

Jewish-Christian Dialogue

May 16, 2017

Notes

Taken by Tony Kireopoulos

Attendance:

In person: Nicole Diroff, Judy Sullivan (Episcopal Cathedral dean and meeting host), Harold Berman, David Straus, Leslie Brier, Whitney Bodman, Darrell Jodock, David Sandmel, Susie Jostyn, Al Moss, Don Thorsen, Don Anderson, Wayne Franklin, Noam Marans, Adam Gregerman, Steve Gutow, Peter Baktis, Daniel Polish, Joel Meyers, Jeff Wohlberg, Claire Burkat, Avi Winokur

On phone: Tony Kireopoulos, Marty Budd, Alvin Berkun

Welcome:

Nicole and Harold gave welcome. As did Judy, David, and Tony. Introductions all around. Greetings from Gil Rosenthal were shared.

Scripture Studies:

What it means to be a Child of Abraham.

Daniel Polish: clichéd phrase. Complex term...why do we embrace it? How can we be better at it? Important to Jews. Every service mentions the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham is father of the line that would become the Jewish people. (Also of Ishmael, through whom Arabs came...Muslims.) But what does it mean to be a child of one common father? As in all families, not always a good thing among siblings.

So how do we see Abraham? Not the same way. How do we understand our role as his children related to this difference? Early Jews spoke of Abraham as a way to introduce themselves to the rest of the world. Abraham's longing for descendants provides underpinning for whole self-understanding...fulfillment of promise. Gave up his past to go to where God said. Then has two sons, and God asks him to give them both up. Abraham acquires merit by believing in the future despite the sacrifices he is asked to make, and that is passed down to his descendants and used in a prayer asking for forgiveness of sins. Christian message began as an in-family message...to Jews. Shifted to gentiles...no longer tied to Jewish laws as necessary...Paul pointed out Abraham's belief...his faith, not the works...Paul as the preacher of faith. So not the family, clan, tribe...but the church, by virtue of belief or faith. In Islam, includes Jews and Christians because of their faith...but also line goes through Ishmael...Abraham is in line of messengers...a prophet like Mohammed. Abraham built the Kaaba for pilgrimage.

How are we better children of Abraham? Can we enrich one another by our perspectives on Abraham? From Islam, that Abraham is a message...a new way of speaking. From Christians, that Abraham is about faith, his absolute confidence on God. From Jews, that Abraham binds the family, as a group. How do we embody what was best in Abraham? He certainly had flaws. But what about his magnanimity, hospitality, faithfulness, willingness to shatter idols, fearlessness in challenging God, care for others. Can we recognize one another as a family? Even Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury Abraham.

What can we do? Enrich and learn from each other about heritage, faith and the transmission of a message through the generations as a holy task. Embody the best qualities of our ancestor Abraham: hospitality, even to those who believe differently, and faithfulness combined with a willingness to question and challenge.

Peter Baktis: tried to come to the story as one without preconceived idea, without faith. A horrible story. Adultery...God commands the killing of the child...

Two names. Abram = exalted father. Abraham = father of a multitude. Founder of monotheism. Rebelled against his father. Shattered idols. Became monotheistic. Several promises to Abraham, of the many in the entire Bible. First promise... leave and I'll show you your future. He had to act...had to leave his father's house...had to break with the past. Melchizedek blesses Abram. Faith and works. Abraham declared righteous by God...not by other people, but by God because of his belief and actions. Tell Ishmael he will have his own descendants but they will not be part of the multitude...God named Ishmael...Abraham's first-born was therefore sacrificed... Circumcision as a mode of identity...name change for Sarah from Sarai... Sarah will still be mother of nations...seed that will carry out the meaning of the covenant...

Visitation of the three angels and promise of Isaac's birth... for Orthodox Christians, important... first manifestation of Triune God...Expulsion of Ishmael comes along... God tells Abraham to go along with Sarah's decision...Huge thing is sacrifice of Isaac...shows faith through works... Promise was to Abraham, so doesn't matter if Isaac or Ishmael as descendant...what matters is Abraham's response of faith and works... Abraham is called compassionate...doesn't want people destroyed...does our own faith reflect in our compassion? Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked? Do we care about the righteous? Do we care about collateral damage as we seek justice? What are we willing to sacrifice? In dialogue with Isaac on way up mountain, Abraham did not want Isaac's faith shattered? Does what we do have consequences for others (of faith)? What does it mean to be righteous?

And monotheism? Two-thirds of the descendants do not accept it? How does our faith in a monotheistic God deal with this difference? Good Friday is playing out of sacrifice of the son. Isaac didn't die; Jesus did die. How does this understanding impact our interfaith interactions? Do we really care for the other if we don't repent for how we've treated the other in the past? We have to see God's face in the face of the other...this is the story of Abraham...how do we live it?

Discussion: Why Abram left his father is not in the text. We fill it in with interpretation.

Is there value in using "children of Abraham" since we see it differently?

