

## *In Spirit and Truth*

*Psalm 15; John 4:5-24; Qur'an 49:13, and 2:256*

I think I've asked this question before, so forgive me if you have heard it. But I'm going to ask it anyway. Have you ever been in a circumstance where you are in a gathering where not everyone is known to you. They're sharing stories, and someone says, "Oh, this is like that time when Peter was at the thing?" Everybody laughs. And you have no clue what they're talking about. You don't remember any meeting of Peter. You don't have any clue what the thing is they're talking about, or what Peter did that was so alarming. You're completely lost.

We all have our own stories. Our stories that we tell in our families. There are stories that you can say at a dinner table where you can get through three words and everybody at the table cracks up because they know exactly what you're talking about. Yet, you can be somewhere else and hear a story and realize that you have no context whatsoever. If I started a phrase and I said, "In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus..." Most of you would go, "Oh! It's Christmas." And you would probably be able to fill in a fair bit of the rest of the story. Because it's a story that, as Christians, we tell regularly, at least once a year.

Now, if I started off by saying, "*Shema Yisrael*", some of you might know where I'm going. Others of you are probably going, "What? I have no idea what that was." Or if I said, "*Ash-hadu an la ilaha illa Allah*," you would say, "Huh?" And yet, those are both phrases that would be known in other faith communities. *Shema Yisrael* is the start of the declaration that God is One. As the other I have said in Arabic, which is the start of the Shahada, which is the Muslim declaration of faith. We don't know those; they're not part of our story.

In the calendar that I have at home – and you can actually get a copy downstairs from the Interfaith Center – it marks today as the beginning of Interfaith Awareness Week. When we look around us and see who our neighbours are. Now, this morning, as I talk about this, I am going to concentrate more on the Abrahamic faiths, partly because I am more comfortable with them. And there are others out there that I need to know about. Now frequently, in interfaith discussions, people say, "Oh, it's okay. Everybody just says the same thing anyway." No they don't. Not at all. In a book by David Kunin, who used to be the rabbi just over here at Beth Shalom, a book called *Beyond the Golden Rule*, he talks about actually listening to others to hear what they are saying; not just trying to find things in their community that sound like our own. We need to have that openness.

In the article I read recently, they talked about three ways to engage in true interfaith awareness. One is to look deeply into the faith of others. Find out what "those people" believe.

Dig deeply into your own faith. What do you really believe? And finally, dig deep into what is good for all of us, for the common good. There needs to be initially that openness.

In the scriptures, we have that interesting conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. I want to just focus on the end part of it, past the discussion of the living water – which, of course, important for us. But I'm going to move to the second part, because after they have had that discussion about the living water, Jesus says to the woman, "Go get your husband." "I don't have a husband." "You're right, you had five. And the fella you're living with now is not your husband. You've told me the truth." Well, it seems like immediately, the woman has decided she wants to get off that topic. I'm not sure why. So, she immediately switches over. "I see you're a prophet!" So now, let's talk about religion. She says, "We've always worshipped here." She must be in the neighbourhood of Mount Gerizim, which was the Holy Place for the Samaritan people. She said, "But you people say that you have to worship in Jerusalem. So who's right?" Jesus gives a rather interesting answer, because he does kind of edge towards his own side. Pointing out, according to the text, "The Samaritans worship what they don't know, and the Jews worship what they do know." But, he goes on beyond that. He doesn't leave it there. He says, "There is a time coming when those kind of distinctions won't really matter. Because what will matter is the relationship each person has with God. A spiritual relationship; a truthful spiritual relationship that does not depend on any place or thing." I'm not sure whether that was what the woman was actually anticipating in this discussion. I think she may have just wanted to get off the topic of her personal life and use religion as kind of a way to do that and start some controversy. Sort of like what you often see on Facebook these days. I don't know whether the woman is actually trolling or not, but there is that possibility open. But Jesus doesn't fall for the troll, and speaks a new kind of truth that she's probably not aware of, and that we probably aren't listening to either. Because we have a tendency to believe that *our* story is the right story.

In the little vignette I told about St. Francis during the early part of the service, one of the things that Francis appeared to be was open to dialogue. Now, there is the possibility that he actually was, in fact, wanting to convert Al-Malik Al-Kamil. That that had been his original intention in going. But the fact that he even wanted to be in the presence of those people was a big change. And as I mentioned earlier, the Papal wanted to take control of the forces in Damietta because they weren't being ruthless enough. This is the representative of the Pope. He's the one who wanted them to be more ruthless. And he is why Francis didn't get permission at first. Finally, according to other biographies, the Papal finally gave Francis his consent, but not his blessing, because he figured that Francis was going to die anyway. So Francis goes off, but he is open in some ways to hear what those people are saying. And it appears that Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil is also open to hearing another voice. Francis and Illuminatus stayed there a week. You can have a lot of discussion in a week and learn about each other. Recognize each other as people.

Remember back to that *Other Voices* that Rebecca read at the beginning, there was the passage from the Quran, that says that we were all made from a single set of parents, referring back to Adam and Eve. We're all related. We're divided in tribes of people with the understanding that we will recognize each other. In the Arabic, it's a little more broad than that, because in some translations it says that we know each other. That we are aware of the relationship that we

have with each other. That we are all people of God. I think Francis was perhaps a little open to that, because – as one of the histories about him says – when he got back to his community, he said, “We’re going to live in peace with the Muslims.” Which was a radical change in understanding. He was asking that his community do something that for most of Christendom was absolutely wrong. “Our story is The Story. End of story.”

The other thing that we need to be open to is our own story. A lot of times, we think we know what our faith is about. We think we understand what the stories are, but we tend to gloss over the bad parts. The parts that are really demanding. One of the things that happened during the Canadian Forces deployment in Afghanistan, was that we had troops asking for Bibles. Eventually, the Bible Society produced a number of volumes in military camouflage, both in summer and winter, in English and French. The reason the troops were asking was that they were in a country where separating religion from the society was like unscrambling an egg. As our commander reminded us from time to time, “We were in the Islamic republic of Afghanistan.” And so, the troops encountering others for whom faith was incredibly important. They began to say, “Well, what’s mine? Where do I come from? What actually are my stories? What should I be saying? What should I be demonstrating? How can I be that good Christian witness?” We need to know our own stories.

That applies not only to our faith, but as a society, because one of the other things I said was that we also need to figure out what is for the common good. Know other stories, know our stories, and know what is for the common good. Because oftentimes, we suppress stories we don’t like. We have seen that in our own national history. Are there any of you out there that realize that on August 1<sup>st</sup>, we marked Emancipation Day? The 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Anti-Slavery Law within the British Empire – of which the lands we know as Canada were a part. We also know that the effects of slavery have not ended; racism has not ended; and our ability to shut out the stories of others has not ended. We’re working on it in some areas. With residential schools; with the LGBTQ+ community; and with others who have been set on the sidelines so we do not need to listen to their stories. We see that in our lives, we see that in our faith. We see that in our politics, where the messages are often meant to divide, not to bring together. To disrupt, rather than rebuild.

What are we doing, as Christians, in a world where we share faith with many others who express it differently...what are we doing for what we call the Reign of God? That desire to make this place, this planet that we inhabit, this gift of Creation, the place for all? I challenge you in the coming weeks and days to get to know your neighbours – especially those neighbours who may express their faith differently than you. Get to know your own faith, and really consider what it means to be builders of the kingdom of God. Amen.