

“Many Folds, One Flock”

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Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

[Jesus said,]

*“And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold;
I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice.
So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”*

Let us pray... O God,

May we not be afraid of interacting with people of other faiths,
but be open to what truths we share with them as human beings.

May we take confidence that you have given us a Gospel of Good News that makes sense
and that you are not finished speaking.

May we affirm your Good News by showing forth your love as a proper response.

Amen

Jesus speaking of “many folds, but one flock”, suggests to me
that he was anticipating a time when human beings would
consider the need for interfaith coexistence and cooperation.

No doubt this has been interpreted by traditional Christian religious thinkers
down through the centuries to mean that all human beings
would become ‘Christian’ or suffer eternal exclusion.

Well, everyone hasn’t converted yet, and for that matter –
which denomination is the “right” one?

Perhaps you know the old joke where St Peter is guiding a new arrival to Heaven
and they are going passed a high-walled enclave, when he says,

“Shhhh...This is where the fundamentalist Christians live.

They think they’re the only ones here.”

That is not true for all fundamentalist Christians – though it is generally taught
that a person must be “born again” as a Christian to go to Heaven.

As a motivation for sincere missionary outreach to save people, that’s commendable;

But as a means of manipulating people into conversion by scaring them,
this has always been unworthy of the love of God through Christ.

Millions of people have come and gone throughout the history of Planet Earth,
who have not even heard of Jesus Christ.

Does that mean they are all lost for eternity?

Does that mean that – in the grand scope of things,
it really didn’t matter that Jesus suffered and died,
because everybody goes to Heaven anyway?

Or does that mean that what Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection,
revealed a universal truth which all people throughout human history
have intuitively known and have had opportunities
to put into practice in their lives, regardless of their religion?

Willard, p.2

If we assume Jesus affirms religious diversity,

then the third option makes sense:

There have always been people who recognized
their potential to do what is false and hurtful;

There have always been people who recognized
that the Universe works in reliable ways
to guide them to choose what is true and good;

There have always been people who recognized
that a Spirit of generosity and wisdom is at work in the world
and that we are never alone even in solitude.

There have always been people who recognized
that there is more to this life than we know – and it's going to be OK.

When I was at Lancaster Theological Seminary,
we hosted a Jewish-Christian Dialogue
with about 20 Hebrew seminarians as our guests.

The opening worship took place Friday evening in our chapel sanctuary,
and afterwards, we convened as a large group for our first discussion.

One of my classmates, Angelee Benner-Smith, spoke up and tearfully protested
that our worship together was bland and she objected
that any mention of Jesus Christ was being avoided.

In effect, we were leaving Jesus at the door
despite our effort to be inclusive and welcoming of our Jewish guests.

One of the Hebrew seminarians – a woman who was a cantor, spoke up, and said,
“That is why I came here – to learn about Jesus. But don't proselytize me!”

That has been the single most important lesson to me about the importance
of interfaith dialogue – and how it works!

You make room for other faiths, celebrating the virtues
you discover in their practice while practicing your own faith –
accepting others while expecting to be accepted yourself.

The idea of being inclusive extended to language –
and in 1984, when I went to seminary, inclusive language was something new.
With the rising influence of feminist liberation from the 1960s through the 1970s,
a feminist theology was forming.

Upon my entry at Lancaster, I learned that “inclusive language” was
officially advocated for our chapel worship together,
and we were encouraged to embrace this practice.

At first I was skeptical about this “inclusive language” which I heard about on CBN –
the Christian Broadcasting Network, before I came to seminary.

It was reported that some mainline churches had adopted
an inclusive language lectionary to be read in worship, which was described
as kind of a ‘looseleaf’ Bible that left out
various unpleasant and inconvenient references.

Willard, p.3

At the time, I was inclined to believe the Bible was infallible –
a view which I still hold, but not in terms of being inerrant
as my conservative friends believed.

So, I considered this matter of inclusive language as suspect –
and quite frankly, awkward and inadequate.

Somehow, 'She' for 'He' as a reference to God just seemed
like a forced compromise, and using the term 'the 'Mortal One'
did not carry the same dramatic emphasis as 'the Son of Man'.

What won me over to inclusive language was hearing
two guest lecturers speak about feminist theology –
The Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Zigmund and Dr. Phyllis Trible.

They convinced me that feminist theology and inclusive language
were not just turning the tables of power, but they impressed upon me
that the momentum of a patriarchal perspective was so strong
that it required a strong challenge in return, to provide balance.

Inclusive or 'politically correct' language is an important way to do that;
and I realized this was not limited to gender pronouns, but more extensively
about how we speak of light and dark, of Jew and Gentile –
to be more eloquent in how we speak of the things of God.

This has influenced me in how I interpret and tell the sacred stories
of our Bible.

One of the most obvious examples is how the Gospel of John refers to
'the Jews' as Jesus' principal antagonists.

That is generally how English versions of the Bible have translated
the word in Greek, which actually means 'Judeans' –
a better description for the politicized Jewish people of 1st Century Judea.

