

May 26, 2019

Love 301: God, Others, Yourself “Not Of This Fold”

John 10:16

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.

I must bring them also,  
and they will listen to my voice.”

Students in a religion 101 class were asked to write on the board what they already knew about the religions they would be studying. Under the word “Islam” they wrote “Terrorism, Isis, veiled women, 9/11.” Some responses come from ignorance at best and hatred at worst.

So, before we as Christian let our selves off the hook with thought we are smarter than that or are at our core loving people. Let me speak a little truth here: Christians who love Jesus have been known to prove their loyalty by dismissing any truth that did not hinge on him. Their job, as they see it, is to come up with solid Christian answer to every important question and then to defend those answer against all rivals. Is not God too great, and the world too wide to allow for a little curiosity?

And then there is the issue of not only our faith as Christians as it encounters those of other faiths, but also our need to deal with the reality that even though we belong to the same religion as Christians we do not mean the same things when we say the word, “God.” Some mean a loving daddy while others mean a cosmic judge. Some see Jesus on a cross and some see him on a white horse with a sharp sword in each hand. Some frankly admit that they do not know what they mean, though they know they ought to.

Eventually all people of faith must decide how they will think about and respond to people of others (and no) faith. Otherwise they will be left at the mercy of their worst impulses when push comes to shove and their fear deadens them to the best teachings of their religion.

Let us explore for a moment how many religious strangers played lead roles in Jesus' life: the Canaanite woman who expanded his sense of agency, the Samaritan leper who showed him what true gratitude looked like, the Roman centurion in whom he saw more faith than he had ever seen in one of his own tribe. Why is it that these narratives have been so easily overlooked, or maybe even distorted? Is it because we have our accustomed ways of hearing scripture that often stops our ears to what is actually on the page? Could it be that are old tapes start playing and we just let them run?

Our tradition is more than exclusive salvation and everlasting triumph. We have a tradition of stories that support Christian engagement with religious strangers – not as potential converts, but as agents of the god who transcends religion and never met a stranger.

Let's begin with the Persian magi in Matthew's Gospel and ending with the Roman centurion who recognizes Jesus as the Son of God, the Gospels are full of such characters – people who come from beyond the tribe to bless the tribe and then return to where they came from. Jesus receives them over and over again, whether they come from Samaria, Syrophoenicia, Canaan or Rome. In story after story, they enter stage left, deliver their blessing on the Christian gospel, and exit stage right, leaving their mark on a tradition that is not their own.

The tradition of strangers bearing divine gifts begins early in the Bible, with the story of Melchizedek, a Canaanite king found in Genesis chapter 14. First Melchizedek blesses Abram in the name of the God Most High, whom he serves. At no point is there a discussion on whether Melchizedek's God and Abram's God are the same God. After blessing Abram, Melchizedek blesses God. In gratitude, Abram gives him a tenth of everything. Then Melchizedek exits the story as suddenly as he entered it, leaving Abram to become Abraham, the father of the Jews. God sometimes sends people from outside a faith community to bless those inside it. It does not seem to matter if the main characters understand God in the same way or call God by the same name. The divine blessing is effective, and the story goes on.

And those type of stories in the Old Testament continue:

- Bithiah, the Pharaoh's daughter who plucked the baby Moses from his rush basket in the River Nile and raised him as her own;
- Jethro, the Midianite priest who was Moses's father-in-law and teacher;
- Ruth, the Moabite who became the ancestor of King David;
- and Cyrus, the Persian king who ended the Babylonian exile and allowed the Jews to return home – the only non-Jew in the Bible who is ever identified as God's anointed one.

In Numbers chapter 15 verse 15b we hear, "You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord. However we define the present-day stranger we are to treat the stranger like one of our own citizens – to offer the stranger food and clothing, guarantee the stranger justice, to welcome the stranger as

Christ in disguise. This is God's expressed will in both the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus in his first public appearance in the temple just as he begins his public ministry after forty days in the wilderness; we hear that the crowds were enraged. Why? Because he spoke about God not sending Elijah to the Israelite widows who had endured three and half years of draught and famine, but to a widow in Sidon. Because he emphasized that God did not send Elisha to go to the many miserable lepers nearby who needed healing, but rather to a Syrian named Naaman who had leprosy. When Jesus reached back and pulled these stories into the spotlight again, he made a point of their strangeness. Sidon and Syria were foreign countries. Neither the widow nor the leper was an Israelite. They did not speak Israel's language or worship Israel's god when God sent prophets to help them. This might have been all right if God had helped everyone in Israel first, but that was not what God did. In the famous stories of God's deliverance, God chose to help foreigners instead of family. And thus we read, "when they (the crowd around Jesus in the Temple) heard **this** they were filled with rage." They were not furious because Jesus had made the special claim that he was the Messiah. Rather, they were furious because Jesus had taken a swing at their sense of divine privilege – and he had used their own scriptures to do it.

Could it be that there is a deeper message in Jesus' sermon at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, which is that no one owns God. Whatever we mean when we say "God" is not fully captured by any of the world's faith traditions. If it could be, it would not be God.

God has many folds and many mansions. Don't blame me, that's what Jesus said in the Gospel of John. Could it be that

Jesus is the Way that embraces all ways! Could it be that no one owns God and that God alone knows what is good!

Is it not true that God has a soft spot for religious strangers, both as agents of divine blessing and recipients of divine grace – to the point that God sometimes chooses one of them over people who believe they should by all rights come first. This is a great mystery, but it does nothing to obscure the great commandment, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Regardless of the outcome, the main thing Jesus had asked us to do is to love God and my neighbor as religiously as we love ourselves. Which means, the minute we have that handled, we will ask for our next assignment. Yet, for now, I would say, our hands are full.