

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, May 29, 2016
Text: Luke 7:1-10

When Our World Expands



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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A minister, a priest, and a rabbi walk into a bar. The bartender looks up and says, “What is this? A joke?” No, it is a sermon about a minister and a priest and a rabbi, and about a Muslim imam, a Buddhist monk and a Hindu philosopher, as well as Sikh musicians, a Zoroastrian laywoman, a Native American flute player, and a Mormon missionary. When our world expands, we become aware of the richness and diversity that surrounds us.

On a Wednesday noon every November the Religious Leaders of Greater Chicago gather representatives from every available religious tradition at the United Methodist Church’s Chicago Temple to give thanks. Each religious tradition has some way to give thanks for something. So, the scene that sticks in my mind is that of three Sikh musicians – one with a small drum, another with a wooden flute, and a third with a tiny accordion-like instrument – seated on the chancel floor in front of an altar with a carving depicting Jesus weeping over the city because the people do not know what makes for peace. Seated in chairs behind the musicians we can see a Greek Orthodox priest in all of his regalia, a Muslim woman in her hijab, and a Black Baptist pastor in his preaching gown. To the left and right is the whole rest of the world.

Each year this thanksgiving service is attended by a couple hundred people working downtown who take their lunch hour to enter the sanctuary. It is not great liturgy, simply one tradition after another offering prayer, a reading, or a song, but it is great worship. Here are people worshiping together where, in other parts of their world, their counterparts are at war with each other. It is a big world out there when we are courageous enough to take a look. That was Diana Eck’s message to us last month. Dr. Eck, a professor at Harvard University and an expert on the plurality of religions in the world, including in our own backyard, showed us how these religious traditions can co-exist, and even more, can reinforce one another.

Not everyone can see it. Years ago I served a small United Methodist congregation in Rockford, Illinois, a wonderful blue collar/middle class church that did great ministry. The city’s clergy association met to discuss a burning issue of the day, prayer in public schools. There were some pastors present who were adamant that there should be prayers offered in the name of Jesus Christ in every classroom to start the school day. After all, that is the American Way. I always have thought that such prayers are presumptuous and arrogant, imposing religion of a particular sort on others. Knowing the theology of some of the advocates, their prayers would have been an imposition on me, too.

During a coffee break I was talking with Rabbi Robert Orkand about the issue, and a very conservative Presbyterian minister walked over to us. I told him, “Rabbi Orkand and I were just talking about the religious differences here among us, and I was telling him that the better Jew he is, the more authentic Christian I become. What he says helps me to understand what I believe.” And the minister said, with no intent on being generous, “I am praying for both of you.”

But, is that not the opportunity we have as our world expands? To talk with others from other traditions prompts us to think more rigorously about what we believe. Our goal need not be to convert the other to our way of believing, or at the other end of the spectrum, to relativize what we believe and say, “Well, it does not matter; we all believe the same thing, but we just say it in a different way.” No, we strengthen our beliefs as we honor the beliefs of others.

That dynamic lies behind our gospel account for today from Luke 7:1-10. Jesus has just finished preaching to the crowd about loving one’s enemies and being merciful to all, and now he goes to Capernaum, a town on the northern shore of the inland Sea of Galilee. A centurion, who is a Gentile serving in the region as a military officer on behalf of Rome, perhaps under the direct authority of Herod, has a slave in his household who is ill and near death. He hears of Jesus’ ministry, and he sends a delegation of Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to heal the ailing slave.

Now, what do we have here? We are told that the centurion has great love for the Jewish people, though he is not one of them, and even has had a synagogue built for the people of the area that his army is occupying. Furthermore, the centurion could have commanded Jesus to come to him, but his sensitivity is seen in two ways. First, he asks a group of Jewish leaders to be his emissaries in asking Jesus to employ his powers of healing; the centurion honors the social structure of the Jewish people. And second, he does not demand that Jesus enter his home since that would sully Jesus according to Jewish law.

The centurion respects Jesus’ authority and power (a person of authority and power often can sense it in another), and calls upon him for help in order to save the sick man’s life, who may be a Jew, as well. But there is no suggestion that the centurion is converting to Judaism or that Jesus intends for this foreign Gentile to bow down and worship him. This account is offered by Luke as a display of the healing power of Jesus, yes, even from a distance since Jesus never

actually touches the slave; but, as well, it is a display of mutual respect between the centurion and Jesus. It is not a matter of one belief triumphing over another, but a demonstration of trust that results in new life for the sick man.

When our world expands we find partners in doing the work we need to do, living the lives we have to live.

Back in my seminary days I had an intern year as a minister in two small Methodist chapels in Wolverhampton, England, in the industrial Midlands. Sally and I were there for only a year, but I talk about it so much that some get the idea that we were there for a decade. We had imagined that we would live in some nice, little thatched cottage next to Anne Hathaway, but we ended up in a post-World War I council housing estate with Andy Capp as a neighbor. It was a time in the late 1960's when a lot of Pakistanis and Indians were migrating to Great Britain. A century earlier, the British Empire, in all of its colonial bravado, had told all of its subjects that everyone was welcome in their green and pleasant land, and now the subjects were taking them up on the offer.

This became obvious to me when I accepted the invitation of Headmaster Brown of a private school in the neighborhood, the Bushbury School for Boys, to offer a customary Christian opening prayer and meditation for the day. He and I met back stage of the assembly hall, and then precisely at 8 a.m. we walked out from behind the curtains and there seated on the floor in front of me were about 400 grammar school boys, about a third of them wearing turbans. They were Sikhs. Apparently, it never occurred to Headmaster Brown to tell me; maybe he did not even notice. I glanced sideways at him, and he said, "Go ahead, it will be good for them. It will keep them in line during the day." I have no recollection of what I said, nor do those boys, I am sure, but I edited and added on the spot to say something that honored the kids who were there.

That was a time of cultural revolution in the Midlands. Sally and I have gone back several times over the years. The larger of the two chapels now is closed. It faded away and the lot now is empty on Showell Circus. But the tiny chapel on Stratton Street in the heart of the city is still going. Back then it had about 35 members; today it still has about 35, even a few of them the same stalwart members.

How has Stratton Street Methodist Church survived? Years ago it opened its doors to the Sikh immigrants, not coercing them to worship in a Christian manner but inviting them to use a large education wing that the congregation no longer needed. If we were to go there today, we would see, with the support and leadership of the city government, people learning English, getting job referrals, receiving health care, learning to cook English-style (as if that were a goal in life; what is "bubble and squeak", anyway?), playing chess, knitting, and the second and third generations becoming acculturated, while not losing their heritage or their faith.

A half a century ago when I was there that was not the plan, but I would say now that the congregation kept the faith, grew in the understanding of Jesus' call for us to love all others and to be merciful in every instance, learned to honor the faith of others, and cooperated with "the other" to make things better for all. The church exists, the neighbors are served, and our world expands beyond our imagination.

How expansive is our world? Here at First United Methodist Church at the heart of Madison where we are "Downtown for Good," how big can it get? Here is a list of non-Christian groups as of last year: seventeen Buddhist temples and centers, two Baha'i groups, two Hindu temples, ten Islamic centers, one Jain temple, twelve Jewish congregations, one Native American community, two Sikh temples, three Taoist centers, and six Wiccan circles, including "Temple of the Dark Mother."

I am not certain that we should start with the "Temple of the Dark Mother," but there remain several communities of other faith traditions surrounding us here at the city center from whom we can learn, learn not only what they believe but also what we believe. Not out to convert, nor intending to cave in, but as I said to Rabbi Orkand, "The better Jew you are, the more authentic Christian I become."

A few weeks ago I had a conversation with Dan Barker, Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation headquartered here in Madison. Some of you heard it since it was on the radio. Dan is a former evangelical minister who has rejected his faith tradition and now works valiantly to keep Church and State separate, as the U. S. Constitution stipulates. I agreed with him on a lot of specific issues, prayer in public schools, as an example.

He has just sued the U.S. Congress because he asked to offer the invocation for the opening of a legislative day on Capitol Hill and was rejected because he is an atheist. I asked him, "If you were to give an invocation, what would you invoke, given you do not believe in a god?" And he responded, "I would invoke all the best human virtues," and then he identified things like kindness, mercy, justice, trust, and doing what is right. And I thought, "Of course! And I would be

inclined to do the same, though within the context of a religious perspective.” What a miracle it would be if those attributes suddenly became the basis for decision-making in Washington! We might even advocate trying it just a block up the street here in Madison.

Trusting one another and honoring each other’s faith, without the intent to coerce or the need to capitulate . . . there is a great deal that we can do together to heal the sickness of our world.

This is the Memorial Day weekend in the United States. It began in Decatur, Illinois, as a way of honoring those who died in the Union Army during the Civil War. There were similar observances in the South, and a national Memorial Day became a way to reunite the nation. It soon expanded to include memorializing other Americans who died in military service in other wars – the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and all of those other conflicts that never were called “wars,” some of which remain hidden from our eyes. Yes, it is a day of solemn gratitude, but it also is a day of regret, especially for people of faith. How often we have resorted to war to make things right.

If Jews and Muslims can sit next to each other and give thanks, if Buddhists and Hindus can bow their heads together in gratitude, if Christians of every theological shape and size can hold hands and praise God, and if Sikhs can make beautiful music for us all, then in this expansive world there is work for us to do together in good faith. The centurion and Jesus did it in order to bring healing; so can we. Amen.