Added complexity: Jews see themselves as children of Jacob (Israel = child of the one who wrestled). Muslims probably don't use this term. Christians don't either for the most part. Only in interfaith settings. Hesitancy because of different developments of the three religions historically. But good construct for our public witness discussion later. Impacts our public witness conversation. Do we use the term with one another? Not really. Usually with those who aren't Jewish, Christian or Muslim, to add heft and breadth to the conversation.

Fight or flight? Sometimes Abraham does one, sometimes the other. Does it have to do with family?

Text subverts the appropriation of the term "child of Abraham" as "ours" or "ours alone."

Message of Abraham...how do we impart the message we have heard to those who have not heard, and how do our actions reflect the faith we have?

The women in the story have a story to tell. And it is one that is important to our context today and doing God's will in this world. "May we all be called Abraham."

Public Witness Presentations:

Our Communities' Changing Public Witness at a Time of Government Pullback

Steve Gutow: How to function now with a party in charge that takes positions different from our own. Jewish community confused and polarized. The president's views are confusing, too. Jewish community is diverse, but largely progressive and liberal. Some people "fear" the change with the president. So how to proceed on a social agenda when the party and president aren't interested in a social agenda and therefore don't plan on spending on it?

Most Orthodox: Glad Obama is gone; like Trump's views on military and on Israel; the Jewish conservative organizations support him. Some progressive / liberal: Don't like Trump generally, but know they have to work with him; mostly democratic and supportive of social justice agenda; in support of Israel though oppose hard-right government. Hard left: Trump is the "anti-Christ"; oppose Trump at every turn; in support of Israel generally.

In election, Jews voted 71% for Clinton and 24% for Trump. Political views (on candidates and issues) do not come strictly from the faith, but are reflected generally in the text and beliefs. Communitarian impetus. Organizations involved in politics depending on the issue. Probably a lot of overlap with the positions of the NCC.

Inside game: work with government when you can / Outside game: marches, etc., to influence policy. Both strategies have to be in place to be successful in helping those in need. Not our job to solve the world's problems, but it is our job to try what we can.

Claire Burkat: her synod is oldest Lutheran synod in the country; founded by Muhlenberg. Started orphanages and schools right at the beginning. Lutheran Social Services is largest in the US (even bigger than Catholic Charities). Serve six million every day. 15 social ministry organizations in this diocese. Funding from congregations to synods and locally; synods fund denominational ministries. \$67 million this past year. Local does what it can; synod does what local cannot do; national does what synods cannot do.

Political advocacy based on religious principles. Her synod does first amendment issues. Huge immigration / refugee work...based on welcoming the stranger. Undocumented kids. Refugees. Public education. Dakota Pipeline. Environment. Criminal Justice Reform. Healthcare. Others...but not Israel and Palestine. Part of motivation is faith tradition; part of it is to line up with God to help heal the world, which goes beyond the Lutheran / Christian tradition.

Discussion: how best to build coalitions when we don't agree on some things? And how to proceed when our congregations are also divided? How do you take what you value and believe and move it into our public work and witness on issues? "A Christian cannot do social justice without talking about the Hebrew prophets."

What do we mean by social justice...we have a basic idea? What do we mean by values...we have a basic idea? But what is it that we're really after? We may want to assist refugees, but do we want unchecked immigration? What specifically are we after?

Need to build trust with others to build coalitions. This leads to the social capital to get things done. We were getting close before when we agreed on the basic direction of the country. Now we're hit by an avalanche from the other side, so it becomes harder to find the points of agreement. Still, we may grow from this experience.

Will always be friction in the world. But why can't we do what we can to live so others can live well enough. For example, do we need such nice cars? Do we need to spend so much on groceries when neighbors cannot afford to eat tonight?

How do we say something without alienating others? Isn't it ok to alienate others if we're doing the right thing? Of course it's ok, though it may be uncomfortable.

Today approaching it from the point of view of being in exile may help. Another way, especially for clergy to interact with a congregation that may not agree, is to start by "loving" the people first. Get attached, and then work from a position of good relationship.

Many people come to interfaith relations as part of their liberal basket. E.g., environmentalism, LGBTQ, and interfaith... How to build our interfaith as part of our democracy and as part of building genuine appreciation for diversity. At the same time, it is part of the liberal basket because we want to know the "other."

What is red line in interfaith coalition building? And what is a prophetic voice? For Jewish tradition, the prophets ended with Malachi. God hasn't told "me" to go out and say something or another. Some reticence to use the term to describe one's own work but rather allow others to pronounce it as prophetic if it really is. And what is it? Basically...bringing God's work of justice and healing to a situation of injustice.

How to rebuke someone the right way? Up to like-minded people to correct one another and do not expect this from across the divides.

Interfaith work is by nature progressive

We were unprepared for the past presidential election. Our inability to connect with people who disagree hampers our ability to make positive change.

We have a strong country. We will withstand challenges because we have dialogue in place and can listen to each other. We need to talk to people with whom we disagree and seriously consider/respect the reasons for their points of view.

Conclusion:

Harold closed the discussion by noting the importance of the discussion. The next one will be in the fall.