"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." —Jesus

strangers at my door

A TRUE STORY OF FINDING JESUS IN UNEXPECTED GUESTS

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CONVERGENT
BOOKS

Judgment Day

The house is cold at midnight, so I put on slippers before going downstairs. Everyone else has gone to bed, including my son, whose asthma was complicated tonight by a cold. I tiptoe across the hardwood floor, careful not to wake anyone, and take a drinking glass from the cabinet. But before I turn on the faucet, I hear the shuffle of feet at the door.

Knock, knock.

Whoever is standing outside, I know, can read the words of Jesus engraved on our door knocker: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." The visitor who is knocking probably has heard the story about how my wife, Leah, and I were part of a peacemaker delegation in 2003. We visited Iraq at the time of America's intensive bombing campaign. On a desolate desert road, our friends were nearly killed when their driver lost control after hitting a chunk of shrapnel in the road. But some locals picked them up and took them to the doctor in a town called Rutba.

"Three days ago," the doctor said, "your country bombed our hospital. But we will take care of you."

Literally by accident, we lived a modern-day Good Samaritan story. The Good Iraqi—the Good Muslim—showed us what God's love looks like. When we heard Jesus say, "Go and do likewise" at the end of that gospel story, we knew it was an invitation to practice the love we had received. So we named this place Rutba House. We put a knocker by the front door that bears Jesus's statement about being a welcomed Stranger. We invited folks who were homeless to consider this their home.

For a decade now, they have. They have come here after fleeing abusive partners, and they've come straight from prison—sometimes for a night, sometimes for life. They've shown up scared by the trauma of war abroad and haunted by the horrors of violence in homes that fell apart. They've been drug dealers who wanted a fresh start, lifelong addicts who needed a place to die, kids whose families had come undone, street workers who wanted to sit down and eat a sandwich. They've brought with them a universe that's every bit as broken as that bombed-out highway in the Iraqi desert.

They come here with pressing needs, and they have taught me hope. I believe in the miracle of Rutba, and not just because I lived it in the desert of Iraq. I've seen the miracle repeated time and again, right here in my home. A knock comes at our door, and we are saved.

"This being human is a guest house," wrote the Sufi poet Rumi. We are, each of us, a hospitality house of sorts. We go about our daily lives on busy streets, often strapped to a piece of steel moving at forty miles per hour. But even if it's through a car window with the doors locked, our eyes connect with the stranger who stands on the corner of Fourth and Main, holding a cardboard sign. Whether we invite him to or not, this stranger comes knocking, asking to be heard, begging to be seen. So, what to do?

Be smart, our instincts tell us. *Your spare change will not help the addict who's only going to use those dollars to get another high, another drink. Better to send a check to the local homeless shelter. Maybe vote for someone who'll mend our tattered social safety net. Besides, you can't stop for everyone. Best to keep on going.*

If you're honest—if you've ever stopped to have the conversation because your kid said, "Help him, Dad"—you know there's more to this than smarts, more than a simple, rational response. That knot in your gut that makes you feel stuck—that sounds the alarm to say, *Get out of here*—is a weight you've felt before. You felt it every time you saw the bully on the playground in elementary school. You felt it when the doctor said, "I'm sorry. It's cancer." You felt it that time when you looked out over the kids playing in the swimming pool and couldn't for the life of you spot your kid. That feeling, you know, is fear.

"Welcome everything," Rumi wrote, because however

frightening, however unwanted, the person who comes across our paths—the unexpected visitor—may be "a guide from beyond." To leave the door locked—to close ourselves off from another person in fear—is to reduce our capacity to connect, to love, to be fully human. If, indeed, this being human is a guest house, then hope comes to us, as Mother Teresa often said, in the "distressing disguise of the poor."

