

“Three’s Company,” February 28, 2010

A few weeks ago, when we talked about leadership and teamwork, we mentioned Moses and how he led the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. We didn’t talk specifically about that part of the story, but in brief, the Bible tells us that the Israelites escaped because the Red Sea parted, giving them an open path to freedom. Once they had crossed the sea, however, the waters once again closed and drowned the Egyptians, who were chasing them.

Mitch Albom talks a bit about that story in his book, *Have a Little Faith*. He attended a religious high school, and the class was discussing the story about the parting of the sea. The teacher informed the students that there was a Talmudic commentary on this passage, which basically means that there’s some additional ways to read, interpret, discuss and understand this story, or any other scripture.

As the Talmud put it, after the Israelites were safely through the sea, and the Egyptians drowned, God’s angels wanted to celebrate the victory. According to this version, God became angry, and said in essence, “Those were my children, too.” When the teacher asked what the class thought of that possibility, Albom recalled that it was the first time it ever occurred to him that God loved the “enemy” as much as the victor.

What do you think of that statement—“Those were my children, too”? That’s a pretty radical statement, and many of us have trouble accepting the notion that God loves all of us equally. We claim that to be true, that we’re all part of God’s family, and yet I fear it’s something difficult for us to absorb and live on a regular basis. That’s probably because there seems to be a lot of attention focused around our differences, and very little around our common bonds.

This certainly came home to me again when we were in Israel, Palestine and Jordan last fall. It’s really amazing to be in Jerusalem, for instance, and experience the power of the three major world religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—living side-by-side, and yet sometimes bumping up against one another in some dramatic ways.

You see, Jerusalem is the home of the holiest place in both Judaism and Christianity, and is also considered a holy site for Moslems.

The “wailing wall,” or the western wall of the temple, is where faithful Jews come to pray, and to walk to that wall, to touch the stones, to see the tiny bits of paper with prayers on them stuffed into the crevices—all are powerful experiences.

The same is true in visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, revered by many as the site where Jesus was crucified and buried. To walk atop the Temple Mount to the dome of the rock and see Al Aqsa mosque with its golden dome and know that Moslems believe this is the third holiest site in Islam and the place where Mohammed ascended into heaven is also a profound experience.

Three major religions, three different Sabbath days, three very different ways to worship, and yet all three share a common bond—they all claim Abraham as the ancestor of their faith. This is even mentioned in the Bible passage we have for today—a passage from Paul that I’ve long valued and appreciated. It says this:

“In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we all are in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ’s family, then you are Abraham’s descendant, heirs according to the covenant promises.”

I follow the Christian path, and as Christians, we’re one of the three major religions that chose Abraham as the originator of our faith. That same claim is made by Judaism and Islam. All three religions chose Abraham as the common origin because he believed in one God. All three faiths are monotheistic; that is, each believes in one God.

That’s one of the common bonds we share, along with some common stories and like values, like love, hope, charity, faith, the Golden Rule. Yet somehow, the differences between us often get highlighted more often than our common heritage. I suspect that divergence has something to do with what happens when religions begin entrenching in their own traditions, and ignoring the others. When religions become institutionalized, the differences seem to become more obvious, and all sense of being one and sharing what we hold in common gets lost.

Bruce Feiler talked about what happens when traditions and experiences get written down, and virtually put into stone. In his book, *Abraham*, he quoted Rabbi Rosen, who states, **“They are saying that the moment you write**

down the oral law you're also doing something a little bit obscene. You're taking something that's dynamic—the Torah—and you're making it rigid."

When something becomes rigid, we often lose the key point, which in this case, is the story of Abraham, and that key point is that God cares for all of us. We affirm the lofty claim that we're all part of God's family, but our human nature has a hard time living that reality. We want to claim superiority; we want to claim that we're right—we've got the right slant, the right angle, and everyone else is wrong. And we use written text to back up our claims. When that happens we have major trouble.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann talked about the same thing. He said, "It is perfectly legitimate for Christians—and I say this as a confessing Christian—to draw all of those traditions to Jesus. It is perfectly legitimate for Jews to draw these traditions toward them and the same for Muslims. It is not legitimate for Christians or anyone else to presume that theirs is the only direction."

