I think is a fitting and beautiful reality.

We've been following the early Christian movement – not even called that at this point – but helpful for us to track as we get inspired by those who picked up the mantle Jesus had left for ordinary people like you and me to carry into the future. How would they do it... *if* ... it could be done at all? It was not a cake walk. It was challenging and hard and included persecution and setbacks and disagreement among the leadership about truth and welcome and how to go about growing the movement. Sounds like almost every experience we have in life whether that's within our family systems, our churches, or our work environments.

Two perfect strangers at the heart of today's focus come together and completely alter the direction of the ministry. Stranger number one? Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion stationed at Caesarea which was the headquarters of the government of Palestine. He would have been like a sergeant-major to connect with our own military

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Brene Brown's "*Braving the Wilderness*" remains the inspiration for this sermon series. This quote as well as references to Linus, Harry Potter and Sandy Hook later in the message come from this work as well. Random House Publishing. New York. 2017. Chapter 6.

terms. We also hear Cornelius described as a *God-fearer*.<sup>2</sup> In those days, this had become almost a technical term for Gentiles who were weary of the gods and ways of the culture and had attached themselves to the Jewish religion. They didn't accept circumcision and the Law, but they attended the synagogue and believed in one God and the ethics of the Jewish religion. The text says Cornelius was a person of prayer and had given himself to help the needs of his fellow humans. His search for God had made him love people and, in Jesus' greatest commandment to love God with a second like it to love humanity, those who love their fellow humans, albeit strangers, are not far from the kingdom of God. In a vision, Cornelius is told to send for a guy named Simon – that everyone was calling Peter – who's staying outside of the town with Simon the tanner, and hear what he has to say. Enter perfect stranger number two: Simon Peter.

Peter is staying with Simon the tanner. While this detail is easily overlooked, it's worth saying that a tanner worked with dead bodies of animals and therefore was permanently unclean. If you dreamed of being a taxidermist and were Jewish, well, probably just had to give up on that dream. No rigid Jew would have dreamed of accepting hospitality from a tanner. There is little doubt that Simon the tanner was a Christian, and Peter had begun to see that Christianity was broader than the laws and taboos that kept so many separated from the movement. So, it's safe to say that Peter is already challenging his own beliefs and traditions, but he wasn't fully inclusive of the outsider just yet. Before Cornelius could be welcomed into the Church, Peter had to really learn this lesson.

Again, strict adherents to Judaism in that time believed God had no use for the Gentiles. At times, they went to the length of discouraging any from helping a Gentile woman in childbirth because that would only bring another Gentile into the world. Can you imagine? Peter had to unlearn that before Cornelius could get in. Maybe we need to unlearn some things about our restrictive instincts or traditions when it comes to who Christ's welcome can reach. And so, Peter has a vision of his own. It had to hit him three different times for him to really grasp that this was God's vision; a reminder that sometimes we must hear the same thing many times before it can crack our spirit.

I have been accused, at times, of preaching about the love of God too often. My gut response is to respond, "*When you have totally embodied the love of God in your own life, then come back and we'll talk about some of the other stuff.*"

I'm sure some of you were among the 1.9 billion people who watched Prince Harry and Meghan get married a couple of years ago now. A cool 2 billion watched William and Kate get married so clearly some of us were slacking. I had not intended to watch, but Carrie and I were getting ready for a full day and it was on. I stopped in my tracks at one point thinking, "*Billions of people tuned in to get a good look at fancy hats, Oprah,*

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<sup>2</sup> Exegetical support from this message inspired by William Barclay's commentary on the Book of Acts. Westminster Press. 1975.

*Elton John, and to catch Marcus Mumford in a big yawn on camera. What they're getting, however, was a fifteen-minute sermon about the love of Jesus from Bishop Michael Curry.* It was amazing. He said, "Jesus didn't die on the cross to receive an honorary doctorate," which was my favorite line. Curry said, "Jesus gave up his life for the well-being of the world. For us. That's what love is." Then he went into this beautiful motif about how such a pervasive love could change the world. Love... over and over and over. Peter needed to hear this vision multiple times before he could understand it as his own.

So, the strangers meet. Peter is receptive to the contingent sent by Cornelius and Peter goes with the guys (*and six of his own posse*) back to Cornelius' place. They are welcomed in and share some of the normal pleasantries – Christian side hugs and some small chat about "Michael" or "Lebron" and how "Hamilton" the movie wasn't as good as the live production on Broadway but still worth the watch. After all of that, Cornelius says, "I trust God has brought us together... please share your story with me." Peter shares his elevator version of the story of Christ. And before he can even share the whole thing, something palpable happens – Pentecost 2.0. The Holy Spirit falls on the house and the room has come alive with the hope and Spirit of Christ... and every person in the house sees it, feels it, and can't deny it. Peter's all – "I can't believe my eyes but I can't deny it one bit. He turns to the six buddies with him... you guys seeing this?" They did. And Peter's like, "This is it. They're in. Jesus said to the ends of the earth and by golly, here we are." And they baptized them then and there, Cornelius fired up the grill to celebrate and Peter stayed with them for a few days to enjoy their company, teach them further about his encounters with Jesus, and to marvel at the way God makes strangers, friends; even brothers. The sheer openness on both sides here is amazing.

How many encounters of the Spirit have we missed out on because we decided to keep to ourselves – don't want to meet *those* people, don't need them, they are outside of any realm of deserving God's mercy anyway; forget it. We form such a stranger danger mentality that we hole ourselves up with people who only think like we do, look like we do, talk like we do. This didn't happen in the early church. In those early seasons of the church, barrier upon barrier were broken down in the name of Christ. If given the chance, the Spirit can still do that today.

But – as is so often the case – others in the movement heard about Peter's ribeye cookout with the gentiles, hanging with the cow-hide rug maker, and, as the text says, "ruining our reputation!"

