



October 6, 2019

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 55:1-13; Romans 12:9-21

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

To Walk in Faith: Join Other Companions

It was my first time on the Camino, first day out with Ken Potsic. We'd walked and talked for hours into early afternoon, when we crested a hill and heard chatter off to our left. Five women sat under a huge tree, making tea on a portable cooker they actually carried, pouring wine and sharing biscuit cookies. We slowed to share the blessing: Buen Camino! They invited us to share the feast they were preparing. Three middle-aged Canadians were sisters—Presbyterian, Catholic, and something more “spiritual” as I recall—they carried ashes of one's teenage son in a journey from grieving loss to healing new life. Two younger women were Jewish-Israelis experiencing this Christian expression of faith. We kept meeting them for days thereafter, shared dinner another night, and lunched in the Santiago Cathedral plaza under umbrella shade at the end.

Friends, as we walk the road of life in our world today, we'll keep meeting people who practice or feel inclined toward another faith. A colleague at work, teammate on the field, neighbor next door, someone dearly beloved in our own family. I suppose it's always been true, depending on how we define “different.” Far beyond Presbyterians and [gasp] Methodists, God forbid Catholics(!), as we live faith now, companions are Jews and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, and more in a beautiful variety of holiness.

As we live faith among others, three basic questions frame stories in our Bible and guide our ordinary lives. 1) Who am I / who are we? What does it mean to be

human? What defines us personally and communally? 2) Who is God? How do we relate with Sacred Grace, Holy Love, the Divine Source of All Life? 3) How in heaven or hell is it all real? How do we live God's love together in the world as we know it? Three fairly clear and basic questions ... that get complicated. Again, a question of anthropology—who are we? A question of theology—who is God? And ultimately a question of ethics—how do we live faith?

In worship the past four weeks we've thought about the first two—being human and the Holy One. This week and next we move into ethics. Of course, there's a vast range of conversational possibility. Personal challenges, social concerns, church life together. We could talk for hours! Hope you've had enough tea or coffee! Assuming we may need more soon, we'll only center today on walking and talking with people of other faiths. How do we express truth, promises, and practices of Christianity in light of other religions? Friends, we need clarity for our own faith. And let's be clear, many others in society will find our witness to God's love appealing or repelling based on what they hear.

On all days as on this World Communion / Peacemaking Sunday, I believe it is really all about nurturing peace. God wants us and all creation to live in the fullness of biblical *shalom*. It's more than no violent conflict. It's about resources and relationships to empower abundant life. Which leads us to equity, education, personal responsibility and social policy, history, science ... everything really. We begin with moral foundations that undergird, or a religious frame to guide how we feel, think, and act in all situations.

Years ago, in Marshall, community leaders fostered a vision for the future. They spoke with us ministers about one point in particular—something like diversity / inclusion. They asked, for example, what we'd do if a mosque came to town? As leader of the clergy group that year, I lead off: we'd welcome their clergy with us,

gladly offer support as needed, partner as possible. One colleague raised his voice to disagree: “No, I’m a prayer warrior. I’d organize people to march around the edge of their property and pray God would make them fail.” His words ring in my heart and still sting like yesterday.

It’s no surprise many wars get caused or enflamed by faith. It’s lamentable, but no wonder some people feel little attraction to organized religion. Yes, of course, it’s fundamentalists present in every brand of faith—even violent branches of Hindus and Buddhists, we can superficially perceive as just spiritually nice. And *we* must address holy texts in our own scripture that seem to say God orders ethnic cleansing. We must face our worst Christian history that stoked Crusades, slavery, centuries of European wars up through the Irish Troubles and Russian / Ukrainian conflict today, and supremacist shootings in our own country. We see these horrors and we name whatever may be our inheritance or complicity.

Still, as we celebrate world communion / peacemaking, friends, I assume that’s not the general direction we’re heading when we go out our big red doors of this sanctuary. We don’t view religion as competition. Whether among churches around the park, with Catholics, or any other expression. Maybe you’ve tired of me saying it in other ways recently. Binary categorization, zero-sum equations where one must lose and be wrong for another to gain and prove right are as false in faith as anything else. Our faith, our Savior, our Messiah, our great pilgrimage leader calls us to a better way—to join with other companions, not try to destroy them.

