

Learning From Strangers – Sermon Starters

<https://www.gcorr.org/learning-from-strangers-sermons-starters>

Introducing two new sermon starters from the biblical texts highlighted in the “Learning from Strangers” small-group sessions. With each of them, think about how the sermon starter connects with cross-racial and cross-cultural (CR/CC) ministries and experiences.

LUKE 2:22-40 (Session One – Strangers Bearing Gifts)

All of the strangers in this story were either following the prescribed religious traditions of their day or following their daily rituals at the Temple. Mary and Joseph had their baby circumcised on the 8th day, going to Temple at time of purification, and presenting a prescribed sacrifice at the Temple. In fact, verse 39 states that they only left after “finishing everything required by the law of the LORD.” Simeon was “righteous and devout” (v 25) and Anna worshipped at the Temple “with fasting and prayer night and day” (v 27) being at the Temple like any other day. This presents an experience of people who are following their everyday, ordinary routines, yet receiving extraordinary gifts as God brings them together. Sermons could address how God brings strangers together to share in the blessings in the midst of the ordinary. In the CR/CC context, God has brought the strangers together—the pastor responding to God’s call to ministry and the congregation serving God in ministry through the local church to share in the blessings God has in store for each of us and for our wider community and world.

Many times stories such as these are reduced to “happy blessings” stories. However, Simeon’s blessing includes difficult words which will lead to difficult life experiences. Jesus will “be a sign that will be opposed” (v 34). A “sword will pierce” Mary’s soul (v 35). The redemption of Jerusalem in Anna’s prophecy will come with a price. Sermons might focus on how our understanding of blessings is sometimes reduced to “happy things,” but biblical blessings are messier than that. Another sermon might highlight how risk and resistance accompany some biblical blessings and challenge the congregations to consider how much risk and resistance they are willing to absorb for the sake of God’s plan. A sermon could come from Mary’s point of view to explain and explore the complications of loving someone “dedicated to the LORD.” Using the interpretive lens of blessings that come with risk and resistance might lead some preachers to challenge the congregation to live into the “messy blessings” of CR/CC ministries and allowing God’s power to remind them of the gifts along the way.

Other sermons might focus on these “starters:”

- Verse 39 has Mary, Joseph, and Jesus returning to “Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.” Sometimes we are tempted to stay in the “blessing place.” But what if God’s blessings occur when we bring the gifts of strangers to a new place? What if the “old place” becomes a new place when the blessings of strangers are brought there?
- Sometimes we are tempted to think that strangers are only there to give us gifts. This is the human version of the “ATM blessings from God.” How could sermons elevate the mutuality of blessings as demonstrated among Mary, Joseph and Jesus; Simeon and Anna; Jesus and Simeon and Anna? Sermons could challenge congregations to practice concrete forms of mutual relationships – asking how can CRCC ministry settings create relationships of mutuality – with blessings and gifts flowing to and from all parties?

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11 (Session Two – Our Stories, God’s Story)

Chapter 26 highlights the people’s liturgical life by including the “story” of their origins, oppression, liberation, and worship. Sermons could highlight how our liturgical practices tell a story asking, “What story/ies are our liturgical practices telling?” Sermons could include parts of the congregational history not known by many or newer members, highlight powerful parts of the church history in times when it stood for justice (or not), or remind members of what your church “is known for.” Connecting CR/CC ministry with this line of sermonic structure could include how such ministries ministry aligns (or doesn’t) with this history. Preachers might ask what changes (if any) to our liturgical/worship life would need to change to reflect the story God is asking us to tell now.

Verses 6-9 proclaim a story of suffering on the path to salvation. Sermons might focus on how hearing other’s stories of suffering to salvation helps us to know one another better, or know God better. Other sermons might ask

what detriment is done when we only hear stories of suffering about a group of people – or only stories of salvation/blessings about a group of people. How does this reduction of experiences reduce our “knowing one another?” Some preachers might seek to elevate the telling of stories of suffering and salvation from people in other cultures/races/ethnicities (If doing this, be sure to cite stories written by the people themselves if possible, if not, stories written by people of that same race or culture to limit the possibility of misshaping or misinterpreting another person’s story).

Verse 11 highlights how “you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.” Sermons might connect the joys of CR/CC ministries, in which people “reside” among each other and celebrate God’s goodness together. What would that celebration of God’s goodness look like in your ministry context? Preachers might also want to explore various Bible translations of the word “aliens” (NRSV), “foreigners” (NIV), “immigrants” (CEB), for example, and consider what these words mean in your community. What does it mean to include aliens/foreigners/immigrants in the celebration of God’s goodness in your CR/CC community? This is not to hide the problems or difficulties that might/do arise when different people of different experiences come together to figure out how to live and worship with one another. However, it doesn’t allow for the difficulties to overwhelm or eclipse the joys that can be present even in the midst of the trials. Some pastors might question the phrase “Levites and the aliens” to de-center our temptation to create labels of “us/Levites” and “them/the aliens.” Sermons could help people to see the dual benefits of reducing the “us/them” categories AND honoring the differences among us while we do.