
Blessing at the Border
Chapel in the Park United Church
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Based on John 8:2-11 and Matthew 25:31-40

[image FIFA 2026]

The FIFA World Cup is an amazing event. People from around the world come together - in this case spread over 3 countries - and celebrate. If you do not care about FIFA you might think they are just playing soccer. And yes, they do play soccer, even if they do call it “football”. But FIFA is also a celebration of our shared humanity. FIFA demonstrates human traits that we all share, including our spirit of competition. Our sense of pride in wherever it is that we come from. And above all, our understanding that we need everyone in the game. The World Cup would be pretty boring if there was only 1 team from 1 country playing.

Sadly, FIFA is also exposing other human characteristics that are also quite common. Fear and hatred of foreigners. Or to be blunt - racism.

We saw all of those human dynamics played out even before the opening whistle of the first match. Because the first task for all foreign athletes is to simply enter the country where their match is being held.

[image: blessing at the border]

In Mexico, foreign athletes were greeted by joyful people, Mariachi bands, enthusiasm, and a real sense of fun. Here in Canada foreign athletes were greeted by many, in a spirit of anticipation, friendliness, and welcome. Mexico and Canada had the idea that we wanted to welcome the World into our countries. Which is why we agreed to host the World Cup in the first place.

Meanwhile, in the United States, many foreign athletes - particularly if they are brown-skinned or Muslim - were received with suspicion, apprehension, and distrust. Many foreign athletes endured lengthy and pointless interrogations. Many were turned away from the country altogether. The United States seems to want to prevent the World

from coming into their country. Which makes me wonder why they agreed to host the World Cup in the first place.

As I said, FIFA has brought out our common humanity, including the good, the bad, and the ugly.

FIFA is not creating this dynamic of course. It is just revealing who we already are as a society. What do we do when a stranger arrives at our border? Do we treat them as a threat? Or do we treat them as a blessing? And we can see this in our own lives. When we meet a stranger, how often is our first response fear? And how often is our first response a gentle reminder that a stranger is simply a friend we have not met.

This question is what is driving the theme of my continuing education time this year. I want to understand fear and hatred better. Why is fear of strangers so popular? Why it is so easy to whip people into a state of continuous fear using propaganda that projects hatred onto certain groups of people? The short version of my thesis is this: All forms of racism and discrimination are stupid. So why is racism still so common in our societies?

I do understand the basics already, of course. Hatred largely comes from fear. But even so - why are we so triggered into fear of other people? There are a number of factors of course. But part of the problem is baked into Christianity. And that is unfortunate. On the plus side, I am well-qualified to discuss that aspect of the problem. And I would greatly appreciate hearing your own ideas over coffee time.

Traditional Christianity has accepted and inherited from Judaism the concept of “Ethical Dualism”. And what is that?

[quote below]

According to Wikipedia, “Ethical dualism refers to the practice of imputing evil entirely and exclusively to a specific group of people, while disregarding or denying one's own capacity to commit evil. The consequence of that stance is the creation of an ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ mentality. Thereby polarizing social configurations into extremes in a way that mutual understanding between the two ‘poles’ is made very difficult or impossible, since the ‘Them’, the ‘Other’, is demonized [and] dehumanized.”

Ethical dualism was baked into Christianity from the earliest days, with the idea

that good and evil are separate and distinct. Ethical dualism is reinforced with concept pairs like good and evil, heaven and hell, God and the Devil, holy and profane. Once people have been convinced that good and evil are separate, it is a small step from there to get people to believe that some groups of people are good, and other groups of people are evil. And from there is a minuscule step to get a group of people to believe that they themselves are the good people, and anyone who is different are evil. In the Bible, this is expressed in the idea that some people are “God’s chosen people” which is pure racism wrapped in religious language.

I am always surprised to realize that ethical dualism was baked into Christianity. Because I think that Jesus did not support the idea himself. And Christianity is supposed to follow the teachings of Jesus, right? Both of the biblical stories we read today suggest that Jesus did not support ethical dualism. Let’s unpack those stories.

Consider the story we read from John 8. Here is a summary.

[image: holding a stone]

One day Jesus was talking with some people. Some religious leaders brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. The leaders reminded Jesus that according to Jewish tradition, the woman should be stoned to death. For example from Deuteronomy 22, “If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall be stoned to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” The religious leaders asked Jesus what he would do with the woman. These religious leaders did not care about the woman. They just wanted Jesus to give an answer that would split his supporters. Jesus had to choose between refusing to follow a religious law, or killing a woman.

Jesus answered, “Let the person who throws the first stone at the woman be someone who has never broken any laws themselves.” The crowd quietly dispersed and the woman went home.

