

“Sharing the Mountain Top”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, The Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 7/29/18

I had my new friend Doug Long, pastor at Umstead Park UCC in Raleigh, NC here about three weeks ago, visiting with us on the campus. He was only here for the day and some of you got to meet him and hear as he shared about some of the things they are doing at his church, some very inspirational ministries to our country’s most vulnerable. While he and I met earlier that day, I heard how when they started their church—there was quite a bit of media coverage regarding one of his initial sermons, which I believe was titled “Is Jesus the Only Way?” It was less about the question that created such controversy, though, and more about the answer. Largely in Christian America the answer is simply, “yes.” However, some of us would propose a much more inclusive answer... hence Doug’s controversy in Raleigh twenty years ago.

This question would find its way to me the week after my visit with Doug when at Shaykh Rashid’s invitation I had the chance to sit on a panel of religious leaders at Sweet Briar College who was hosting a large group of Saudi Arabian college students. The panel had representatives from Muslim and Jewish faiths, as well as Unitarian Universalist. I alone would represent the Christian faith, no easy task for such a wide net of beliefs—but I did my best—playing it safe, often simply quoting Jesus’ own words. One student after the seminar secretly confessed to me, “I didn’t like being compared to a sheep; they are dumb animals,” referring to one of the parables I had shared where Jesus talked about the sheep and their shepherd—and how the shepherd must always lay his life down for his sheep. I told him, “I think Jesus was emphasizing the role of the shepherd more in that particular story, rather than the dumbness of the sheep.” He seemed only slightly relieved. However, during the panel discussion, a question concerning how our faith compels us to work with people of other faiths was posed. I quoted the very passage we read today where Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman, a woman of another faith, who wanted clarity concerning which faith was more right in their worship to God (John 4:19-24). Jesus’ response could have been talk titled “Is Jerusalem the only way?”—and I am sure the controversy of such a question would have captured the headlines for devout Jews of the day, undoubtedly.

The Samaritan religion was an amalgamation of Jewish and outside beliefs, not dissimilar to the differences between Christians and Muslims and Jews today. We each emphasize a different prophet or leader as the “father of our faith”. For us, it is Jesus; for Muslims, the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH); for Jews, Moses—and for Samaritans, it was Jacob. However, Jesus, instead of choosing one prophet over the other, or choosing one place over the other (that is, whether Jerusalem was more holy and necessary than Samaria for reaching God), Jesus focuses the question on the worshippers themselves. Some would say that Jesus, in the passage, makes a sleight at the Samaritan religion while elevating his own when saying “you Samaritans worship what you do not know and we Jews worship what we know, for salvation comes from us,” but for truer exegetical analysis I challenge you to look deeper into the syntactical work of the phrasing where context is everything. This passage could just as easily be interpreted as a sleight to the Jewish faith while giving a pass to the Samaritans, arguably more accurately translated as, “Samaritans are in the clear because you don’t have all the information, but we Jews hold the key to salvation in our hands and are still ignorant to this truth.” Now “this truth” is what I think constitutes Jesus’ main point: Religion, in this case, is irrelevant. Its leadership or patriarchy is irrelevant. The primary thing relevant in Jesus’ teaching seems to be the worshipper and God. Their relationship is key, and he squarely puts the locus of control on the worshipper, that is—the person.

Now, for some of us more devout “Christians” may cringe to think that God honors all faiths. “Certainly ours is the most pure, or God’s ideal?” I say only this, “It is simply ours.” Jesus is our door, or better yet our window into God’s essence, the lens through which we understand the great mystery that is God. Jesus is our Savior, our Redeemer, and this should not be misunderstood; even though Jesus offers this path to all, all may not take it, and yet we may all end up in the same place at the end—within God’s great mystery.

Some may find solace in this word, and others discomfort. Some may quickly add, “Doesn’t Jesus say, no one comes to the Father but through him?” And I say, to exegete such a passage, let us dance together in the linguistic realm where context is paramount and audience detrimental. If I asked you, “who was Jesus’ audience?” Could you tell me? Most likely not. The cookie-cutter response for nearly a century now has been, “he was talking to the world.” However, I would encourage you to reread the passages, and study the audience and understand the context, and after which I will ask you, “Was Jesus honestly setting the standard to exclude billions of people whose certain death would mean an eternity without God’s presence?” or “Was Jesus fighting hard to have the very teachers of the Law of his day understand that there is no Law and God without the Messiah, that is, Jesus?” In this, was Jesus separating, perhaps the wheat and the chaff, and more specifically the self-righteous and the humbly righteous? My assumption is yes.

And it is clear when Jesus is talking with the Samaritan woman at the well that he has no interest in changing her religion. He does not make a case for why the woman should convert to Judaism as a more pure form of reaching God. He does not attempt to convert her to Christianity, though its modern version as a religious sect had not formalized at that time (and perhaps should have stayed as what Christ presented it to be then, instead of becoming the dogmatic behemoth it is today). What Jesus did do, however, was present a heart-posture of how to approach one’s faith—an authenticity. He said, “this is what God wants” (God is seeking true worshippers that worship him in spirit and in truth). And whatever forms of spirit and truth this may take is between the worshipper and God, that’s what makes it authentic. It is not for you and I to dictate. Just as Jesus left this into the hands of the Samaritan woman that day, we must leave it in the hands of every human being. It is indeed a personal, private journey.

However, we can unpack from the passage an encouraging hope. Jesus says that God is spirit therefore seeks those who will worship him in spirit. This makes sense. It is not a physical act, like many in that day and even today have made it out to be. Remember, Jesus was tearing down the physical structures of a religion, in favor of an unseen approach to God—that which is hidden in our hearts. Again, our heart-posture. How do we approach God in spirit? Do we approach her with diligence, faithfulness, devotion, humility, and love? Do our hearts guide us into a posture of “openness” and “inclusiveness”? I would think Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman compels us to do exactly that. While gathering together in this sanctuary, singing these worshipful hymns, and lighting a candle of ceremony together are all good things, encouraging things to do, they are not what God requires. God only desires a heart-posture that seeks the mysteries of God herself. This is the true challenge. Though it may not be easy to make it here on a Sunday morning, your greatest challenge is to open your eyes on Monday morning while still in bed, and look into the heavens, and then whisper a heartfelt “thank you” to the Creator that you long so much to be connected to. To the one you remember suddenly or perhaps gradually becoming aware of as a child, an inexplicable mystery, a presence of comfort in your time of distress. And to do this in what Jesus calls “truth”. Heart-posture requires a genuineness. We must be honest.

Our personal truth must be acknowledge. Our weakness must be confronted and handed over. In that moment of holistic candor and internal focus, that is our inward journey manifest, we connect with our Creator. Mysteries are revealed in silence. Truths fall into place in the noise all around us. We become centered and connected. We become less concerned with source and more concerned with truths. As James writes to the first church, “don’t get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light” (James 1:17). And so may a River of light crash into your very essence this morning. May God’s mysteries reveal themselves and his grace overwhelm your mind and heart. May then, our heart-postures soften and not harden, and then even tears may freely flow. Let us be part of the process of this great awakening, this great love—and then as in the 150 year old words of Horatio Spafford’s poem, “when peace like a river attendeth my way... It is well with my soul.”

May the peace of God be with you as we share this Mountain Top with ALL people.