

Protecting a Neighbor's Honor

John 2:1-11

When the news broke a few days ago about the horrific and deadly attack on the natural gas plant in Algeria by Islamist extremists, I thought to myself, “Oh, no! Here we go again—more senseless violence by religious extremists in the Middle East and one more reason Muslims are hated by non-Muslims.” Perhaps “hate” is too strong a word, but it reflects a widespread distrust and suspicion in much of our own society that Islam, as a whole, is an intolerant and dangerous religion.

I suppose, given the general media coverage throughout North America and Europe, there's very little reason to dispute that view if that's all you knew and heard; the media (in all its forms) does little to embrace Islam as a positive influence and tolerant mainstream religion. I can empathize with my Muslim friends, because every time a Baptist makes the news it's when the Southern Baptists make an offensive and ridiculous public pronouncement, or when members of Fred Phelps' whacky Baptist church in Topeka picket funerals, or when some right-wing nutcase like Pastor Terry Jones and his Baptist flock threaten to burn a Qur'an. The general public's perception of Baptists is that we're also a bunch of religious extremists, albeit bullying people with the Bible instead of bombs. Clearly, that's not true of most Baptists, but then who's listening to us?

However, I still think Muslims have it worse. Islamophobia is alive and well in many parts of our country. A Gallup poll a couple of years ago revealed a wide margin of prejudice against Muslims

compared to any other major religious group¹. Despite the fact that Muslims contribute considerably to the commonwealth of our country and there are almost as many Muslims in the U.S. as there are Jews (with some estimates suggesting far more), Islam is still a relatively unknown religion to most Americans. One rarely hears a glowing story about Islam in our newspapers or on TV. I can't recall how many times I've watched a movie or TV drama in recent years when Muslims are portrayed as the villains—the “reason” why America is threatened and vulnerable. Terrorism being what it is, some of it is, of course, warranted. This isn't an innocuous caricature. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (which tracks hate crimes in the U.S.), anti-Muslim propaganda and crimes are on the rise, while anti-Jewish, anti-Latino, anti-black, and even anti-gay crimes are not, leading to the conclusion that Muslims have become the newest target and scapegoat in our society!²

Religious prejudice isn't anything new, of course. It's always been part of our society and, of course, it exists with great ferocity around the world. Religious bigotry in the U.S. used to fall along different lines, usually over denominational or doctrinal differences, or more generally between Protestants and Catholics, or even in Christian/Jewish relations, with minorities usually suffering under the dominance of the majority. Fortunately, most mainstream Christians have given up those battles, recognizing the commonality we have with other Christians, or even with our parent faith in Judaism. The ecumenical movement over the last half-century has

¹ “In U.S., Religious Prejudice Stronger Against Muslims,” *gallup.com*, January 10, 2010.

² Mark Potok, “FBI: Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Still Up,” *salon.com*, Dec. 10, 2012.

been an important one in our culture, allowing us to move beyond the stereotypes and tribal mindsets that seem to come with strong religious identities and firm beliefs.

As much as times have changed for the better, there are still some rubs that irritate thin skin. A pluralistic culture, for instance, requires a greater separation of church and state than we've known in the past, including a reduced role for religion in schools and at public events. Some choose to go to battle over that crying foul that religion is being replaced by secularism. That may be true if you compare today with the 1950s, but the loss is not over religion per se, but of Christian dominance of it within our culture. Americans, as a whole, are still quite religious. It's just that Christianity no longer dominates the public square nor defines the nature of religious expression. We have to recognize that the "good old days" weren't so good for those who weren't Christian or even religious, yet had to tolerate in public institutions the celebration of Christian holidays with Christian customs and Christian songs. Our changing times have reduced the dominance of Christian culture, but in favor of being more respectful of other traditions and beliefs. A more pluralistic setting today requires us to honor the intent of our nation's constitution and the interests of our non-Christian neighbors.

For that reason, I like to extend the meaning of Christian Unity Sunday beyond the customary ecumenical lines to include the unity we can or do have with non-Christians—those of other faiths and even those with no particular faith. Compared to the past that might seem strange, but there's good reason for doing so. Namely, being ecumenical among Christians is no longer the growing edge;

denominational differences and identities don't really matter as much now as they once did. We have crossed over to the need for interracial, interreligious, interfaith relationships, and even openness toward the growing number of "Nones"—those who declare no religious affiliation or beliefs.

Because of the increasing plurality in our society, our commonality with others doesn't have to exist solely on the basis of beliefs—theological or otherwise—or specific religious rituals or practices. Unity can also be based on a common humanitarian desire for justice, peace, mercy, compassion, human rights, care for the earth, and all the other matters of life that concern people of faith and those of no faith. As many of us know firsthand, no one needs to share our particular religious beliefs in order for us to work alongside them or to value their insights and experiences or to form meaningful relationships. Many of us can attest to the Divine Presence being found in our common concern for people's welfare, where there is an agreement to respect each other, to care for each other, to learn from each other, and to help each other in ways that honor each other's presence and personal dignity. That occurs interreligiously and interracially, as well as in explicitly humanitarian endeavors.

For me, at this point in my life, that's an important and achievable good in a world that seems too often to lack a charity of spirit even among those who claim to be religious. Cultivating and claiming humanitarian values are very close to the essence and purpose of religion. It's certainly better than maintaining old rivalries and prejudices over who was going to make it to heaven or who could claim to represent God! Those arcane and irrelevant arguments make

little sense for our time—amounting to nothing more than foolish tribal rivalries that serve no other purpose than to make one group feel superior to another—dividing rather than bringing people together. It seems to me that the Spirit of God beckons us to err on the side of reconciliation and mutual respect—protecting our neighbor’s dignity and honor rather than to judge them on religious or non-religious grounds.

