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Series: Forrest Gump ~ Lessons from I John
Sermon: Stupid Is As Stupid Does

I John 3:7-11; 16-18 (NIV)

7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. 11 For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Sermon:

Ten years ago, I was walking around Tokyo Disney land, surrounded by 100,000 of my favorite Japanese. Our Disneyland and their Disneyland are exactly the same, and very much different. Exactly the same layout, same buildings, same bathroom stalls. But if you've ever been to Disney, you've noticed that a third of the folks are foreigners. The signs are in many languages. PA announcements are in many languages. But at the Tokyo Disney, less than 1% of the visitors are foreigners. Every sign was in Japanese. We were aliens, in a foreign land. Out of a 100,000 people, we did not see another American. Except for Alice, sadly enough, who spotted us a hundred yards away, came up to us and gave each of us a big hug - "My people" she said. While we were in Japan, as hospitable they were, the feeling was immense that we did not belong there.

Maybe you've had that feeling, where you just don't belong. Maybe this has happened to you. You're supposed to meet up with some friends at a party, or at church, or out somewhere and you arrive first. And you don't know anyone there and mill about awkwardly waiting for your friends to arrive. Maybe this is your first time at this church, and you feel like a stranger in the midst of strangers. Don't worry, we've got the nicest people around.

Or perhaps it's your first day at a new school. First day at a new work place. You don't know anyone and you're walking down the halls, trying to find your classes, trying not to get noticed as the "new kid". Or you are out of country, trying to buy a few things. You get lost. You can't find your way around. You can't read the signs. The people are all talking too fast. You feel lost. A fish out of water. There are many times in life when we feel like the stranger. The outsider. The alien one. They are situations of discomfort and anxiety.

Imagine living your life in that state. What must that be like? An entire life shaped by anxiety, discomfort, and the sense that one is an 'outsider', inherently disadvantaged. Never secure in one's sense of well-being or place in the community.

We watched Forrest Gump last week as a family. Everywhere he went, Forrest was on the outside. Never quite belonging to any group. Everyone just thought him stupid and paid him no mind. In Biblical Israel there was a class of individuals in the community known as gerim. Gerim, not germ. The word gerim is variously translated as 'sojourner' 'alien' 'foreigner' 'resident alien' and 'stranger'. It applied to a non-Israelite dwelling

in and among the people of Israel. And it is clear from the Biblical material that there were many of them. They are not always clearly identified. Were they Canaanites? The other peoples who inhabited the land of Israel? Were they from abroad—Egypt, Assyria, Moab, Edom? The text doesn't seem to make distinctions. They probably all looked the same, but they were outsiders. The 'strangers' were those who were not of the people Israel who nevertheless resided in their midst.

It is a command to the Israelites, that though they are a people in special relationship to God they are not to oppress the strangers in their midst. Nor are they to treat them any differently than they would treat each other. An admonition that is frequently encountered in Scripture :

Leviticus 19:33 : When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.

Leviticus 24:22 : You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God.

"You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt." You have heard the phrase, bronzed onto the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

However, despite these noble words, we as a nation, have not always been the best at welcoming the stranger. In our own national life we have seen plenty of examples of fear of the stranger. In the 1850's a group called the "Know-Nothings " who were rabidly anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic threw a stone intended for the Washington Monument into the Potomac because it had been donated by the Vatican. This party flourished in the South and in the urban centers of the North where immigration was bringing German and Irish Catholics into the United States. And we see the same thing repeat itself in different fashion with waves of Italian and Polish immigration in the late 19th century. And with Jewish immigration in the early Twentieth. And so on. Often, this anti-immigrant attitude would be joined in by the very groups who had experienced it in the last go-around. And this problem is by no means the United States' problem alone. In Germany it is the Turks who are the 'stranger'. In France, the Algerians. In Britain, the Pakistanis. In Israel, the Palestinians. And so on, around the world. There are always communities within our midst who are 'other', 'alien' and 'stranger.'

Why is it so hard to love the stranger? Why do outsiders and aliens strike such fear in us , causing us to close in rather than open up? Much of the current talk about immigrants seems to defy reason. You often hear that immigration is a threat to our economic livelihood. "They take our jobs" I hear you say! But there are countless illustrations where many businesses would fail because they have been unable to find native-born who are willing to do the work. Indeed, as many businesses will point out, immigrant labor is vital to our economic survival. Much of the problems of job loss in this country are the consequences of globalization and the competition from abroad in terms of cheaper labor and infrastructure abroad. When we lived up in Omaha, I took a short spanish speaking course. Next to me was the manager of Grisanties, the Italian restaraunt with awesome great bread and dipping sause. He was learning spanish because everyone in the back was Hispanic. It's all who would apply for the minimum wage job. Who's working construction? Who's building our roads? Who's picking your fruit? Anglo's to be sure, but a disproportionate number of immigrants. Our unemployment rate is where it's at due to losing our jobs oversees, it is not due to inexpensive labor domestically.