For that matter, the Jewish people of the north were called Galileans –
and whether they were fishermen or Pharisees,
friend or foe, they were all Jews.

Language is one way to dismantle the predispositions of prejudice –
so 'politically correct' language of inclusivity is important.

Inclusivity is an affirmation of human diversity –
more and more we are talking about this as age-old problem
of tribal fear and distrust of others.

More and more we are witnessing people just trying to get along in this world,
rising up to claim their place in the sun, demanding the opportunity to get
what they need to survive and thrive.

More and more, we are witnessing the Church reclaim a vision of Jesus
not just as God who is holy and almighty, but as that Son of Man
who is a true heir of what it means to be human.

We need to see Jesus as authentically human to give us hope
for who we can be authentically.

Willard, p.4

I have had some discussion recently about the term 'ONA – Open and Affirming',
for which congregations of the United Church of Christ must be certified.

It has a specific intention that speaks to the need to let visitors know
we are inclusive of all people regardless.

I am very proud of our church for this and –
for me, this takes on a greater significance;

In fact, to be ONA defines for me what it means to be Christian.

As an expression of this radical inclusivity, to be “open” means to open one’s heart
to the diversity of human-kind – to be more human.

What is implied is that as we become more open to what is human,
we simultaneously turn away from what is inhuman.

That is the original meaning of ‘repentance’ as the translation for
the Greek word ‘metanoia’.

As we turn from what is unjust and inhumane
to become more open to what it means to be human,
we become more humane in the process.

To be “affirming” is to be loving – to be devoted to some thing or activity
that is greater than oneself.

To become more devoted and loving in this way, is to approach the divine
by cultivating gardens, building bridges, teaching children,
and in so doing, imitate God who brings forth worlds into being.

Again, there is a simultaneous recession from what is unloving
as someone grows into rational loving-kindness;

The impulse to manipulate and coerce others, diminishes.

The Holy Spirit of love will not cooperate with evil,
for as soon as one is forced into ‘devotion’,

love immediately withdraws... to spring forth somewhere else.

Through Jesus Christ, we see this balance of the human and the divine,
as he touched and healed people who were afflicted by leprosy,
as he forgave people crippled by guilt,
as he corrected people blinded by pride,
while driving out the evil spirits of fear, shame, and arrogance.

Through his affirmation – his love of humanity,
that we are no less worthy of God’s care
than birds of the sky or lilies of the field,
Jesus demonstrated the divinity of a loving God.

So as a congregation of the United Church of Christ,
we need to be a continuing witness – not only to the world
with its ‘dog eat dog/survival of the fittest’ mentality,
but to other denominations of the wider, traditional Church as well.

Willard, p.5

As the United Church of Christ, we are rooted in all Christian traditions,
including what Christianity has borrowed from Judaism.

Judaism was the religion of Jesus – and it is through him,
that Christianity has a claim on the use of the Hebrew Scriptures,
and some but not all of the traditions of Judaism.

Our interpretations are our own of these traditions which we have appropriated,
but it is not appropriate for us to tell the Jewish people
how they should interpret their scripture and traditions.

They have their mission and an abiding relationship
with the God of Abraham & Sarah–

In the same way, the Muslims have their mission and an abiding relationship
with the God of Abraham & Hagar.

As the United Church of Christ, we claim that God is still speaking –
certainly in new ways like the challenge
to be more open to what is human,
while rejecting what is inhuman, and
to affirm of what is divine wherever we find it,
while rejecting what is evil.

At the same time we hold on to what is good – tested by time,
passed down to us through centuries, like gold passing through fire...

We are not bound to the archaic language of what we have received from Judaism.
We know there are new translations; We know that the old labels can be unpacked;
and that we can unpack them ourselves, and find their truth.

We know that they have universal truths... for us... now... because of Jesus.
These truths have been revealed to us because he stood up to the 'powers' of his day.
These truths have been revealed to open us up, in our day,
to affirm the truth that God loves us, and we should do likewise.

In closing, join me in saying together the King James Version of the 23rd Psalm...

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

*²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*³He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

Amen

*Our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures is a familiar one –
Psalm 23, but hear it now as a new translation
from the contemporary English Version...*

¹You, LORD, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.

²You let me rest in fields of green grass.

You lead me to streams of peaceful water,

³and you refresh my life.

You are true to your name,

and you lead me along the right paths.

⁴I may walk through valleys as dark as death,

but I won't be afraid.

You are with me,

and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.

⁵You treat me to a feast,

while my enemies watch.

You honor me as your guest,

and you fill my cup until it overflows.

⁶Your kindness and love

will always be with me each day of my life,

and I will live forever in your house, LORD.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 10:11-18

[Jesus said,]

¹¹ I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹² He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

¹³ He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ as the [Abba] Father knows me and I know the [Abba] Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

¹⁶ And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.

¹⁷ For this reason the [Abba] Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again.

¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my [Abba] Father."