

GENTILE WOMAN, JEWISH RABBI

Mark 7: 24-30

Pastor Bob Roberts of Texas and Imam Mohamed Magid of Washington D.C. may seem to be an unlikely pair. Both do hold to traditional teachings of their respective faiths but more, they are “creating a nationwide grass-roots network called My Neighbor’s Keeper. The goal is to build ‘neighborhoods and cities that are more interconnected and resilient to hate and violence.’ [Bruinius, Harry, *The Christian Science Monitor* quoted in *Christian Century*, June 6, 2018, p. 15] It has not been easy. for their traditions emphasize an exclusive truth that cause them to be tribal in nature,, each firmly believing that he has the only authenticate way to interact with God. “And”, Roberts says, “the impact of tribal is, we see each other as objects to be won rather than people [with whom] to be in relationship.”

To move beyond tribalism and its many violent expressions, the two religious leaders “bring together imams, rabbis, and evangelical pastor for a three-day retreat, to get acquainted in an environment of openness and transparency.” As a result, “participants make a commitment to have their members work side by side on neighborhood projects or other civic concerns.” Rather than attempt to convert each other, such interaction “is based upon a fundamental doctrine that human beings are created in the image of God.” [Ibid]

One who has endured anti-Muslim violence speaks a word of encouragement. “If there is a place in the world where we can do something different about [extremism and oppression] it’s got to be the United States. I’ve lived everywhere in the world, and I always just get so much solace here, because so many people are doing such good work, investing so much in each other in so many unexpected ways. [Ibid]

But formal programs may not be the only opportunity to move into a relationship of respect and possibly love. The gospel suggests that there may be many circumstances and moments when the will of God might be expressed and experienced. We discover that it is not unusual for Jesus to leave the familiar environs of hilly Nazareth or seaside Capernaum. Nor is it out of the ordinary for Jesus to seek solitude, even if it were to be a place where he might remain unknown. It is in such a place that he encounters a woman, a Syro-Phoenician woman, a gentile woman with a cursed child. One would expect a Jewish rabbi avoid any interaction her. For a variety of

reasons, they might be considered to be enemies, one threatening the purity and propriety of the other. Temple and tradition, culture and history combined to build strong walls between he and she.

But none of these enforced separations seemed to matter to the Gentile woman. Nor to the Jewish rabbi. It is a testimony to the extent that the reputation of Jesus had spread, well beyond the boundaries of Israel. Though he wishes to remain in seclusion, she knows of his arrival and of his residence. Though she ought to be quiet in the company of this rabbi, she speaks and speaks again. It is her persistence that brings forth the healing for which she hopes. No word, no touch, no mud, no spit---nothing brought forth in other healings.

In this instance, and in others also, Jesus moves beyond the identity imposed upon him by his disciples who looked to him as Master, and by the strict regulations of his society. Purity was expected of all Israelite males and much of the ritual demanded of them brought forth and preserved this purity which is little more than an exceptionalism that has been attempted by others who have counted themselves chosen, destined, powerful, and privileged. Rather than count himself above, better, stronger, wiser, even more blessed, Jesus portrays himself to be called and equipped, responsive and responsible, humble and sacrificing---surely an example of discipleship to be taken up by others.

Ministry is often most fruitful when we are able to meet another as equal rather than as more. Jesus does not hold himself above the lives of others; rather he enters such lives with all of the suffering and anxiety, even the evil and death that is to be found in such interactions. Though others might wash their hands of every interaction that might pollute or detract or inflame, Jesus willingly and courageously responds to the cries of others, even if they be possessing demons. His fearlessness is a testimony of his trust, trust in God.

During September as well as in March, we are blessed to be able to serve lunch to those in the community who have need of a meal. But it is more than food that is offered. Along with that which is served on a plate or two, there is an unspoken acceptance that may be more of a blessing than the food. Family Promise is an opportunity to interact significantly with other families in the community although the significance of our response may be quite ordinary and even incidental. None of us is likely to be remembered for our participation in either community ministry, nor in any other witness of such nature. But those who are served will remember that there was someone---perhaps several---who met needs with a smile of welcome and words of greeting.

Jesus does not turn aside from the presence and person of the gentile woman but as a Jewish rabbi, he would be expected to do so. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priests, and even the high priest would demand that he conform to the law that dictated their behaviors. His unwillingness to do so, not only in this instance, but in a multitude of others, would cause him to be threatened---even, especially with death. But as Paul would indicate, it is not the law that brings life; it is God's grace that provides new life.

The church, perhaps as a result of its sense of exceptionalism that occasionally bordered upon a struggle for purity if not the exclusion of others who were different or feared or misunderstood or difficult, this church formulated a series of doctrines that would represent the theology of the faithful and direct the practice of the same. Those who would not conform would be variously excluded either temporarily or permanently, often through imprisonment, sometimes through banishment or even through death. Such doctrines took on the power of dogma, counting unfaithful those who would not believe.

Many people in most churches would be unable to recite the doctrines of the church and it seems that doctrine is rarely that which attracts a person to a particular religious expression. Practice is far more important, both the practice of the church and the practice to which the church calls its people. The Apostle James reminds us that faith without works is dead and that if one should wish to discern faith, that one should observe that actions of the one under scrutiny.

Though many would wonder if we believe much of anything, we are a doctrinal church. Such statements of faith are not designed to separate the wheat from the chaff, the faithful from the fallen. Rather they remain as important points of conversation as the church strives for a sense of greater unity. No one is to be excluded from the congregation because he or she does not follow every doctrine or any of the doctrines of the church. These statements stand as a testimony to the theological thinking of past and current generations, such thinking to be extended into this age and place. The conversation about God is to continue.

This struggle to better discern God's will and way has been enriched by people whose histories and experiences are new and different. Within this congregation and an increasing number of gatherings, there are people who have not only come from other countries and cultures but carry in their histories other religion traditions as well including that of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism as well as Islam and Judaism. Each can add to the evolving understanding that is faith.

Forgoing our temptation to believe ourselves exceptional as well as all that encourages us to separate ourselves from others will afford an experience of Christ---and of God. The testimony of the Hebrew scriptures and of the New Testament people is that God is very present and active in all of creation, even in the parts that seem to us to be far removed from our understanding of God. It is in this world that the Gentile woman dares to confront the Jewish rabbi and it is in such a world that healing occurs.

Our Jewish friends are in the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Even as they celebrate the beginning of another year of blessing, they prepare to admit how they must change---we might call it repent---if the world is to know more love, more grace, more peace in the months ahead. Perhaps we should humbly join with them in admitting to our reluctance to live the world that the Jewish rabbi creates with the gentile woman. And we might join them in building a kingdom that would be one of joy and peace. Such a kingdom would be not only a gift from God but a gift to God as well. For every year, for all of life thanks be to God. Amen.