

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 6/30/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

I often call people from my cell phone which has a number from the central coast of California: 805-944-8085. I suspect that many times, people get these calls and assume it is a telemarketer or spam call. Please add my number to your phone, or at least consider that a call from an 805 prefix might be your pastor and accept the call. I miss connecting with you.

The Torah, the law given by GOD to Moses and recorded in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, has many more commands to love the stranger than it does to love the neighbor. One reason for showing love to the stranger this is simply that GOD commands it. Another is that by doing so, by loving the stranger, we are imitating GOD who loved us while GOD was a stranger to us. The main reason given in the scripture, though, is that we are to remember what it feels like to be a stranger ourselves. “You shall not oppress a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” Recall that these instructions were given by GOD to the Israelites during the Exodus as they were leaving their bondage in Egypt. It was fresh in their minds and easy to remember what it was like to have been in Egypt where they had been made to be slaves as well as remembering how they wished they had been treated.

“Love” because you “remember.” The two go together. We show love to strangers because of the love that has been shown to us, most of all by GOD.

Yesterday, someone cut me off on the freeway. I immediately hit my horn. In part, this was because they came very close to clipping my car. Or, at least, it felt like they came close. Second, I wanted them to think about how they were driving so that they didn’t do this to anyone else. And, third, I did it because I was angry to have had to suddenly step on my breaks to avoid what I was sure would be an accident.

Once in the lane in front of me, the driver gave me a quick wave as if to say, “See you!” and then drove on. I was irritated and thought for a moment how I could respond. Several ideas came to mind, but my relationship with the LORD won’t let me do those things. (“Thanks a lot, JESUS!” and you can decide for yourself whether I’m saying that with appreciation or regret.) But then, I remembered. I remembered the times I had gotten honked at, presumably for cutting someone else off. I remembered how I had waved in a feeble attempt to say, “I’m sorry,” and perhaps a thank you for not coming at me with road rage. And in my remembering, I was able to grant the other driver some grace, to show some of the love that had been shown to me, even if love had not actually been the intent of the person I had cut off.

Years ago, driving on the Illinois Toll Way, our family got in line to pay our fee at the toll gate. If you have exact change, you can go through a different gate, and just toss your coins into a metal basket that counts your payment and then gives you a green light to continue. If you don’t have exact change, you have to go through the gate for which we were in line where an attendant will receive your payment, take the balance due, and give you some coins back. Our family, my wife, Lori, and I, and our two daughters, were in an out-of-state car, waiting for our turn to pay. When we got to the gate, the attendant said, “Go ahead. The car in front of you paid for you.” A gift of grace. A gift of love. From then on, when we were on the Toll Way, our daughters would ask if we could pay for the car behind us

and, because we remembered, we often did, even though we didn't know who was behind us. They were strangers. It was also fun to watch the response of those whose toll we had paid. Sometimes they did nothing, as though pleased that someone had made a mistake for their benefit. Sometimes they would catch up and wave and say, "Thank you." Sometimes they would race ahead to pay our fee at the next gate.

Remember and love. It is a powerful formula. Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we are tempted to act unkindly or feel resentful. It is on these occasions that we should remember a time when we were a stranger. Or someone who was in need. Or just not aware or down on our luck. The Golden Rule says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Because we have been blessed with grace, with love, especially GOD'S love, we can remember and in that remembrance be guided to show love for others.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey