

On Welcoming the Stranger

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One of the realities I discovered while working in Junction (Texas) was the regular arrival of poor travelers who need a little help--sometimes a shove--to get to their next destination. In a town on the edge of civilization that specializes in gas stations just off a major highway we were bound to welcome all sorts of strangers.

Over the course of a month we have played host to a new friend, Ricky. Ricky was headed to San Diego, but his van--that he lives in--broke down a few miles up the highway and was towed to a local wrecking yard where he took up residence.

Ricky was a mess. He was in his late 60's but looked like he was in his late 80's. He was an old hippy who had a difficult childhood with an absentee father and alcoholic mother. He made a living as a painter for a while until he contracted lead poisoning. On top of this he was diagnosed with a form of Lou Gehrig's disease (or ALS, that disease you all poured ice water on your heads for). His version works slower, degenerating his body less aggressively but no less effectively like a form of torture. He has to do physical exercises constantly to maintain feeling in his throat so he can retain the ability to swallow and stay alive.

Physically he was strange. He had no teeth and his skin had lost its elasticity, making his face droopy and his speech even less discernible. He walked with a limp and his shoulders were slanted. His clothes were always dirty and held to his body by makeshift belts. Its not hard to notice a grapefruit size lump protruding from his stomach, which he informed me was a hernia. Apparently there was another, slightly smaller, hernia on another part of his body.

Ricky was difficult. He would talk for hours until you had to tell him to stop, trailing down whatever thought pops into his head--usually stories from his life. And he would come by the office every day, sometimes twice a day to talk or shower or use the phone or internet. He did not ask for much money. Mostly I thought he was just lonely.

Every time I was tempted to brush him off or refuse him even a portion of my time the image of Ricky in his van at night popped into my head. When I go to sleep at night I have a wife beside me who will talk to me, love me, share in my joys and sorrows. I have children who will wake me up because they want my attention. I don't know who Ricky had, if anyone.

I wanted to help Ricky. I wanted to help him get his van fixed so he can get to San Diego. I wanted to help him get access to food and shelter and a shower and a phone. But the best way I could help him, not excluding these things, was to give him the time of day. I needed to help him know that he carries within him the image of God. Material help is vital, but I needed to help him by seeing Christ in him, curious as to how Christ chooses to be seen in such a frustrating person.

One of the last days he was around he found a guitar I kept in my office and asked if he could play it. I said sure, unsure of how he could produce anything but a few poor notes. As I sat at my desk fiddling with whatever I was busy with I heard an impressive melody begin to play. Ricky claimed it was something from Paul McCartney. And then he began to sing in his raspy, toothless voice a sweet little tune. Most people in his condition would be dead or want to die. But Ricky kept on going, and I'm glad I got to hear his music.

Romans 13:8 says, Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." I owed Ricky nothing except an extraordinary debt of love, and he to me. I did not need to fix him, I did not need to give him all my amazing advice, I certainly did not need to shut the door to him. I needed to make space and time for him, to enjoy his gifts, to love him.

The thing is, you are Ricky to someone. I am Ricky to many, no doubt. There are people in your life that are broken deep down inside, some of them more obvious than others. You owe a debt of love to them. We are not asked to fix them. We are asked to be patient with them, to see their inner beauty and value. In short, to love them. We are allowed to be frustrated, annoyed, and perhaps disgusted by them. They'll probably get frustrated and disgusted by us at some point too. We are allowed to set boundaries when

necessary, but we are not allowed to see them or treat them as anything less than beloved. "Let no debt remain outstanding except the debt to love one another."