



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"God is bigger than our tribe"

Isaiah 43:1-7 Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As the story goes, the young adult Jesus made his way to the Jordan River along with many many others to see his relative John, that radical wild man who was calling for a huge turnaround in his people- a change of heart and mind that would some day culminate in God turning the fortunes of his people. And Jesus, along with others who had longed for change, had come down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. And as the story goes, at some point in the proceedings, the heavens opened, an opening emerged in the fabric of the universe, and the spirit touched him, and a voice was heard, "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased."

What a moment! People said it was the voice of God offering such a blessing to such a person. And we say it was the voice of God too right- we who follow him, who are part of his tribe? God's voice offering our beloved Jesus a divine blessing. But here is the big question. When we say it was the voice of God, what do we mean by God? Whose God was it that blessed him so tenderly, so beautifully? Was it the one referred to in the first part of our reading from Isaiah, the one who also spoke to the poor beleaguered exiles in Babylon, offering them words of comfort and hope, "when you pass through the waters, they will not overwhelm you and the fires, you shall not be burned, ... because you are precious in my sight and honoured and I love you..." Such tender words of connection with the divine. Or was it the more tribal God of the rest of that reading, the one bargaining away the lives of nations: "I give Egypt as a ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you... Nations in exchange for your life..."

So which God was it. You see the problem we have as people who turn to the biblical tradition as a core framework and language for our faith is that the Bible does not speak with one voice about God. The bible contains many images, many characterizations of God. There is the early concept of God as a mountain God, whose voice is heard in the thunder and lightening. There is the agricultural God who, in all fairness, lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike. There is the warrior God who backed the nation of Israel under David and while armies were fighting it out on the ground, there is a sense that the God's were doing the same in the heavens. There is a thread though, a mystical and universal inclination which was not so much present in the earliest elements of the biblical tradition but emerges in the voice of the prophets at times, and certainly in the wisdom writings, that conceives of God in more universal terms- the God of everybody, friend and enemy, the God of all creation, and the force of love and life at the heart of things including humans and human community.

To be clear, I don't believe there are many gods, but I do believe that humans, including those of the biblical tradition, and people today, have conceived of God differently. Sometimes our concept of God serves a deep and lasting and beautiful purpose, love and life eternal and universal- that is religion at its best. Sometimes our concept of God is small and tribal and vengeful, and serves to support rivalries between communities- religion at its worst. Some have said that religion is a damaging force in the world because it pits us against each other. But that is judging all religion by its worst examples and blaming God for the worst of human nature.

Linda Hibberd shared with me yesterday a blog post by Omar Rikabi, a Christian minister from a Muslim family. And he speaks of what it is like to live in a culture that is increasingly fearful of anything sounding Muslim. He writes: "... I hear about San Bernardino, or

Paris, or any other terror event, my first prayer is to hold my breath and hope the killers do not have names like mine... down the highway from me some men with guns protested outside a mosque, then posted the names and home addresses of local Muslims online... a brother in Christ, and president of a large Christian university, received thunderous applause when he told his student body to get guns and help end Muslims before they kill us."

Now I know that he is speaking from an American context and that difference is not a small one, but it is an example of how religion, Christianity included, can be used for tribalistic purposes, to protect our people and our interests against other people and their interests. It is the dangerous practice of giving theological justification for our own small minded purposes.

Now I use this example, which arises from within the Christian community because I want us to see clearly that we Christians have a long history of doing this, of seeing our faith, our concept of God, our religion as the right one, over and against others, and our community as the one God blesses, over and against others. These days there is great fear out there of radical Muslims, and it is understandable, but Islam is not the only faith that can be used for tribalistic purposes. The problem is not the faith itself, but rather the practice of it, the way the faith is used that makes it either of force for universal good, for the best in humanity, or quite the opposite, to pit us against each other in the name of God.

I believe that religion has great power to harness and bless the best in humanity. We have many great examples of this in human history. Through the Christian faith but not only the Christian faith, God has blessed us, as witnessed in Jesus. The message and witness of our faith to the world ought always to echo the message of God to Jesus at his baptism- you, O world of mine, are my beloved. We must never allow our faith to slip into a smaller manifestation as it does in Isaiah, and appeal to a smaller humanity with a smaller tribal God.

So what does it take for our faith and our concept of God to be of the kind that blesses in the way that God blessed humanity at the baptism of Jesus? We have work to do as Christians and as a Christian faith. Because truth be told, there is plenty of tribalism and tribalistic inclinations within. First of all, we need to do our own work to embrace a broader more universal enlightened expression of Christianity. And this means confronting fear within ourselves. It means learning to trust that the blessing of God includes us. It means confronting our small, reactive self, the one that is in it for ourselves. It means practicing our personal faith: our own discipleship, prayer, study, growth, such that our relationship with God, ourselves, our neighbors, and with life grows deeper and kinder and more trusting. That is the personal work of an enlightened Christian faith. That is really the first step and something that all of us can do.

Secondly, our relationships with people of other faiths are really important. There is tribalism within all religious communities, but there is also compassion, and grace and humility. We need to learn from our neighbors so that when we hear in the media or in conversations, broad sweeping generalizations rooted in fear of Islam or fear of others, we have personal experience to draw on so that we can maintain a broad embrace.

Finally, it is time for us to be public in our faith. The world needs to see a gracious universal Christianity, to hear our Christian voice articulating a bigger vision and view of God who embraces and blesses not just us but people of all faiths. We are not in competition with people of other faiths. God is bigger. We need to come out of the closet and into the public arena.

I want to give Omar Rikabi the final word from his blog. He writes: "If I believe in prevenient grace—that Jesus is pursuing every person—I can only know what He's up to by entering into another's story through His holy love. How can I join in if I am running in fear from, discounting, and demonizing those made in the image of God?? ... (This) means I cannot dehumanize the politicians, preachers, and even friends who dehumanize my Muslim family. I cannot become a monster to defeat a monster... dehumanization (And I would add tribalism) may be a casualty of war, but it should never be a casualty of the Gospel." Amen