

A Cup of Water

First Congregational UCC, Eagle River, WI

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Text: Mark 9:38-50

Today's passage from Mark's gospel evoked a memory, one that I hadn't revisited for some time. Let me set the scene. I was visiting Turkey with a small delegation of board members from what was then the United Church Board for World Ministries. I was the staff person; the other members of our group were the people who would eventually have to make important decisions about our continuing mission involvement in Turkey. We had provided missionaries and financial support for secondary schools, a hospital and a printing press in Turkey for about a hundred and fifty years. Our earliest efforts were primarily, but not exclusively, directed to the Christian community in Ottoman Turkey, and most of those Christians were Armenians. In 1915, the Armenian Genocide began and by the early 1920's over two-thirds of the Armenian population of roughly three million had been massacred or brutally deported to neighboring areas, mostly Syria and Lebanon.

Many of our church's missionaries accompanied the Armenians in their diaspora; others chose to remain in Turkey and to continue to serve the institutions that were permitted to remain in the new Turkish Republic. That new state, founded by Ataturk, was a relentlessly secular state where the teaching of religion, including Islam, and attempted religious conversion of any kind, was strictly forbidden. (Things have changed since then regarding the teaching of Islam.) But the missionaries who stayed wanted to witness to their commitment to serve all the people, not just the ones with whom we share a

religious tradition, and so they accepted these restrictions as a sign of that commitment. By the time our delegation was visiting Turkey, in the late 1980's, however, our ability to support our institutions financially had been severely compromised, and we were also having difficulty recruiting staff for them. The Turks who had graduated from the schools, and who had appreciated the open inquiry and moral values that our missionaries had encouraged, were offering to assume responsibility for the schools, and we were reluctantly, albeit gratefully, turning over a new page in our relationships in Turkey.

So we were having some difficult conversations among ourselves, and sharing some of those conversations with the Turkish staff and alumni supporters of the schools. At the conclusion of our meeting, which took place in the Tarsus school—and you'll recall that Tarsus was the birthplace of St. Paul—we American Christians, board members and teachers alike, had decided to have a worship service that included Holy Communion. The Turks, all of whom were either Muslims or secular, left as we passed out our hymnals and prepared the bread and cup for communion. Except for one man who had earlier expressed his deep gratitude for his own education in the Tarsus school.

This man remained in his seat as our worship began. Since there were only about 25 of us, I think that we all noticed. And then we wondered what would happen during communion. Sure enough, this man took the bread and the cup as they were distributed and he said the words printed in our worship bulletin, just like the rest of us. We were, after all, all watching him. Afterward, a member of our group from the U.S. approached him and said, "I didn't realize that you were a Christian." "Does the label mean so much to you?" he responded.

Maybe you can see why today's reading from Mark evoked that memory. The disciples were troubled that someone who was not a member of the group of people who were following Jesus was casting out demons, and he was doing so in Jesus' name. "He's not one of us," the disciples said to Jesus. And Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who

does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

After our meeting in Tarsus, I inquired about this man’s history, and I learned that he was, indeed, a Muslim who had been part of a group of people who, inspired by their love of the missionaries, had been in dialogue with them about matters of faith. The Turkish members of the group were curious about what motivated these crazy but lovable Americans to come to a strange and sometimes scary place and carry out their witness without any possibility of converting those they served to Christianity. Remaining Muslims, they nevertheless came to call themselves “Jesusists” because Jesus, is, after all, a revered prophet in Islam. They wouldn’t call themselves Christians, because that term had connotations of crusaders, and later, western colonialism. But, like their missionary friends, they wanted to be considered “followers of Jesus.” The missionaries, in turn, were learning about Islam from their partners in dialogue; in fact one of them produced what is still one of the classic books in English about Islamic mysticism.

Half a continent away, at roughly the same time the Jesusists were talking to our missionaries in Turkey, one of our missionary giants, Frank Laubach, was launching his groundbreaking literacy movement in the Philippines. Laubach first came to the island of Mindanao with the goal of converting its Muslim population to Christianity. He was a miserable failure at doing that, but he was a great success as an educator. In fact, in the Philippines he developed the “each one teach one” method of spreading literacy. It is a methodology that has been adopted in a wide variety of cultural settings. There still is a Laubach literacy society active around the world.

