

Praying With the Wrong People

From the Bible: Matthew 7: 21-23

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It's not just what we say, is it?

At least if Jesus is to be believed.

It is who we are and how we live.

"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus said.

"But only the one who does the will of God."

I would like to begin this morning by saying *Thank you*.

Several weeks ago members of the Upper Westchester Muslim Society were here to share in worship with us. The genesis of the idea to invite them was two-fold. First, was a desire better get to know our neighbors who are Muslim and to learn a bit more about Islam. And, second was reason way, in whatever way we were able, to offer our support for them at a time when anti-Muslim rhetoric had reached a fevered pitch.

We prayed together.

We read sacred text together.

We learned with and from each other.

From my perspective and from those of you who spoke with me about it,

Our worship that morning was meaningful.

And, gracious.

And, thought provoking.

And holy.

Thank you.

In more ways that I can number or name, you are a community of open doors and of open hands and of open hearts and minds. Your welcome and witness stands in stark contrast to the polarizing rhetoric we continue to hear about those who are different from us. And, in stark contrast to the Wheaton College professor put on leave for saying Christians and Muslims pray to the same God. And, in stark contrast to the narrowness of fundamentalists of whatever religious tradition who demand their particular form of purity. And, in stark contrast to the hierarchy of the Missouri Synod Lutheran church who, a number of years ago, disciplined one of their pastors *for praying with the wrong people* when he participated in a community service honoring and remembering the tragedy of September 11, 2001.

Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said.

Only the one who does the will of God.

So, thank you for your witness.

It may not always easy and it may not always comfortable, but it matters.

And, it makes a difference.

So with that on my heart and mind, what I found myself thinking about was this.

Maybe what the portion of scripture we read a moment ago is about is how you imagine or think

about or talk about God. And, about how you imagine and think about and talk about what the passage calls *the will of God* which is what God intends and desires for us and for all. In these verses, it seems to me, Jesus was pushing back against the narrowness of the religious understanding of his day and pulling into the circle of God's grace those whose religious customs and practices might not have matched expectations, but whose lives did.

So, as you consider these things...

Your idea of God.

And, whether or not it is even possible to pray with the wrong people.

And, whether Christians and Muslims, to say nothing of Jews or Hindus or anyone else, might, in fact, pray to the same God.

These somewhat random reflections to add to the mix of your thinking.

First, this...

In 1952, British Biblical scholar J.B. Phillips published a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*.

In many ways, that book was his effort to push back against the growing tension between traditional religious views and an emerging and growing scientific world view. Today, his challenge and insight pushes back against other issues and concerns with which we grapple. As Kathy DiBiasi and I try to help our 9th grade students in our Confirmation program think about their faith and their understanding of God, we often share with them this excerpt from J.B. Phillips' book and then ask them what they think.

This morning I do the same with you.

From the book *Your God Is Too Small*.

The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static. It is obviously impossible for an adult to worship the conception of God that exists in the mind of a child of Sunday School age, unless he [or she] is prepared to deny his [or her] own experience of life. If, by great will, he [or she] does do this, he [or she] will always be secretly afraid lest some new truth may expose the juvenility of his [or her] faith. And it will always be by such an effort that he [or she] either worships or serves a God who is really too small to command his [or her] loyalty and cooperation. (p.7)

And, so I wonder...

Where might our understanding of God be too small for the world in which we now live?

Where might our '*Lord, Lord...*', our traditional way of thinking about and practicing the faith we profess not quite match up to what God is calling or asking us to do or be?

And to that, let me add this.

Several weeks ago, again in Confirmation, Kym McNair, who is our Minister for Community Education and Engagement and who is African-American and who grew up attending and who is still a member of the Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills, led a conversation with our youth about how, as an African American woman, she imagines and thinks about God and Jesus. She grew up, as I did, with pictures of Jesus displayed on every classroom wall. The only thing was, in all those pictures, Jesus was white and had long, brown hair. She talked about the first time she saw a picture of a black Jesus and what that meant to her and how that helped to shape her faith. She then showed us several pictures of the mosaics found in The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. Images of Jesus and Mary created by artists from around the world.

An African Jesus.

An Asian Jesus.

An Ecuadorian Jesus.

An Indonesian Jesus.

And, she left us with these questions:

Do we create God in our own image?

Or, are all of us created in the image of God?

And, if it is the later...

If we are all created in the image of God, what does that tell us about the God we worship and serve?

And, finally this...

I was moved by this story from an article I read a week or so ago about the work and witness of Christian communities in the Middle East connected to the Presbyterian Church. The author writes,

Last May I spent a week with my friends, Georges and Rima (not their real names), a husband and wife team who serve a church in southwest Syria in a village that is fairly safe from the violence. Because it is a safer region, hundreds of families forced out of their cities by ISIS have come to this area looking for help. I quickly learned that every day, as soon as the sun rises, the front door begins sounding with the knocks of a steady stream of visitors who bring all manner of needs: food, rent money, help with doctor's bills, medicine. Anyone who comes through the door, at a bare minimum, gets a bag of food. [A community member said,] "There are other churches doing this kind of thing, but I only see them taking care of their own people. But this church takes care of everyone - Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, everyone. If someone can't get help anywhere else, they know they can come here."

He goes on to write:

It is tough right now to be a Christian in the Middle East. Many Christians are leaving the homes where they were born - it has become too dangerous to raise their kids, too hard to make ends meet. And in this little village I visited in May, people are wondering: Will Georges and Rima leave? Will the people of the Presbyterian church continue to leave? A Muslim woman approached Rima with that very question. She cried out, "You people cannot leave. You are hadara. You are the good culture - you are the positive, the life, the hopefulness that keeps our community going." (Presbyterian Outlook, February 1, 2016, pp: 6-7)

So, let me end back where I began.

Thank you for your work and witness.

Continue to do your best to reach for a God who is large enough to embrace and to love the entire human family. Continue to do your best to recognize the imprint and image of God in all of the children of earth. Continue to open doors and to extend hands to any and all who would knock and seek to come in.

For in doing so you will be...

Continue to be...

The good culture.

The positive.

The life.

And, the hopefulness which keeps our community going.

And, maybe, just maybe...

We will find ourselves coming close to that which Jesus called the *Kingdom of God*.