

Celebrating Diversity
John 4:4-18, 39-42; Romans 14:1-12
September 17, 2017

It was not about six weeks ago. . . I was working in the office when Sharon told me that there was a young man in the outer office that would like to speak with the pastor. Now this is a relatively common occurrence here at the church; and it usually means someone is seeking financial help. One of the difficult jobs of a pastor is attempting to sort out whether the need is genuine, whether the person seeking help is telling the truth or whether they have a well rehearsed story to receive a hand-out rather than seeking legitimate employment. Yes, I am charged with attempting to assist those who need assistance and still not reward those who really are capable of caring for themselves; and, of course, I am also charged with trying to be a good steward with the church's limited resources. So, Sharon told me that there was a young man who wanted to speak with a pastor; and I assumed this was "just another" request for help. But, in fact, this was a request like none I had ever had before in my 14 years in ministry.

As I walked out of my study, I was met by a young, clean-cut, neatly dress man – approximately 30 years old, who appeared to be of middle-eastern descent. He told me his name was Mujeeb; and he was a PhD candidate at Cleveland State University majoring in Chemical/Biomedical Engineering and doing some significant cancer research. He also told me that in 2010 he came to this country as a refugee from Afghanistan. Then he handed me a book and said, "This is my story. I wrote and published this book to tell my story, and especially to tell the story of the abuses committed against women and girls in Afghanistan. I published this book, and all the profits from its sale go back to support the women and further their education. I send the money back through relief agencies. I want you to have the book. Please read the book. However, if you could, I would humbly ask that you give me \$15.00 to pay for the book. I looked at the book, which is self-published. The covers contain several endorsements from various professors, both at Cleveland State and Tri-C. I asked if Mujeeb was a U.S. Citizen or if he had refugee status. He told me that he was glad to say that he became a U.S. Citizen in 2013, and he is also a Christian. His conversion to Christianity from radical/fundamentalist Islam was, in large part, what led to his becoming a refugee. He would like to come and speak to our church, and that is still under consideration. I asked how I might get in touch with him, and he referred me to an e-mail address printed on the copyright page of the book. I thanked him, gave in a reasonable donation toward his cause along with my business card and wished him well.

It took a couple weeks for me to get around to reading the book, but I tell you it presents a most compelling and I might add horrifying story of life in rural Afghanistan and Pakistan under the authoritative rule of fundamentalist Islam. Hear that word “fundamentalist.” As I have said many times before from the pulpit, Islam is not in and of itself evil. However, it has been used by certain extremists, just as Christianity has been used by certain extremists, to further hatred, bigotry, prejudice, and exclusion. The young man that I met a few weeks back had to flee his country because he advocated an open mind. He had to flee his country because he dared to wonder what other religions taught. He had to flee his country because he dared to suggest that women should be treated with respect, that girls should be allowed to attend the same schools as boys, and that girls at the age of fourteen should not be forced into arranged marriages, sometimes with much older men – marriages about which they have absolutely no say.

And this brings me to my sermon subject for today. As you are aware, our long-range planning team has been busy, seeking to strengthen our church today, and guide our church in the coming decades. I mentioned last week that, as the result of our general meeting last year and focus group meetings last Spring, we have formulated five guiding principles upon which to build the plans for the future; and I will be concentrating on one of the principles every Sunday for the next five weeks. I’m presenting these principles in no particular order. They are all important; no principle has priority of the others.

So today’s principle (You have it on your bulletin insert.):

We welcome and nurture a diverse congregation who become extended family – all people are loved by God. We seek to find the God-image common to all people, and not seek to mold them to our image. We welcome strangers, even when they do not look or act like us because Christ told us to. We specifically reach out to those in our community who may feel alienated by the church. We invite those with physical or developmental disabilities, because our building and the accepting nature of our congregation are well-suited to serve their need. We model that it is possible to be a Christian while fostering an understanding, tolerance, and acceptance for those of different faith/religions traditions. We seek to be in dialogue with those of differing faith and those of no faith in particular.