We are so threatened by the notion of change, aren't we? We have this staunch attachment to inertness – things that are static appear more controllable and so we hunker down in those corners. I'm not sure how Peter's connections to these folks were seen as so appalling. He was following the example of Jesus who, as Scripture

tells us, hung out with publicans, tax collectors, and sinners – the triple threat of those despised in society. And what does it mean that he “*hung out*” with them? It must have included times of car karaoke and laughter and chips and queso and times when the love of God and their desire to mutually care for each other became a focus of their relationship.

Even so, the stranger always brings an element of discomfort. So Peter is called on the carpet and told to explain himself at the church Board Meeting. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, tells the whole story of Peter’s vision again. This shouldn’t be overlooked. Luke uses so much space to cover this encounter with Cornelius and the movement of the Holy Spirit beyond the Jewish community that we must receive it as an extremely important reality to Luke’s sense of inclusion of the Gentiles. It wasn’t a time when everyone had their own blog and endless data space to type words upon words upon words. In ancient times, a writer had very limited space. Rolls of papyrus were as precious as toilet paper in a pandemic and really an unwieldy thing. The longest rolls used were about thirty-five feet long which would be almost exactly the length required to hold the book of Acts. Into that limited space, Luke had endless material to fit. He must have been very careful about what he was going to set down as most important for perpetuity’s sake. He tells this account in its fullness two times. This is a notable milestone for the Church who was groping its way into the conception of what taking Christ to the world would really mean.

As Peter shares his own account before the Board, he tells them that he took his posse with him – six brethren to be precise. Peter made seven which is important. In Egyptian law, which the Jews would know well, seven witnesses were necessary to completely prove a case. In Roman law, which they were also well versed, seven seals were necessary to authenticate a really important document. Peter is saying, “*I’m not here to defend or argue – this is just what happened, and seven witnesses confirm what I’m saying.*”

It is the fruit of the faith that makes it real, believable, trustworthy. No one is ever really argued into Christianity by logic or idealizations of concepts. By our love we are known. By the fruits of the Spirit, God, in Christ, has changed the world. Argue all day long what you believe. Post a real zinger on Facebook that digs at another viewpoint. Argue a proof-texted logic about any topic but without fruits of the Spirit – it won’t get us far.

What are the fruits of the Spirit? The fifth chapter of Galatians drops the knowledge:

**The fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**

If you’re looking for a way to live out your faith this week, pick one of those fruits of the Spirit and honor it. Pray about how it is being revealed in your life. Share it with someone else. Study it. Embody it and take on another one the following week... make

a summer faith discipline. Do so, and I promise your faith will be challenged and will grow... as will your influence.

Hearing Peter's account, the Board and all gathered quieted for a time as they soaked in what he was saying. Once it truly sank in, they started praising God: "*It's really happened,*" they said. "*God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!*"

And so it was – braving the wilderness with perfect strangers opened a way, gave someone courage enough to pass the gift on to someone who passed it to another and another and another until it was passed to you and me. It spurs on this desire for it not to end with us... that we could now be the ones to share, to welcome the stranger, to consider that someone we've deemed unworthy in the past as the very person, or group of persons, that Christ is waiting for us to reach toward and say, "*Tell me your story and I'll tell you mine.*" It's Mary Oliver's simple word on "*Instructions for living a life: pay attention; be astonished; tell about it.*"

What are we missing out on... *who* are we missing out on... because we've kept to ourselves? How do we cultivate and grow our belief in inextricable human connection as Peter and Cornelius did? *We. Show. Up.* We show up for collective moments of joy and pain, so we can actually bear witness to inextricable human connection.

It's why 200 strangers sat teary-eyed in a movie theater and raised their imaginary wands to the ceiling when Professor McGonagall raises her wand to the sky as Harry Potter weeps over the death of his mentor. A theater room full of hands raised, all who know Harry Potter is not real but knowing that the power of the collective light they raise is real. It's why I stop whatever I'm doing and dance when Coldplay's song "*Paradise*" comes on the radio. I think about some of my best friends and strangers from around the world with whom we danced with joy to that very song on several occasions. It's why someone who has never been to Newtown, Connecticut, can, upon driving into town for the first time, read the sign that says: "*We are Sandy Hook. We Choose Love.*" and immediately hold 'all the feels' of strangers who lost children, the pain of a community shook by violence, responding in love. It's why when I see a parent smiling wearing a rainbow colored "*Proud Parent*" pin, I smile, too, knowing someone has created brave space and another family has waded into that space with love. It's why when I see a "*Black Lives Matter*" sign posted in someone's yard, the Rolodex in my mind spins through names and images of those I love knowing like Peter, who would soon be planting a "*Gentile Lives Matter*" sign in his yard, that someone longs to be truly seen as beloved; made in the image of God. Gentiles were no longer strangers to Peter... they had a name: Cornelius for starters... and his life mattered.

Now... if you turn the lights on in the theater at said Harry Potter showing or discuss the pros and cons of homeschooling with the person sitting next to you or discuss politics with your fellow dancers when the DJ scratches the song to a halt or talk gun laws with families in Newtown ... some will start to build walls again. For whatever reason, we allow difference to negate our extraordinary innate inter-connectedness.

There were certainly plenty of differences between Peter and Cornelius – plenty of things for which they might disagree. But they opened themselves to what God could teach them through the relationship with the other and by doing so, Jesus was honored, and we're experiencing a service of Christian worship this morning because of it. *"We need these moments with strangers as reminders that despite how much we might dislike someone on Facebook or even in person, we are still inextricably connected."* So... pick your cliché: *"Don't be a stranger,"* may fit best here. Find the best and beauty in all you encounter... for we are all made to brave the wilderness together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.