

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Shabbat Pesakh

I had the pleasure of spending last Sunday morning with an adult study group at a downtown church. I was there to teach on the life and teachings of St. Paul, from a Jewish perspective. I love these opportunities to share time and thought with other religious denominations. I hope I have something to offer them, in the same way that I know that I grow from each such experience. Sometimes, the growth comes from shared ideas that create a synergistic new understanding for everyone in the room. Other times, we gain new understandings of just how far apart we may still be. Last Sunday, I got to experience both.

Certainly I was not on foreign turf. I have had the blessing of teaching in this church a number of times over the last seven years. I knew, going in, that my comments would not be too radical for this group, and that even while far outside of my own religious tradition, I still felt like I had home court advantage. Everything was going well, as the conversation was vibrant, until I tried to support an answer about Paul's investiture in the Rabbinic tradition, I made the comment that the Hebrew Torah has no vowels and no verse structure. My point was that Paul was making statements, using Torah situationally, and not necessarily intending to create over reaching and absolute dogma. I pointed out that Torah means teaching, and that calling it "Law" is a Greek invention (as it is translated to the Septuagint). One older gentleman could not get his head around this concept and kept telling me that Torah meant "Law," and that I did not understand my own tradition. Further, if I was correct in the way I described my faith, it was too confusing. I needed to read what was written and take it for what it is. My way, he said, was meaningless, and he knew lots of Jews who so far strayed from any religious life, that he felt validated in his belief that it held no relevant value. Of course, arguing was not going to help ... and I understood from where he was speaking. He grew up with a belief that God wrote the King James Bible ... in English. There is no room for alternative reading. Respectfully, I disagreed, and thanked him for his comments and his time.

The following night, as I sat down to the first night Passover Seder, I had to pause and think about this exchange. Here I was about to lead a service that demanded that we experience the bitterness of bondage, both as if we were slaves in Egypt, and as though we were amongst the many people who live under the weight of oppression today. The purpose of the service is to create an empathy within us that will open our eyes and hearts to the plight of those who have yet to taste the exhilaration of freedom. Just the day before, I had an exchange with a man of devout faith who honestly believed that his tradition had super ceded mine, and that mine was archaic and valueless. Passover is the one holiday that speaks loudest for the values that my faith holds out as being sacred. The pursuit of righteousness, justice, freedom, and peace are the cornerstones of my religious tradition. Yet, because the way in which my tradition teaches me to pursue these goals diverges from this other individual's faith does, he denies my relevancy in God's world. As I stewed over this, I began to understand the nature of my generation's Egypt, from which we have to be freed.

God is not ours to own. God is not the whip we can employ to beat each other down. God is not limited to my faith or yours. I have often spoken about the arrogance of thinking that God is monolithically as we believe God to be. I now see this not simply a matter of arrogance, but more as a system of bondage

and oppression. Our faith is held hostage to the arrogance of others, and no differently than did the Israelites of the Bible, we acquiesce to this “power,” and hide or out rightly ignore our faith and traditions so as to better fit in and “not to make waves.” At the very same time, we live in a world that argues that if someone’s beliefs are not important enough to them to honor, then these beliefs cannot be relevant to any communal discussion. In our own disenfranchisement, we give the rest of the world more ammunition with which to deny the validity of our faith. Today’s Egypt is our own apathy and the power that it vests in others to simply dismiss us. This is not a call to ritual, rather it is a demand to identification. Ritual is but one of the things that makes Jewish life rich. Affiliation and identification is essential to our family and faith. In truth, though, so many faith traditions suffer these same oppressions, having turned over the designation “religious” to those who only hold the narrowest of beliefs. Even those who have a faith belief would rather be seen as secular than be labeled “Religious” in this current atmosphere. As I led the Seder meal at my house and at our congregation, I was mindful of the many ways in which our plight today is, spiritually, so tightly tied to the plight of our ancestry, and it won’t be until people who hold faith in the bigger picture of God stand up to be counted that we will experience the parting of the sea and our ability to march faithfully and freely with each other. Our liturgy affirms that on that day, God will be one and God’s name will be one. On that day, the world will be, for all faiths and all people, a world of peace. Shabbat Shalom, and may this holiday week for all bring peace and renewal.