I am an eyewitness to all of this. But still I stop in my tracks at midnight, as I get a drink of water. I am tired from the day's work and a host of concerns. I am worried about my sick kid. Yes, that could be Jesus out on the porch, knocking. But it also could be Greg, drunk off his tail, ready to tell me (way too loudly) about how he lost his cell phone for the fourth time this month. It could be Larry, nervous as a cornered cat, wondering if I'll buy the brand-new toaster he just "found"—still in the box. Or it could be Patrice, out of her head again, wondering if she can sit and chill for a minute so she doesn't go home and "kill that big mouth, Lamont."

Over the years, I have seen a few folks get up from the dead. But I also have stared death in its ugly face, wondering if I would survive. Welcome everything, and you'll witness miracles. Welcome everything, and life can get complicated. So, as much as I cling to Rumi's wisdom and Jesus's identity as a Stranger, I also appreciate the succinct honesty of William Stafford's poem "Easter Morning." Stafford knew the miracle

that can happen when you open the door and welcome a gift from beyond. "You just shiver alive," he wrote, "and are left standing / there suddenly brought to account: saved." But Stafford also knew that sometimes the stranger who comes knocking wants to sell you the moon. Sometimes the slick voice at your door will try to sell you hell, "which is what you're getting by listening." I've been there too.

So, what to do? A decade of stories flash across my mind as I stand in our kitchen, silent, half praying that whoever is outside on the porch won't knock again.

But they do.

Knock, knock.

Stafford wrote, "I'd say always go to the door, yes, but keep the screen locked. Then, / while you hold the Bible in one hand, lean forward / and say carefully, 'Jesus?'"

Is this Jesus at the door, a guide from beyond come to save me, however inconvenient his timing may be? Or is it just the beginning of another long night in the ER?

I decide to see who's there. I go for the same reason I came here to Walltown on the west side of Durham—for the same reason I've stayed. Because strangers and friends keep teaching me about realities that I'd often rather ignore. They keep inviting

me to share their pain—to enter into their suffering, even. And there, in the damp, cold darkness, I learn to face myself.

I go to the door because I don't know who I am without this community of the down-and-out who have trusted me when they had every reason not to. I go to see who's there because the Jesus I want to know is the Jesus who comes knocking at midnight, bringing his tired and homeless friends with him.

Strangers at My Door is a book about the friends I've met over a decade of shared life in a house of hospitality. I wrote it because I believe these stories should be told. My aim is to hear the knock and to ask, "Who's there?" in the most immediate sense.

When we answer the knock at the door, we begin to answer the question "Who are the homeless?" In the wealthiest society to ever exist, hundreds of thousands of people live without the necessities, without a place where they belong. Homelessness has been explored as both a social problem and an issue in public-policy debates. But most of us have failed to seriously consider homelessness for what it is: the social cancer of an advanced capitalism in which people are reduced to autonomous individuals. The homeless, it may well be, are all of us, exposed.

My experience has been that we cannot face the reality of our homeless neighbors without also confronting the darkest fears and twisted desires within ourselves. So I wrote this book also as a confession of sorts. I am a "red-letter Christian" who

has tried to take the words of Jesus seriously (his words were printed in red in the King James Version of the Bible that I grew up reading). While I'm not trying to make a case for Christianity and I don't assume that you buy its claims (though you very well might), I believe this stuff. I see the world through Jesus-colored glasses.

But often I have found myself sorely disappointed, both by my own easy answers and by my fellow Christians, as I've tried to wrestle with the unspeakable reality that so many homeless friends face. This book is a confession that, at precisely the places where we should have been, people of faith have often been absent. What's more, many homeless friends who have struggled in the darkness, lonely and losing hope, have prayed, "Who's there?"—only to hear silence. These stories seek to honor their struggle with faith.

But this collection of stories also is an invitation to hope. Because, for all the messiness of our life at Rutba House—for all my own shortcomings, for all of our doubts and disappointments—I've leaned into the darkness, my face pressed against the screen, and I've seen the Jesus who's there—the Jesus who invites us to become a new kind of human community here and now.

This is a book about the hope that's possible when we trust a grace that's greater than ourselves and go to the door to see who's there.