

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43
Psalm 96

Galatians 1:1-12
Luke 7:1-10

A Muslim, Jew, and Christian walk into a bar. You thought I was going to make a joke with that, didn't you? Well this morning, I want us to think about our relationship as Christians with people of other faiths. I am not talking about different denominations within the Christian faith, such as Lutheran or Baptist or Episcopalian. I am talking about other faiths, such as Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and others. and not only just Jews and Muslims. How do we as Christians deal with religious pluralism?

Ever since Nine Eleven there has been questions about how we as Christians are to relate to Muslims. Safwat Marzouk, a professor at a Mennonite seminary, reminds us that there are basically two approaches to how we relate to religious pluralism. One approach is to think that our particular faith is the only one and we reject those who believe otherwise. The other approach is to give up on any peculiarity of our faith in the interest of tolerance. The first approach blocks dialogue by assuming there is no chance the others hold some truth or goodness in their conviction. This leads to a monologue in which we don't want to hear about their faith, but to communicate our faith. This leads to thinking of evangelism and mission in the narrow terms of coercive conversion. The second approach blocks dialogue by assuming that tolerance of other faiths happens only through focusing on what is common and shared. This reduces each person's faith to a set of universal values, leading toward a sort of subtle reductionist aggression toward both traditions, ours and the other. We look for the commonalities of both faiths, while giving up the uniqueness of our faith. The challenge, as Marzouk states it, is how to be grounded in one's own faith tradition while also

showing respect, love and cooperation toward others. We see that in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple.

Here King Solomon has completed building the Temple. What we read this morning are portions of his prayer at the dedication of the Temple. What is very surprising is that he is asking God to hear and grant the petition of non-Israelites. It is very rare to find an Israelite offering such a prayer on behalf of a non-Israelite. Solomon would have learned from his Israelite tradition that people who were non-Israelites were ungodly. He wanted God to answer the prayer of the non-Israelites just as God answered the prayer of the Israelites. He was open to asking God to bless the people who were not Israelites.

And our gospel lesson, Luke's story of the healing of the centurion's slave is relevant for interreligious encounters as well. The centurion is a Gentile in service to the Roman government. As a centurion he was a ranking officer in the Roman army, usually the commander over a company of 100 men or fewer. They functioned much like a master sergeant. He has made friends among the Jewish elders. His slave is ill and he sends the Jewish elders to Jesus asking him to heal this slave. They inform Jesus that this centurion loved their community, for he had built a synagogue for them. The centurion acknowledges not only his need for Jesus, but even his reverence. The centurion informs Jesus that Jesus did not need to come into his house. The centurion was a man with authority. Those under him obeyed his orders. He recognizes that Jesus also had authority. In this case to heal the slave. "Just say the word, Jesus, and my slave will be healed." Jesus is amazed by this man's faith, and tells the crowd "I tell

you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Here Jesus acknowledges the faith of a centurion, one who was part of the oppressive Roman overlords.

Granted, Solomon’s prayer does not make him a model of interfaith dialogue for he wanted God to bless the people who worshiped God. Likewise, the centurion had been good to the Jewish people and built a synagogue for them. These two were aware of and acknowledged God. However, if Solomon could ask God to hear and answer the prayers of non-Israelites, if Jesus was amazed by the faith of a Gentile, then surely we as Christians can build upon Solomon’s prayer and Jesus’ healing in a world sorely in need for inclusivity. The world in which we live needs people who are firmly rooted in their faith traditions but willing to talk with and learn from people of other faiths. As Debra Mumford, a professor of Homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary says, “Being people of God is not about owning God. Rather it is about glorifying God in all that we do—including the ways we relate to people who are different from us and believe differently than we do.”

I find that helpful. It is not about owning God. God owns us. If we go out and pronounce all other gods but our God are no gods at all will solicit protest and charge of bigotry. For us to go out and call people of other faiths as pagan is not going to get us anywhere. Yet the central convictions of our faith cannot be compromised. We can be grounded in one’s own faith tradition while also showing respect, love and cooperation toward others. We do not need to surrender what is unique about our faith to be in relationship with and dialogue with those of other faiths.

One commentator suggests that we consider our “practical” monotheism. In other words, our actions for actions speak louder than words. We are to not only tell of God’s

salvation from day to day” but also become agents of that salvation in a hurting and unjust world. We cannot, as the commentator states it, insulate ourselves from the ills of the world and settle for a holy huddle. We all have to get into the messiness of the world, engage the messiness of poverty, marginalization, exploitation, and all other the atrocities human beings do to themselves, to one another, and to creation.

Right here in our own state of Nebraska, in Omaha, a mosque, a church, and a synagogue--sounds like another setup for a joke, but it isn't. These three faiths have partnered in what they are calling the Tri-Faith Initiative. This initiative will build a space for all three faiths. Each of these faiths will have their own worship space and there will also be some common space. The three faiths have meals together; their youth do activities together. This building with three separate worship spaces is an expression of the commonalities of the three faiths, yet no one is giving up their uniqueness; they each will worship in their own ways. Not only will they worship in the same building, but also work together. There is a similar project being built in Berlin, Germany. Quite often there are interfaith initiatives that are working together to solve some community problems, whether it be hunger, poverty, homelessness, lack of medical care. And on and on.

Our God hears the prayers of others. Our God heals people of different faiths. We are all God's people; a God of grace, a God who has chosen to elect us all. Should we not also extend such grace to all of God's people! Again, quoting Dr. Marzouk, “When people take both their own faith and the other person's faith seriously, when they find healthy ways to both cross boundaries and maintain them, then they can turn their differences into a source of theological enrichment.

How majestic is the name of the Lord our God. Amen!