Now in a roundabout way, the lectionary text from John’s gospel illustrates my point. It’s the familiar episode of when Jesus turned the water into wine. This may appear to be worlds apart from what I’ve just been talking about, but trust me, there is a relevant word.

Typically, most interpreters read this story metaphorically—that John’s intention is to illustrate the transformation that is beginning to take place in Jesus’ ministry: that Jesus is the bearer of the Spirit that takes the ancient water rituals of purification that helped make one right with God (as outlined in the Torah) and turns all of that into the living presence of the God’s own Spirit within us. Going from the dourness of repentance to the enlivening inspiration of the Spirit is then illustrated in the celebration of a wedding feast—from the water to the wine—a new relationship with God is taking place where the covenant is formed with God’s Law written right onto the hearts and minds of people. Coupling the waters of baptism with the anointing of the Spirit, the transformation of water into wine serves as a powerful metaphor of spiritual renewal. All of this makes sense in the context of Christian theology—in whatever tradition we find ourselves.

But if you step back from the metaphor and take the story simply as it is, another message can be mined out for meaning. It comes from the social context and what weddings entailed back in Jesus' day. As I've mentioned before, marriages were arranged by and large by fathers (or heads of households), bringing together families that were joined for political, economic, social, or religious purposes. Romance was rarely a motivation for a marriage. So we have to assume, this wedding Jesus attended came about because the families involved wanted to be united, whether or not the specific couple had romantic feelings for each other.

When weddings took place, typically they would be large community-wide events lasting over several days. There would be preparations, ritual processions, food, dancing, storytelling, more food, and more dancing. The hosting family, which would be the husband's, were responsible for making sure everything was done right. The last thing any host wanted to have happen was to run out of supplies for the festive occasion. This was not a problem for wealthy households, but it was a tremendous burden for those who were not. So the family members (both immediate and extended, along with close friends of the groom) would bring provisions and make themselves available to help out with meals and accommodations. It would be socially humiliating and shameful for a host to be lacking generosity and consideration for the guests. The presiding father's and his family's honor was at stake, even if they had few means to accommodate the guests.

As the story goes, the host in Cana ran out of wine at some point during the celebration, indicating a paucity of either resources or

friends. Wine was not only used for ceremonies and meals, it was also used as an expression of hospitality. To be without wine, meant you lacked a spirit of hospitality and care. So it was no small matter when Jesus' mother came to him to help deal with this humiliating circumstance. Mary apparently was trying to protect this family's honor when she went to Jesus, who immediately indicated to her that they were not obliged to—meaning they weren't family or even particularly close to them as friends.

So, according to custom, Jesus could have let the husband's family face the consequences and public humiliation. This is where the story makes a more direct point. Jesus broke custom, crossed the psychological and familial threshold into this other family's predicament, and responded, generously so, in a way beyond all expectations. In a miracle vintners still dream of performing, he turned ordinary water into a fine tasting wine! Aside from wishing to know how to do that, what we take away is Jesus' charitable embrace of his dishonored neighbor. Not only did he come to his neighbor's aid when called upon, but he did so in a manner that protected and even enhanced the family's honor! This family became like his own.

This is why I view this story as an illustration of how you and I might participate in ecumenical and interfaith relationships. Rather than view others (particularly non-Christians) as spiritual or religious rivals, strangers, or even enemies—those with whom we have no relation or interest (where we might even take some delight in their misfortune)—a Christ-like spirit would be to embrace them as our kinfolk (even if they aren't family) and go the extra mile for them. It's not only refusing to contribute to religious prejudice against our

neighbors, but more positively to stand with them and protect their dignity and honor and wellbeing. For standing with them also means they will stand with us.

Many of us know the benefits and challenges of doing this firsthand. On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, many of us recall how over the years standing with African-Americans for racial justice has built relationships interracially. The same has been true with the Jewish and Latino communities. As Marti Bradshaw and I experienced at the national Baptist-Muslim dialogue a month and a half ago, Muslim leaders in North America want to help us correct misperceptions about Baptists in the Muslim world and, in turn, Baptists need to correct wrong judgments about Muslims in our churches and in culture. It begins with building relationships with one another by spending time and learning the basics about each other, then cultivating real friendships and compassion for one another as spiritual families. These are important thresholds to cross. We come to realize God's love and goodness is far greater than our differences!

We can do the same with Hindus, Sikhs, and with any other religious community we do not know well, or those who might be disparaged or ridiculed by us or anyone else. Christian unity is more than tolerating denominational differences and distinctions; it means Christians finding ways to forge unity with all faiths and even with those of no faith. It's for breaking out of our tribal mindsets and customs that include some and exclude others. It's overcoming the fears and distrust we have from ignorance or due to arrogance. In

effect, it's turning toxic water into incredibly good wine by sharing the sweet, sweet Spirit of God with others.

Unity is not merely a dream. We can follow the wisdom of St. Augustine: "In necessary things, unity; in uncertain things, liberty; and in all things, charity." That's a great motto for building human relationships and experiencing the grace of God. We live in an age that desperately needs a spirit of charity and graciousness between people and we come out of a heritage that has demonstrated too little of it at times. But when you view it from the eyes of heaven, as G.K. Chesterton put it: "we are all in the same boat in a stormy sea and we owe each other a terrible loyalty." That we do, not only to those who are like us, but to the many throughout the world who aren't, yet still bear the image of God. May our generosity of spirit translate to a new effort to be generous to others, who in their own customs and beliefs, simply seek to do God's will.

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