

“How Will We Be Christian Pluralists?”

Friends, longtime and new, we are gathered on this crisp spring morning to worship God, which is fathomless and expansive Love. We acknowledge that this land we now love as People’s Park has been loved by the Wahpekute tribe of the Dakota people and myriad other peoples for millennia before us. As we enter into a time of wondering about how we will be Christian pluralists, please pray with me.

God of all, you are the source who empowers us as individuals and as a community of faith. Energize us today as we consider how we might embody your love and follow the lead of Jesus by being Christian pluralists in this time in the life of the world. As you move within and among us this morning, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends, do you find your own humanity in the faces of others each day and hold space for your humanity to be reflected back to you? My theology and personal experience of pluralism have been tremendously influenced by words my grandmother spoke a few weeks before her death in 2008. *“See yourself in everyone.”* Grandma spoke these words in response to a loved one who was expressing frustration with the ideology or behavior of someone politically different than them. *“See yourself in everyone.”* Because of her deeply rooted Christian faith, I extrapolate that she believed we will see ourselves in everyone if we see God in ourselves, in others, and in the relationships among us. Grandma invites us into a profound and relentless call to love others.

Our scriptures for today reinvigorated my interest in my grandmother’s influence on my approach toward life in a pluralistic society.

I use the term pluralism to name that people coexist while identifying with diverse religious traditions, political convictions, and experiences of gender and sexuality, ethnicity, class, abilities, and race. I recently paged through Grandma's memoirs, which she wrote in her later 80s and which I had the privilege of helping to edit not long before her death, which was several days before her eighty-eighth birthday. I found these faithful, hopeful words about religious pluralism: *"When God made each soul unique, [God] pretty much ensured the multiplicity of religions. I am reasonably sure [God] is also having a hand in the coming together in understanding and mutual respect of the leaders and many followers in the world's major religions."*

I would call Grandma Liza a confessional pluralist. Nurtured in the Episcopal tradition and a practitioner of Buddhist transcendental meditation as well as a form of centering prayer developed by a Roman Catholic monk, the late Father Thomas Keating; Grandma could confess with clarity of conviction her identity within the Christian story while also recognizing the beauty and truth in other traditions.

I will return to further discussion of this concept of confessional pluralism, but let's first directly explore our scripture readings for today to see what wisdom they may seek to offer. I appreciate the question Jesus' disciple asks. I invite us to listen to Jesus' response and to listen for what his response does or does not imply. We heard,

"Judas... said, 'Rabbi, why is it that you'll reveal yourself to us, and not to the whole world?'

Jesus answered, 'Those who love me will be true to my word, and Abba God will love them; and we will come to them and make our dwelling place with them. Those who don't love me don't keep my words. Yet the message you hear is not mine; it comes from Abba God who sent me.'

This much have I said to you while still with you; but the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit whom Abba God will send in my name, will instruct you in everything and she will remind you of all that I told you.”

With total trust, Jesus’ disciple asks, why have you revealed yourself only to us? And Jesus clearly says, because there are other messengers of Love among other people. Judas wonders why Jesus would reveal his full self only to his closest disciples. Jesus explains that he and his concepts and experiences of God will have the most impact among those who connect with him and his message. Jesus’s message of God as Abba – a transcendent yet intimately loving parent – would reverberate with his followers for millennia beyond his lifetime. Jesus’ Abba God would dwell with them. And Jesus’ trust in a Holy Spirit (powerful beyond human understanding) would reverberate with his followers, empowering their living for millennia beyond his lifetime.

My understanding of our Creator God has been significantly influenced by contemporary theologians Eleazar Fernandez and Sallie McFague. In the creation narratives of our Christian tradition that we find in the book of Genesis, God’s voice declares creation to be good. I believe that Creator God is present providentially in all that upholds the vitality of creation. When the seasonal weather patterns renew the face of the Earth, when animals adapt and thrive with the Earth, and when humans coexist harmoniously with the Earth, we all manifest God’s presence. God is the providence, creativity, and goodness within all the ways in which the interlocking pieces of creation uphold each other’s vitality.

My understanding of the purpose for human existence resonates with a “self-in-relation” model proposed by Eleazar Fernandez in *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil*.

While I was in seminary, Eleazar was both my professor of constructive theology and also my academic advisor. His “self-in-relation” model is an anthropological perspective grounded in the concept of a relational God. Hear this brief excerpt from Fernandez’s *Reimagining the Human*:

“If being in relation is what constitutes who we are, then it is also what makes us truly an image of God. Relationship is the primary lens through which we interpret the notion of the image of God. We image God most profoundly when our individual interactions, families, and communities—as well as our political, economic, and ecclesiastical structures—reflect life-giving relations. Conversely, the image of God construed in a relational framework presupposes what God is like: The very essence of God is ‘to be in relation.’ God is the term we use to refer to that source and power of life-giving relation. God is the web of life-giving relation.” (Reimagining the Human, 188)

I believe that each of us has been and continues to be formed in the *imago dei* (image of God) by our Creator God’s movement within each of us and within our relationships. I understand each of us to be a unique piece within the puzzle of creation. Yet each one cannot thrive or even survive unless we attend to our interlocked connections with the other pieces in the puzzle.

