

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
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Who is Other?

In nomine...

I. Intro

Some years ago, at the invitation of a friendly acquaintance, I attended a lecture at a big, prominent synagogue in Manhattan. The speaker's name was Rabbi Tovia Singer. Rabbi Singer has made a focus of his ministry around refuting Christian groups that would proselytize Jewish believers. He has a special concern about Jews for Jesus which he finds to be deceptive in their appeal and a bit cultic. Most of the lecture that evening was about how manipulative, deceptive, and mistaken these Christian missionaries are. And there *I* was, a Christian missionary from the Bronx, seated near the front with a yarmulke perched on my head. I may have been blushing. I didn't move and I hardly dared to breathe. I didn't want to give myself away, but I was sure everyone could see right through me!

I read a book last week by Toni Morrison called *The Origin of Others*. In that book Morrison talks about how we label some as "other" in order to make ourselves less "other." She refers back to some of the same phenomena which Canon Brian mentioned last week. Her focus is on the peculiarly American notions of "white" and "black" which were invented out of thin air in Jamestown, Virginia in 1633. She reminded me of how those same concepts continue to permeate American culture and dehumanize everyone they come into contact with.

Being "other," being excluded, is hurtful – any kindergartner could tell you that. And it only gets worse as we grow older and learn more effective means of ostracizing one another. That's what all the hub-bub is about with the current governor of Virginia: did he realize then, does he realize now, what it means to perpetuate the narrative of "other" and imputing that on people?

Being "other" is dangerous, as 400 years of American history has demonstrated on the bodies of people of color. Black Lives Matter is responding to a real and pressing issue. Being "other" is

to be vulnerable and taken advantage of, as generations of women have experienced. #MeToo is responding to a real and pressing issue.

Sometimes it seems like there is no end to the number of ways things we're being invited to protest. But the project of rallying behind, and righting wrongs done, to particular groups of people who have been oppressed, abused, erased, or somehow classed as "other" is spiritual work. It is Christian work. The Bible in fact teaches that there is no "other." We are all and each loved by God. And all these things that make us different do not separate us from one another. They bind us together in the diversity of God's amazing Creation. With God, there is no "other."

II. Thesis

Our Bible begins with the story of Creation – and that is not accident. There is one God, who created everything that is, and who created humankind in God's image, and who breathed God's Spirit into humankind. This means that whenever you or I encounter a person, we are encountering the very image of God. Whenever you or I interact with a living person, we are interacting with God's Holy Spirit. This is as true whether we are looking in the mirror, across the dinner table, across party lines, or across the tracks.

The story of the Bible is the story of humankind trying to grapple with this very simple truth: God's Holy Spirit dwells in you. The breath you draw in and push out: that is God's breath. The image you bear in your body and the very shape of your soul: those are shaped like God. Yet it has always been difficult for us to understand this. When people start to understand this, we call them "enlightened" or "holy" or maybe "saints."

None of us starts out "enlightened," though. Moses, the greatest of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, encountered God at the burning bush and immediately protested, "Who am I? I am a nobody! I am other!"

We saw the same thing last week when we read of the calling of the prophet Jeremiah. He said, "I'm too young!"

This week, Isaiah says, “I can’t be around God: I have the mouth of a sailor!” In our epistle, Paul characterizes himself as the least of the apostles because he once persecuted Christians. And in our Gospel, Peter acknowledges not only that he has the mouth of a sailor, but he *is* a sailor! He says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

Yet in each of these cases, God responds with welcome and with healing. It is the live coal, the light on the Damascus road, the stupendous catch of fish by which God speaks to each one, saying, “There is no other. I dwell *in* you, and you in me.”

III. Good News

That’s the Good News. That’s the Epiphany. God’s revelation is being made to you in a way that is peculiarly appropriate to who you are, how God made you. Because you, too, have been called by God. Your very nature as made in God’s image and as a vessel of God’s Holy Spirit means that God has called you into community with God and Creation. You are not too young or too old, too pigmented or too ethnically classifiable, too gendered or too ambiguous, too smart or too ignorant, too important or too unknown. You are not “other” to God, but you are God’s own.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3.27f. NRSV)

When we are baptized, we begin to acknowledge that we belong to God. We begin to explore what it means for God’s Holy Spirit to dwell within us. We begin to learn how to live in community with the whole family of God, which includes those who have been baptized and also those who will never be baptized.

How is God revealing God’s reconciliation to you? Where have you been noticing something unusual, something that may be scary, but something that underneath you suspect may be good? How is God, patiently and softly, intruding into your life? And what will be your response?

IV. Invitation

It was terribly awkward and uncomfortable for me to sit through Rabbi Singer's presentation. From my place of privilege, I had thought the Jews for Jesus fliers were amusing and even clever. I'd known those fliers made me a little uncomfortable, but I hadn't figured out why. I hadn't identified with the community at whom they were aimed like bullets. Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity sprang from the same roots 2000 years ago and have gone their separate ways since. They constitute two different ways that different people encounter God. I have heard God's voice in both settings and together they led me to the Episcopal Church.

As Rabbi Singer finished up his presentation, he came to a conclusion. Rabbi Singer declared that the most effective way to combat cults and proselytizers like Jews for Jesus was to teach all Jewish people, and especially Jewish children, the basics of the faith that had been handed down to them. He was talking about what we call formation. It's about passing along the truths about God and themselves that are revealed in Scripture and in the community that has formed around Scripture. To that comment I said, and still say, Amen.

Because in that comment, Rabbi Singer and I were no longer "other." We were people who saw lots of things from radically different points of view. But we agreed on the importance of giving people the gifts of Scripture and Tradition and Community that teach us to know ourselves, to respect one another, and thereby to encounter God.

In God there is no "other." Even those practicing other religions, or no religion, are part of "us" because we were all made in God's indelible image. To see with Christian eyes is to see God in others and to see God in yourself. Then the question becomes, as you encounter the people around you, how will you choose to respond to God?

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