Why did I begin today’s sermon with the story of Mujeeb? Because his experience growing up in rural Afghanistan is the antithesis of this statement; and his beliefs in an environment as I just expressed got him repeated beatings and eventually threats on his life and the lives of his family members. I also began today’s message because thankfully, I had the good sense to listen to Mujeeb’s

story. He told me that some churches would not listen to him. They seemed to be afraid of him. I'm thankful for the opportunity to listen; and I have kept him in my prayers.

Friends, if Jesus was about anything he was about inclusiveness. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, when that very act was considered a sin and a violation of cleanliness ritual. He healed the lepers from another country, those tortured by demons, a woman from Syro-Phoenicia, a rich young ruler and humble fishermen. Then there is today's Gospel story. I love the story of the woman at the well, because it is the ultimate expression of inclusiveness. First, we have a woman. In Jesus time, Jewish men did not converse with women. Just as in Afghanistan today, women were seen as second class citizens; or, let me correct that, women could not be citizens. They were the property of their husbands or fathers. But here, Jesus initiates conversation with a women, and not just any women but a Samaritan women.

The Jews hated the Samaritans. They had different customs. They came from different backgrounds. They didn't worship in exactly the same way that good Jerusalem Jews worshiped. And perhaps worst of all, five hundred years earlier, the Samaritans did not experience the Babylonian exile in the same way the "real Jews" experienced it. That's what makes the parable of the Good Samaritan so powerful. We need to realize when the poor Jewish fellow was lying in the ditch half dead, beaten by robbers on the road to Jericho, the last person he wanted to see was a Samaritan. The Jews equated Samaritans with evil; but, in the parable Jesus noted that it is the Samaritan that is the neighbor to be loved. And so, in today's story we have a Samaritan Woman and a major portion of a Samaritan town coming to Jesus – the height of inclusivity in the midst of diversity.

I'm thankful that this is a congregation that welcomes, indeed that embraces diversity. I celebrate this congregation's commitment to the Reconciling Ministries Network, and the open acceptance of LGBTQ individuals. Now, I know that many of you are very accepting of homosexuality, and others of you are still struggling with that; and that's okay. That too is part of our diversity. But even those who are struggling, those who aren't real sure how to deal with certain issues of sexual orientation, are still loving, caring, and I might add open-minded in your struggles. And that is cause to celebrate.

I seriously wish that we had more racial diversity in our congregation, for I believe that diversity would further insights and understanding of the racial tensions in our society; and that understanding would further acceptance and love and peace. I recognize that we are essentially a microcosm of our community when it comes to race; but I also hope that we can be welcoming to people of all colors and ethnic origins.

I was very pleased that about a year ago an adult Sunday School Class did a series of videos on an interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. I've said before, I am profoundly Christian; I could not be a Muslim; and still, I will do anything in my power to further the true expression of Islam as a good and peace-loving religion, quite contrary to the media and popular expressions by a lot of ignorant people.

But there's a far larger group of people "out there" that I would like to feel welcome "in here" and that's the folks we sometimes call SBNR's – Spiritual But Not Religious. Some of these folks truly feel alienated by the church which they see as judgmental, hypocritical, and irrelevant in today's society. Others simply feel the church has nothing to offer them. You and I know better. You and I know the mission and the ministry of the church. You and I know the loving fellowship that surrounds people in times of hurt or need. You and I know the grace of God, the amazing love of God that we experience in worship, in sacrament, in prayer, indeed in the sharing as a Christian congregation.

And so, one of our guiding principles is to be a welcoming, nurturing congregation that values diversity and in that diversity finds unity in the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And I pledge, as your pastor, to work to make all of these principles more than just principles but practices within our congregation.

In the way of preview, I'll tell you that next week's principle is: **We actively serve our neighbors in the North Olmsted community and the wider world.** I hope to see you next week as we consider the mission arm of our church.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,
You are the God of all people,
so, help us accept each other as you accept each of us.
Help us reach out in love and peace,
as together we share your amazing love
with your people everywhere.
Amen.

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