That phrase from the Bible, “So you shall purge the evil from your midst”, is classic ethical dualism. But Jesus rejected the punishment as well as the thinking behind it. All people carry good and evil within. Evil cannot be banished through murder, or expulsion, or war, or genocide, or by building walls to keep evil out. Everyone has

capacity for good and evil. Ethical dualism is simplistic and does not lead to truth. It instead leads to entitlement, exceptionalism and racism.

The local people were tempted to pick up stones to throw at the woman. But Jesus reminded them they are all a mix of good and evil themselves. And the people put their stones down and walked away.

I suppose the question for us today is - are there people who we ourselves are tempted to throw stones at? Are there groups of people that we ourselves want to dump blame on while we ourselves fail to see the evil that we do ourselves?

[image: goat and sheep]

Now, let us consider the story from Matthew 25. Often called the story of the sheep and the goats. Here is a summary:

The story actually begins like an affirmation of ethical dualism. Jesus separates people into two groups - sheep and goats. And the sheep are destined to go to heaven while the goats are destined to go to hell.

But then Jesus pulls a fast one. The distinction between the sheep and the goats is NOT based on ethnicity, or religion, or money, or power. The distinction between the sheep and the goats is NOT based on what group you belong to. The distinction between the sheep and the goats is based solely on whether or not a person helped other people. What makes a person a sheep who is destined for heaven is - to quote Jesus - "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was isolated and you visited me." And just to drive the point home, Jesus says that whenever you did those things for the most disadvantaged people, you did it to Jesus himself.

That is the opposite of ethical dualism. Ethical dualism says that what separates good and bad people is their membership in a particular group. But Jesus says that what separates good and bad people is their behaviour. As individuals.

Moreover, Jesus says that whether or not we ourselves are good or bad people is determined in part by how we treat strangers. Like foreign athletes. Strangers are not threats. Strangers are opportunities for us to decide - am I a sheep or a goat? And the answer will depend only on our behaviour.

[image: blessing at the border]

The question of how we treat strangers is very pressing. Not only because the World is coming to Canada to participate in the World Cup. But also because anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise in the West. Even here in Canada.

Some people argue that Canada is a Christian country, and that we need to minimize immigration to Canada to preserve our Christian value. The logic is that if Christians become a minority, then we will have our Christian values taken away from us.

I find that logic not very logical. I understand the fear that some people feel when they go from being a majority group to a minority group. I get that.

But Christian values include welcoming strangers. We want to be sheep, not goats, remember. Christian values call us to welcome the stranger. The foreign athlete. The immigrant. The refugee.

Here's the point. If we refuse to welcome the stranger, our Christian values are not being taken from us. If we refuse to welcome the stranger then we are throwing our Christian values away ourselves. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was isolated and you visited me." Christian values are not about our membership in a club. Christian values are about our behaviour.

And Christian values demand that we welcome the stranger.

[image: world refugee day]

Today is the weekend we celebrate World Refugee Day, which was on June 20. And what about refugees? The World Cup will end. The athletes will go home. But the refugees of this world do not have a home to go back to. They are not visiting Canada for a few weeks to play football. They are fleeing war, and persecution, and famine, and the catastrophic effects of a changing climate. They are on a much more desperate journey than any athlete. And they are arriving at our border every single day.

And Matthew 25 is very clear about what Jesus thinks we should do. Jesus did not say - I was a stranger and you checked my papers. Jesus did not say - I was a stranger and you questioned my motives. Jesus did not say - I was a stranger and you turned me away because you were afraid. Jesus said - I was a stranger and you took me in.

Refugees are not a threat to our Christian values. Refugees are the test of those values.

So let's go back to where we started. What do we do when a stranger arrives?

One answer is fear. Suspicion. Stones. The other answer is Mariachi bands. And welcome. And friendship.

Today we will be celebrating communion. I created a communion liturgy specifically for today. And as part of that, I want to share this idea with you.

[image: put down a stone. Pick up bread]

This is a stone. It is actually a piece of the Berlin Wall that the Lukas family gave me as a gift. This stone is a symbol of hope, because the Berlin Wall has been torn down. But the Berlin Wall itself symbolizes hatred, racism, division, loss of humanity. Today I'd ask each of us to consider a stone in your own life. And I invite you to put that stone down. And instead, to pick up bread. I invite each of us to put down a stone that we have been holding with the intension of harm. And to pick up bread, with the intension of sharing.

[image: blessing at the border]

We are called to be a Mariachi band people. We are called to see in every stranger not a threat - but a blessing. A blessing at the border. God's own self, arriving in a form we almost turned away.

Put down your stones. And pick up bread to share with the world.
Amen.