When we do that, when we claim to have the only answer, we are trying to define and limit God by our own limited vision. We simply cannot presume to know all of God, nor can we assume to have all the right answers. Arthur Schopenhauer once said, "Everyone takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world," and I think he was right.

Jesus challenged the religious authorities of his day because of their limited ways of thinking and believing. He pushed them and he pushes us to think more widely, more deeply, more broadly and not to claim that we know the whole story. Thinking about how Jesus dealt with the religious types causes me to find myself in agreement with Brian McLaren who wrote these words in a *Generous Orthodoxy*: "The more I read the Bible and reflect on the life and teachings of Jesus, the more I think most of Christianity as practiced today has very little to do with the real Jesus found there. Often I don't think Jesus would be caught dead as a Christian, were he physically here today."

I realize those may sound like really harsh words, but I have to tell you that I agree with a lot that McLaren has to say, as do others. In fact, when I'm away this summer, you're going to hear a little more along those lines when Phil Gulley is here, talking about his new book, *If The Church Were Christian*. Sometimes we who profess to be Christians are the most

unkind, unloving people around, and we fall far short of being the kind of son or daughter that God would want us to be.

Frankly, that's why I have a hard time with those Christians who claim that our way is the only way to God. To me, that's more than a little arrogant and condescending toward others, and just doesn't fit with my experience of who God is and what God is like. I cannot believe that God would create one way and only one way for us to be connected with God. That would be denying the diversity among us with our many divergent backgrounds and viewpoints.

You've probably figured out by now that I really like a lot of what we find in Mitch Albom's book, *Have a Little Faith*, and another of the things I like has to do with honoring the diverse faith traditions that are part of our world. The rabbi was talking about all the various interpretations and debates that are part and parcel of every major religion, including Christianity, Islam and Judaism. He called it the beauty of it. He said, "It's like being a musician. If you found *the* note, and you kept hitting that note all the time, you would go nuts. It's the blending of the different notes that makes the music." Albom asked, "The beauty of what?" Reb replied, "Of believing in something bigger than yourself."

Just in thinking about the three major religions, I have to say to you that I truly believe that all three lead us to and connect us with the same God. The ways we relate with God and the ways we practice that relationship may be different because of our various paths, but I am convinced we connect to the same God.

I had a friend who once tried to paint a picture of how these various spiritual paths lead to the same place. She described it like trying to get to the top of a mountain peak. Some decide to get up there by hiking; some choose to go by an all-terrain vehicle. Some take the paved road, and others go on the rockiest path they can find. Regardless of the vehicle or the path, ultimately we will arrive at the same place—that place of connection with the ultimate source of life.

I recall a time in Jerusalem when I was riding in a taxi with a driver who was Moslem. He was trying to make conversation and asked what I did in the States and why I was in the city. When I told him I was a pastor, we began to chat about the two different religions, and I'll never forget what he said when I got out of the

taxi. He said, “We all worship the same God, you know?”

And indeed, I do know, and I believe that. I am Christian because my path has been the Christian path, but I’m not just about to say that it is the only path for everyone. Had I been born in a different time and in a different place, to a different family from a different background, who’s to say that this path would have been mine or yours? Maybe it would have been an entirely different spiritual journey. Yet, I am convinced that, regardless of our path, we’re all trying to connect with a power/a being that is greater than we—the one God, the same God.

I know not everyone agrees with me, and that’s OK, but that’s what I believe. How about you?

Closing:

In her own way, Mother Theresa was restating and elaborating on the Bible passage we have for today. This is what she said: “**There is only one God who is God to all; therefore it is important that everyone is seen as equal before God. I’ve always said we should help a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim become a better Muslim, a Buddhist become a better Buddhist, and a Christian become a better Christian.**”

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that, whatever our faith path, we live like the bumper sticker that was passed out here last summer—the one that says “**Coexist.**” ([bumper sticker pic on screen](#)) And I hope we do it in love.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.