Like any successful educator, Laubach’s success had to do with his love of the people he was teaching and his appreciation of their gifts. Great teachers must be, first of all, great learners. While he was teaching literacy to Muslim Filipinos, Laubach came to be a great admirer of their strong faith. He became so knowledgeable and appreciative of Islam that

one day he joined a group of Muslim Filipinos in prayer, praying exactly as they did in Arabic and kneeling and prostrating himself as they did. The leader of the group, the imam, said to the others, “He is Islam.” Laubach responded, “No. I am a friend of Islam.”

I want to tell you what I want to say about these examples from our mission history and about the scripture that inspired me to recall them; but first I want to tell you what I don’t want to say. What I don’t want to say is that all religions teach the same thing. They don’t, although there is a remarkable convergence on ethical matters. Virtually every religion has some version of what we call the Golden Rule. And, I don’t want to say that it doesn’t matter what your religion is as long as you’re a good person. I believe deeply in the uniqueness of the faith tradition in which I was nurtured, the tradition whose richness I continue to explore. I believe that following Jesus is the most important mandate in my life. I believe that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus tells us something absolutely crucial about God, and about our relationship with God, and that that relationship can bring joy and meaning to our lives as nothing else can. That is my experience and it is my conviction. And I believe that if I love other people, I should do my best to share that good news in the most loving way I can.

But, having told you what I don’t want to say, here’s what I want to say. What I *do* want to say is that God’s love is not bound by the labels we give each other. If I am eager to share the good news with others, I should be willing to hear their testimony about how they have experienced God’s goodness as well. So much of our religious energy is devoted to determining who are insiders and who are outsiders. “But they’re not part of us!” the disciples said about the unauthorized healer who was healing in Jesus’ name. Jesus told his disciples that they had to expand their understanding of who “us” is.

A good friend of mine, Paul Knitter, a Catholic theologian, has written a wonderful book entitled “Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian.” In that title alone, he is saying something profoundly important. He is saying not only that his study of Buddhism has

enriched his life; he is saying that Buddhism, in his experience, was essential to his being able to remain a Christian. I think that I'm being fair to him in saying that his Christian self is no longer separable from his Buddhist self. I think that my Turkish friend was, in a way, telling us that his Muslim self was no longer separable from his Christian, or Jesusist, self. And Laubach, in his life and witness, was extending a hand to his Muslim friends, saying, as he did in his diary, "Come, let us seek God together." We can't all get there as these giants have gotten there, but we can learn from them.

After all, this insider-outsider thing has been responsible for horrendous acts of violence: Muslims slaughtering Christians and others as ISIS has done in the Middle East and elsewhere; and, in the Crusades, Christians slaughtering Muslims with a comparable level of ferocity; Hindus slaughtering Muslims, and vice versa, in the Asian subcontinent and in Burma; Buddhists slaughtering Hindus in Sri Lanka. It seems almost to be an externalization of what Jesus says will happen if you're putting obstacles in front of others who are seeking God : cutting off limbs, gouging out eyes if they cause us to sin. All that violence to maintain that boundary between insider and outsider; between the religiously correct and the impure other. It's hard and bloody work to be perfect and to be separate.

But, for just offering a cup of water to one of these little ones, Jesus tells us, we will experience eternal reward. I'm not talking about heaven in the sense of a place where we go after we die, I'm talking about what Jesus also called abundant life, a life of generosity, a life of relationship, a life inextricably bound up with others. It's a ridiculously low requirement, don't you think? Eternal life in exchange for just a cup of water, a gesture of kindness, particularly when purity demands doing violence to ourselves and to others?

What would our world be like if the cup of water replaced the building of armaments and construction of walls? What would our world be like if we devoted ourselves to providing

a cup of water to the millions of refugees floating around the world looking simply for a place called home instead of figuring out every way imaginable to keep them away from us? What would our lives be like if we devoted them to opening up our spirits as opposed to closing our minds? If, instead of greedy accumulation we sought the joy of sharing with others, not just things, but a love that sees them as God's creations?

OK, here's a spoiler alert. In a little while we're going to sing the following words as a part of our closing hymn.

The cup of water given for you still holds the freshness of your grace;
Yet long these multitudes to see the sweet compassion of your face.

The humble cup of water that makes outsiders insiders; that, in fact obliterates the line between them. The cup of water that tells us something about God's invisible, but real, realm among us. Amen.

