

Easter 6A Trinity Cathedral

In 2001, I was asked by the Presiding Bishop of our church, then one Frank Griswold, to come onto his staff in New York to oversee ecumenical and interfaith relations for the Episcopal Church. It was not an easy decision because I had loved being Bishop of Iowa. But I had lost my wife, Pam, to an untimely death and decided (after much spiritual direction and counsel) that a new venue and context for ministry might be just what I needed.

And I had become deeply involved in the ecumenical movement, especially with the Lutherans, while still bishop here. So I thought I might be of some use to our church doing that ministry fulltime. I knew less about interfaith relations, dialogue with Jews and Muslims and the great Eastern religions, but I had studied them some at the university and even once taught a community college course in comparative religions while I was still a young priest in Florida.

It turned out that I had a steep learning curve in both ecumenical and interfaith relations, but I wouldn't take anything for those nine years where I was blessed to travel around this country and the world engaging in conversation with fellow Christians and people of other religions on behalf of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. Most of the people in our church understood ecumenism – the movement to draw closer one another as Christians, heal the divisions between denominations, and seek closer cooperation or even full communion with each other when possible.

But interfaith relations were a different matter: Often, people would say – in an adult forum or coffee hour discussion -- what are we doing dialoguing with the Muslims? Are you trying to create some kind of one world religion and do away with the uniqueness of Christianity? Do you think all religions are the same and one is as good as another? I always tried to assure them that, No, we are not trying to merge all the religions together. In fact, It's been my experience that the more committed you are to your own faith the more you will be respected by people of other faiths.

What we did try to do was to find common ground with those folks. We tried to see where, with all our differences, we might find some agreement, at least as a place to start. I think we were trying to do what St. Paul was doing in our First Lesson today. As Luke tells the story in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul was in Athens, that great seat of intellectual and philosophical curiosity and dialogue in the first century. He was standing in front of the Areopagus which was a big rock outcropping located northwest of the Acropolis in ancient Athens. In Paul's day it had become a popular center for trying court cases and engaging in all kinds of debate.

He begins his conversation with these intellectuals (as he often does in his epistles to the churches) by complimenting them: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For, as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17)

He even goes on to affirm their common humanity as children of the one God as he speaks of "The God who made the world and everything in it (who) gives to all mortals life and breath and all things..." These are themes the church will explore on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of this week as we observe the Rogation Days which some of our hymns pick up on today. A celebration of the Creation!

Now, clearly, Paul's purpose here was not interfaith dialogue. He was trying to convert the Athenians as the rest of our passage this morning makes clear. But he started, as we do in interreligious relations, by finding common ground. He doesn't ridicule the Greeks' faith. In fact he commends them for being extremely religious. He doesn't begin by disrespecting their worship of other gods. But he finds an opening by referring to an altar they had dedicated to "an unknown god" (covering all their bases, I guess!). And he says, what you acknowledge as unknown, this I am proclaiming to you!

He's starting with them where they are, not where he would have liked them to be! Unfortunately the church has often forgotten this diplomatic approach by the greatest missionary who ever lived. Our latter day missionaries have often gone

into cultures – be they Native Americans right here in our own land, or societies overseas – and have begun evangelizing by trashing their indigenous religions and even making it appear that they had to adopt Western culture in place of their own if they converted to Christianity.

Desmond Tutu puts it this way about our missionary work in South Africa: “When the missionaries came to us, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, Let us pray, and when we opened our eyes, we had the Bible and they had the land!” Not exactly high praise for Christian missionary work in the 19th century! We’re doing a little better today for we often send our missionaries into foreign lands, but as partners not conquerors these days.

We establish hospitals and schools not primarily to convert people but to carry out Christ’s command to care for the least of these. And to show the people what Christ was like. Missionaries today look to raise up indigenous leadership in new churches, hoping to ordain native deacons, priests and bishops and to – as it were – work themselves out of a job as soon as the new leadership is trained and deployed. That’s how the Anglican Communion has developed so rapidly and why our churches in Africa are among the fastest growing and most committed in the world.

But what I want to point out most of all this morning is how this missionary strategy can work for us right here at home. Each one of us is a missionary in our day. Our culture has become so secular, so “anti-religious” in some quarters that it’s almost like we’re starting over again, evangelizing in America! Well, let’s take as our model St. Paul, as I said perhaps the greatest missionary who ever lived, and modern missionaries be they Anglicans or Jesuits or Maryknoll Sisters around the world.

Start where people are, not where you would like them to be. Become a good listener before you become a talker. Let people tell you of their lives, their joys and their sorrows, their struggles and their successes. People long to be listened to today. Listened to deeply and not only with 140 characters on a Twitter feed... or by so-called “friends” on Facebook.

Listen to other people deeply and compassionately. Then, when you can, make a connection with your own life perhaps even with your faith. “You know,” you might say, “when I was going through something like what you’re going through my church was really helpful. It was so good to have a community I could rely upon.” Or, in another conversation: “that’s fantastic, thank God (literally!) you had the gifts necessary to take advantage of that job opening.”

Something like that simply can be a way of sharing the good news with your family members, friends and neighbors, and others who so desperately need to hear such news these days. When you do something like that, know that you are standing on the shoulders of St. Paul the Apostle and countless missionaries and evangelists around the world.

And, like them, know that you can rely on the same Advocate Jesus promised his first disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. He said “...I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be...in you!”

That’s a promise, dear friends, from Jesus to us. His spirit is within us to guide us in our sharing of the good news. And we can rely on that Holy Spirit!