Isaiah’s people lived as exiled captives in Babylon. They tried to know and trust God amid a society with other deities. Isaiah gives a vision of hope, inspiration to pursue a way home. “Comfort my people,” says the Divine Voice. In the wilderness, every valley and mountain will be leveled, so they can walk home in glory. And now here at that vision’s end we sense what that glory of Sacred Grace looks like.

Beneficence without price—a blessing of resources freely for all. Like street vendors offering wares with no weighing of silver. Like getting your favorite latte-whatever from Water Street, Biggby, or Starbucks ... on the house! Opposite binary-constructed, Babylonian captivity. Far beyond our comprehension or control, God's ways are not confined by our ways. Breadth, depth, beauty, and generosity of Holy Love go past the scope of our plans and imagination to include all nations, all religions, Isaiah affirms. Come with humility to share a drink. Go out with joyful determination. Find home in peace-filled satisfaction.

And that's how Paul charges the Romans to live, an echo of which we share at the end of worship most Sundays. As we live in the world, he says, here's what Grace and Love look and act like. Seek not superiority, rather humility. Respond to violence and hostility with generous hospitality. If tempted toward vengeance center in prayerful peace. Don't be overcome by evil, rather overcome evil with good. You see, friends, *in this way we become the body of the risen Christ*, Paul urges, with all our variety of gifts in harmony, *as a witness for the world to see*. Here's how it's possible, so far as it depends on us, to live this way of peace with all people.

First, we seek integrity—inspiration for these relations within our own theology. Jesus embodies God's grace and love. We follow him on the path to fullness of life in God's peace. Still the Son is *one* part of the Trinity. We affirm God created all of life. All people, especially in the Divine Image, can reveal life in Holy Love. The Holy Spirit among us continues to redeem and sustain life in our world, beyond the person of Jesus. No wonder we find affinities with people who practice other faiths. The Trinity can prove tricky in inter-faith dialogue—as if we bring a kale-blueberry-banana-orange-juice-chocolate-with-protein-powder-smoothie when all people want is a simple cup of tea or coffee. Remember it is poetry expressing holy mystery, beyond scientific certainty. No one really gets it all. Still, the Trinity gives us solid ground, an open way to join inter-faithful relations with generous integrity.

Second, cross-shaped faithfulness calls us to serve beyond preserving our own “success.” Jesus loved enemies, ate with outcasts, crossed religious boundaries. And he pursued that sacred purpose, suffering, emptying himself on the cross, showing that God’s way gets fulfilled not by overpowering defeat of others. Rather empowered ultimately by vulnerability even in seeming defeat. And the hopeful promise of resurrection to which we give our hearts, proves time and again that purposes of Holy Love endure more than any tomb. Power of Sacred Grace and Mercy proves able to give new life more than any loss takes it. In that Spirit, we join with human kin in other faiths advocating, supporting, nurturing life, as we believe God wants for all creation.

Third, we find in other faiths clarity about who we are. We receive in other stories and insights inspiration for our walk with Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor calls it “holy envy.”ⁱ Sometimes, friends, maybe such encounters can make us seem lost. We doubt. We toss out former beliefs and feel disoriented. Still, precisely through this process we share new views of what’s been so familiar, yet unknown. Something we admire in another faith, opens our eyes to find it in our own. Diversity feeds—not clouds—our deeper relation with Divinity. Yes, differences can divide. Yet, if we keep Holy Love in our hearts, amid fear we share hope—for us in the promise of Christ. Amid all that’s ugly we share beauty—for us in the face of Christ. Amid competition we share common purpose—for us called to by Christ. “Make me a channel of your peace,” we sing, as St. Francis prayed.

As we come to this table, I love how Aaron captured the bountiful feast on our bulletin cover. It was to celebrate Eid, prepared by the Zamel family, shared with all among us who worked so hard to welcome them—refugees from Syria, home here in peace. And I love how Barbara Brown Taylor imagines drinking from a cup filled with new fruit of the Holy Spirit, continually being poured out.ⁱⁱ A cup of tea shared

under a tree on a walk of faith years ago. A cup we might fill among companions of all kinds, dipped in the well of divinity, whose water does not belong to Christians alone. A cup whose water for us, as in joyful communion with his dearest friends, Jesus turns into savory wine—or juice—to quench our thirst, and to share in blessing with all people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019).

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), p. 184-185.