

s-Ephes. Series 3-09A-People Are Strange
Eph. 2:17-21 *No longer strangers*
Eph. 3:14-21 *For this reason I bow my knees* (P11B)
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PEOPLE ARE STRANGE

Melanie and Harvey were going to Harvey's family reunion. Harvey had been attending these function since he was just a little tadpole, but ever since he and Melanie were been married, he either skipped them or went alone. It wasn't that Melanie was antisocial or anything like that; it just never seemed quite possible for her to get a week off at the beginning of June when the reunions were always scheduled.

But now both Melanie and Harvey were retired, and there wasn't any reason for Melanie to stay home while Harvey flew to Texas. Well, not any reason that Melanie could admit to Harvey, anyway.

The truth was, Melanie hated being a stranger. Harvey wouldn't understand that; it was, after all, his family. But what a BIG family it was! All descendants of one Abner Hoffman and his second wife Ollie Ann. Apparently, despite infant mortality, Abner and Ollie Ann had managed to raise nine kids to adulthood, and they were all fertile. The fashion of the day was for big families, especially in farm country, and so there was a whole galaxy of aunts, uncles, cousins, little cousins (who were taller than the big cousins) and second cousins twice removed.

Melanie certainly couldn't keep them all straight. In fact, she made Harvey do the Christmas cards after the year she mistook one of the cousins for his own grandpa and asked how the operation for kidney stones went.

Melanie was trying to pack. "What do they wear, Harvey?" she asked, poking and prodding the clothes in her closet with deep misgiving.

"Oh, any old thing." Harvey replied unhelpfully. "It's a hotel. If you wear hotel clothes, you'll be fine."

"What in heck are hotel clothes?" That's what Melanie wanted to know. "You mean, like cruise wear? Bermuda shorts and big straw hats? Sunglasses? Cocktail dresses and black tie? Come, on, Harvey, give me a clue."

"You know, Mel," said Harvey, slipping out the bedroom door. "Just regular clothes."

"What a help *you* are," thought Melanie, pulling out blouses at random. "One thing's for sure. Nobody's going to catch me in a bathing suit."

On the plane, Melanie tried to get Harvey to coach her about who's who. "Remind me again," she said, while Harvey ate both his little bag of pretzels and hers. "Is Vanessa the daughter of Abner Junior, or is she one of Annette's girls?"

"Annette," mumbled Harvey with a mouthful of pretzel.

"And she has two boys?"

"Boy and a girl."

"And their names are...?"

"Melanie, for heaven's sake, nobody's going to expect you to know the names of all the little cousins. Can't you just relax already?"

Well, actually, no. Melanie could *not* relax. But she did shut up and stop asking Harvey so many questions.

Melanie changed her outfit three times before she would go down to the ballroom with Harvey. It didn't make much difference; when they got within four feet of the doorway, a loud and exceedingly friendly relative hustled them inside, stuck nametags on their chests, and got them a cold drink before Melanie even had time to register that she was in the middle of a whole room full of people *who looked an awful lot like Harvey*.

Here, all these years, she thought he was unique. Well, maybe not exactly unique, but she certainly didn't imagine that there could be so many people—men, women, and children, who had that same dip in their nose. The men all shambled just like Harvey; and so did an unfortunate few of the women. Many of those present had the same crinkly red hair. Even the little bitty babies being bounced on kneecaps had dippy noses and crinkly hair.

Melanie had a straight nose and black hair. She had never felt so alien in all her life.

She looked down at the drink in her hand. Some horrible kind of Texas beer, pale and tasteless. She looked at the people surging around her, and had the same impression. Pale and tasteless. Harvey had disappeared into the crowd, waving and shouting at some invisible cousin.

I'm going to stop our story right here and ask a few questions. Have you ever felt like Melanie, a stranger in a strange land? Have you ever dreaded a social situation simply because you knew for certain that there wouldn't be one single person in the room you already knew? Have you ever fussed about your clothes or your hair or your car or your accent or any number of other things that make people self-conscious?

If you have never worried about any of these things, then you should run for public office. Politicians are the only people I know who adore rooms full of people they don't know. The rest of us would rather be on a roller coaster ride with a rhinoceros.