"They take our welfare", I hear you say! Every study has shown that immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits. A typical immigrant and his or her children will pay an estimated \$80,000 more in taxes than they will receive in combined local, state and federal benefits over their lifetimes. A quote from Alan Greenspan: "There are great misperceptions that immigrants are a drain on our economy, but many studies have confirmed the opposite is true. Even undocumented workers contribute more than their fair share in our great country."

Their employers are required to pay social security taxes, both for the person and the business. Since

undocumented workers have no valid social security numbers they can never receive those benefits. The money is placed in the Social Security Trust Fund, for our use, and amounts to between \$6-7 billion per year.

Immigrants pay sales tax, cigarette tax, wheel tax, gas tax, etc. They pay property tax if they own a home, or, as renters they pay property tax in the rent.

The very real tax advantage to the United States, and the recruiting demands of employers, are major political reasons the system is so hard to change. Curiously, our government will not issue Social Security numbers to anyone without a work permit, but will provide an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) for sending in employer withholding from persons without a work permit. Undocumented workers can receive no return benefit or tax rebate. In other words, we are slow to change our immigration policies because of the additional revenues immigrants bring in without having to pay much in benefits - billions of dollars worth! There are a few benefits they receive: Schooling is guaranteed to be available to every child in Oregon, from ages 5 to 21. Emergency Health Care must be offered at every hospital emergency room in the U. S. This does not include hospital care or physicians care after release from the emergency room.

“They don’t speak English.” I hear you say! “No havlo anglais”! Now we’re just grasping for straws. Yes, most recent illigials don’t, or refuse, to speak English. You come to this country, you speak English. My wife and I went to Mexico a few years ago, to Puerto Viarta. You know what my attitude was? They’d better speak English! Everywhere we went, every store, every taxi, “You’d better speak English.” Of course, my attitude was, “You want my money, you speak English”. I wonder if the immigrants have a similar attitude. “You want my sweat and my blood while I build your precious interstate? You can deal with my broken English”. I need to remember that the first generation of anybody who came over here learned as much English to get by and maybe no more. Many of you might remember your grandparents or great-grandparents speaking another tounge when they were at home. My wife took Czech in college just to try to learn the meaning of some of her grandfather’s swear words. But the next generation learned our language. And it took a generation, maybe two. But I don’t speak German or Czech, although that is my Kolache eating heratage. We don’t like anything that is different than us. To put it in another way, how silly does this sound, “My German grandfather Franz didn’t come into this country to see it overrun by immigrants.”

And of course, the last reason to fear immigration is that we are letting in the terrorists. And in this heightened sense of terroristic threat that we face today, I can see that. But the numbers don’t play out. Almost all of the mass shootings last year were home grown perpetrators. In 2015, more Americans were killed by lightning than by terrorists. More Americans were killed by televisions than by immigrants. Literally - more folks had televisions fall on top of them than by jihadists. Cows killed more Americans. Not by eating them, literal cows. Here’s one to blow your mind: More Americans were killed by toddlers with guns than by terrorists in 2015.

It does not seem that our inability to embrace the stranger has anything to do with reason. It really is a spiritual failing: we fail to see ourselves in the stranger. So, what is the proper answer to the complex issue of immigration? I’ll be honest. I have no idea. But what I do know is this: If we make prejudices and policies out of fear, then we will make horrible decisions. If our information about immigrants comes only out of talk radio and we do not do our own research and develop our own opinions, we will make horrible decisions. The last culture that used the phrase enmass “Show me your papers”, or built a wall was a culture based in tyranny, socialism and communism - not the land of the Free.

No matter where you land on this subject, I just want to remind you of the biblical mandate: As a community of Christian faith, bound by the Covenants Old and New, we are bound to execute justice on behalf of those to whom it comes with so much difficulty: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. We are called to have but one law for the native born and the stranger –to treat with justice and equality all people. To lay down our life for our neighbor. Stupid is as stupid does. You are known by what you do. And all of this comes out of a deep understanding that before the throne of God we are all strangers. All on the outside, all sojourners in the house of God. Remember to love the stranger, for once you were a stranger in the land of Egypt. And the people of

God said, Amen.