Sallie McFague writes of the role of human beings within the web of life: *“On our planet we are the self-conscious aspect of the body of God, the part of the divine body able to work with God, the spirit who creates and redeems us, to bring liberation and healing of the earth and all its creatures” (Body of God, 124).* I believe that all beings, both animate and still, are indwelled by and reflect our Creator God.

Though I believe that all beings co-create, co-redeem, co-liberate, and co-heal in partnership with God; I certainly agree with McFague's description of human capacity to collaborate with God in such ways. As we interlock with other pieces of the edgeless jigsaw puzzle, we can co-create the realm of God that Jesus proclaimed to be present here and now. We do our part by living in just relationships – loving God, our neighbors and ourselves.

As Jesus was answering the question of Judas, Jesus had a full awareness that he was an incarnation of our Revealer God, the second part of our triune God. In his book *Faith Seeking Understanding*, contemporary theologian Daniel Migliore invites consideration of Jesus' purpose and role by presenting three distinct theories of atonement, each aligned with one of the three classic offices of Jesus Christ. Migliore describes *Christ as victor* (atonement in which Jesus is king), a theory of *satisfaction* (atonement in which Jesus is priest), and *moral influence* (atonement in which Jesus is prophet). About the moral influence theory of atonement, Migliore writes, "*Christ shows God's love to us in such a compelling way that we are constrained to respond in wonder and gratitude. The atoning work of Christ is complete only when it is appropriated in the act of faith and allowed to transform one's life*" (*Faith Seeking Understanding*, 185).

In line with Migliore's moral influence theory of atonement, McFague describes Jesus as modeling both inclusive friendship with the otherwise neglected and solidarity through suffering with the oppressed (epitomized in his dying as resistance toward corrupt systemic power). She describes Jesus as paradigmatic: "*...everything that is is the sacrament of God, but here and there we find that presence erupting in special ways. Jesus is one such place for Christians, but there are other paradigmatic persons and events—*

and the natural world, in a way different from the self-conscious openness to God that persons display, is also a marvelous sacrament in its diversity and richness.” (Body of God, 162) Those are words from Sallie McFague. A core aspect of Jesus’ ministry, which we seek to emulate as Christians, was his openness to experiencing God in the other.

One of the most helpful concepts I learned about during my years of seminary studies (which I’ve shared before) was that of being a confessional pluralist, which I have drawn from the work of Daniel Migliore. We can confess faith in a loving God as embodied in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus... while also bring radically open to pluralism, learning from and even being transformed by the beautiful and truth-filled teachings of other religions, philosophies and ways of life.

And so let’s return to an example from the Apostle Paul and the business leader Lydia, reading again parts of the Epistle reading for today:

“Then one night Paul had a vision. A Macedonian stood before him and said, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After this vision, we immediately made efforts to get across to Macedonia, convinced that God had called us to bring them the Good News...

On the Sabbath we went along the river outside the gates, thinking we might find a place of prayer. We sat down and preached to the women who had come to the gathering. One of them was named Lydia, a devout woman from the town of Thyatira who was in the purple-dye trade. As she listened to us, Christ opened her up to accept what Paul was saying. After she and her household were baptized, she extended us an invitation: ‘If you are convinced that I am a believer in Christ, please come and stay with us.’ We accepted.”

It would seem that the Apostle Paul has since passed along to us but really, truly adopted the experience of mutuality from Jesus – his teacher, his savior. And we have the opportunity to do that at every step of the journey as well. Here are two ways of understanding how we might be a confessional pluralist, one who is willing to say what our own story and our own tradition, our own faith family is while also being open to the other.

Migliore writes, *“The encounter of Christians and non-Christians requires genuine dialogue, yet without relinquishing the responsibility to communicate the gospel as faithfully and as compellingly as possible... The interaction of Christians and non-Christians should be encouraged at the grassroots level and fostered in cooperative efforts on matters of common concern and commitment.”* (Faith Seeking Understanding, 328).

Yesterday we had the opportunity to embody our gospel message of welcome and inclusion, joy and connection. Let us stay radically open to hearing the messages that others are filled with joy to share with us as well. Let us follow the advice of my Grandma Liza to *“see yourself in everyone.”* Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
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