Some of us remember the 60's psychedelic rock group The Doors. Remember them? Their lead singer was more than a little wacko and died early and unpleasantly, but before that happened, they were an extremely popular band for a short period of time and some of their songs are classics. One of their big hits was a sinister song by the title, "People Are Strange." The lyrics were pretty simple: "People are strange, when you're a stranger."

That's just it, isn't it? People *are* strange... when you're a stranger. They aren't strange to themselves. They aren't strange to each other. It's you! You're the one who is a stranger here.

Written under an ancient practice of respectful pretense, Ephesians purports to be by the Apostle Paul. One reason for this subterfuge is so that the material won't be rejected as being too foreign, too strange. If Paul wrote it, then it must be OK! It's like going to the bookstore and heading directly for the section with your favorite authors. If you really liked the last three books by Danielle Steele, then you know you'll probably like the fourth one, too. You don't feel strange in that bookstore. You feel like you're on a mission.

If you're a train buff, and you visit a model train club, you expect to have at least one mutual topic of conversation. You don't feel strange, because the trains, if not the people, are interesting and familiar.

If you buy a ticket to a movie, you expect the other people in the theater to be there for the same reason you are—to sit down and watch the film.

But if you were handed a book by an author you'd never heard of and were told that it was critical that you sit down and read the whole thing, you might be uncomfortable until you got a few chapters into the story. Who knows? Maybe you wouldn't like it. Maybe it'd be offensive, or boring, or scary. Teachers, have you ever thought about how this situation, so common in school assignments, might make your students feel strange? Here, read this book. You have to read the whole thing, and pay attention while you're at it!

If you went to a club meeting, but didn't know what kind of club it was, you definitely would feel strange. Maybe it's a group of Barbie doll collectors. Or line dancers, or swinging singles, or hamster enthusiasts. Human beings evolved to be cautious in strange surroundings and alien situations. That's how Trog the cave man managed not to be eaten the first time he set foot out of the cave! We like to know what we're getting ourselves in for.

And would you ever, every buy a ticket to a movie if you didn't have any idea how people were going to behave in there? I sure wouldn't! At least, not without having some idea of what I was getting myself into. Years and years ago, I went to see "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" when it was first showing at the Castro in San Francisco. I hadn't seen the movie yet, so I didn't understand why all these guys were wearing gold lame bathing suits in the freezing fog. Later, of course, I realized that folks liked to dress as characters from the movie. Nowadays, that's pretty common. Did any of your kids go to the midnight opening of the new Harry Potter film? They all dressed up like Hogwarts students or wizards. You'd feel like a fool if you went and dressed like Darth Vader for a Harry Potter movie. Or discovered it was a special showing for the local nudist colony.

Melanie wished she knew how to dress up like one of Harvey's relatives, so she'd blend into the crowd. It's a natural reaction, to want to be included. Even Paul himself, writing to the Corinthians, admits that he tries to be "all things to all people."

But, for heaven's sake, Melanie was at a *family reunion*. She had been invited, expected, welcomed! She had every reason to be comfortable. Yes, most of the people were already acquainted, but just think—a natural topic of conversation right there in her lap: "How are you related to Harvey?" and away they'd go.

Ephesians says that we are no longer strangers and aliens, none of us; we are all related via the family tree of God. It's a beautiful concept. Near or far, familiar or new—or, as is implied here—Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; all members of the household of God. Ephesians uses the image of fine homebuilding here: we share a home built on a strong foundation by those who preceded us in faith. Jesus is the frame that holds it all together and supports the structure with hidden strength that allows for remodeling and adding on. We make up the walls, floors and ceilings flowing together into corners and rooms and spaces, growing together spiritually, forming a dwelling place for God.

And here God dwells. Come on in. Your clothes are fine. Do you know everybody yet? That's OK. We're all family here. I think I'm your aunt's cousin's brother.

And I like your gold lame shorts.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O holy God, to you who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, bless us with the knowledge and power of Christ, that

he may dwell in our hearts through faith, that we may be rooted and grounded in love, and that we may be filled with all your fullness as we find and settle ourselves in our place, here in your holy family.

To you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.