

## The Right to Be Different

Esther 3: 8-11

(Delivered to the Congregation Kol Ami – March 13, 2009)

The right to be different and the responsibility to respect the differences of others are two sides of one coin. They cannot be separated and they teach us a great deal about the nature and purposes of God. As we are open to the reality of God, of others, and of ourselves, we can discover our true selves and create our own pathway in life.

Seven years ago, I took a turn on my life's journey that led me to become the senior pastor of Crossroads Church, a post in which I still proudly serve. Crossroads is a rather unusual Christian congregation: theologically progressive, open and affirming in welcoming people of every orientation, radically committed to personal freedom and congregational autonomy, and just as passionately believing in the oneness of all people. In other words, we are a little bit flakey and a whole lot of fun. Perhaps, in many ways, Crossroads is a great like the congregation of *Kol Ami*.

Seven years ago, I left the land of Virginia, just outside the beltway of Washington, DC and set off for a distant land called the Midwest. I discovered that the Midwest is a very large place! I'm not sure just when I actually entered the Midwest. From the perspective of an easterner, the Midwest begins about the time one exits West Virginia, on the border Kentucky – or taking the northern route, when I entered Ohio. I have since discovered, from my new perspective as a Midwesterner, that you're not really in the Midwest until you've crossed the Mississippi. My destination was the far reaches of the state of Missouri – the metropolis of Kansas City.

I came to Kansas City and discovered right away that I was different. That difference was emphasized in the way I kept saying things such as, “back East we...,” and “in my former church, we used to...” As far back as I can remember, I have always had my own ideas about faith, understanding God, and how to do church. These different ideas have often brought me into some conflict with other clergy, but I have come to realize that it's okay to be different. It is okay for me to be different than them and vice versa.

I have also discovered that my congregation is different – really different! They welcome everybody. They talk about everything. They like to ask lots of questions – and they do. And I've come to realize that it is okay to be different – even really different. It is not only okay, but it is essential. Each of us is unique, different from anyone else who has ever lived or who ever will live. Author John Powell reflects on this idea and even calls it a tradition:

God sends each person into this world with a special message to deliver, with a special song to sing for others, with a special act of love to bestow. No one else can speak my message, or sing my song, or offer my act of love. These are entrusted only to me. (Seasons of the Heart)

I cannot prove the validity of this idea, but I believe it to be true and its truth is reflected in traditions such as the story of Rabbi Zushka (historical or legendary?)

It seems that Rabbi Zushka was dying and someone asked him what he thought life beyond the grave would be like. The old man thought for a long time, then he replied, "I don't really know. But one thing I do know: when I get there I am not going to be asked, "Why weren't you Moses?" or "Why weren't you David?" I am going to be asked, "Why weren't you Zushka?"

We not only have the right to be different, to be uniquely ourselves, each of us has the responsibility to be that unique person God made us to be.

The story of Esther is about people who were different, people who were persecuted for being different. The villain in this story is named Haman. He has the ear of the powerful King Ahasuerus (possibly either Xerxes or Artaxerxes of Persia). He says, after playing on the monarch's vanity, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them." (Esther 3:8)

"These are people who are different. They don't follow party line and they don't give you the respect you deserve. In other words, they are breaking the rules. We know the type, don't we -- a weird person who doesn't fit in." People in power cannot and will not tolerate those who upset the system, but it's the out of step people who can show us a better way.

One writer has said about modern day people who are out of step:

"The stresses that modern life often produce in sensitive and intelligent people are no longer considered to call for a change in society; it is the individual who is wrong and he consequently becomes a neurotic, not a revolutionary."

(Everett W. Knight, *The Objective Society*)

It's okay to have different ideas about faith and about God. The Israelites did. Crossroads does. Congregation Kol Ami does. It is not only okay, but it is essential to have different ideas about faith, and life, and God because the mystery of God is far too large to be contained, too vast even to be approached by one perspective. There is a story often told and in many forms about a group of people, in pitch darkness, who tried to describe an elephant having never actually seen one.

One, touching its trunk, thought that the creature must resemble a hosepipe; the second felt an ear and concluded it was a fan. The third, feeling a leg, could liken it only to a living pillar; and when the fourth put his hand on its back he was convinced that it was some kind of throne. None could form the complete picture; and of the part that each felt, he could only refer to it in terms of things he already knew. (Jalaludin Rumi)

Each of us has the right to be different. Our faith communities have the right to be different and that difference is much of what we have to offer the world. If this is true, then the converse is also true – that others have a right to be different and that it is in our best interest that they are different. This is more than tolerance. It is an insight into the nature of God who, as theological Paul Tillich suggests, meets each of us at the core of our personhood. Our openness to partnership with God, in the uniqueness of our own authentic self, actually helps to shape God's presence in this world. (Paul Tillich, *Theology*)

*of Culture*) And this is not limited to individuals. Judaism, Christianity, and other faith traditions help express the difference that is so essential to the diversity and mystery of the divine reality we call God.

Why did King Ahasuerus turn on Haman and, in effect, repent of his edict? Why did he free Mordecai and the Jewish people from a penalty of death? He changed his mind because he knew Esther. The Jewish people were no longer an impersonal group of uncooperative people. Suddenly, they wore the face of a flesh and blood person – a beloved person. Personal relationship is always the way to overcome prejudice and bigotry – then and now.

On of the ways your beloved Cantor Paul Silbershur and I and came to know each other is through the Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity here in Kansas City, known as MORE<sup>2</sup>. This community-based organizing group seeks to change unjust policies and work for racial and economic equity across the Kansas City area primary through personal relationships. Members commit to having one-to-one conversations with each other and with government and business leaders on the premise that such relationships lead to cooperative action. And it has proven to be very effective.

It has been said that the dream of God for creation is summarized in the word Shalom – the oneness of humanity with each other and with all of life. For us to cooperate in the realization of that dream requires that we embrace our own uniqueness and our right to be different. It requires that we respect diversity and rights of others to be different – including different religious traditions. And it requires faith – faith that the best way to express the mystery of the reality of God in this world is for us to be the best Jews, the best Christians, the best Muslims, and on and on that we can be – the best people and the best people of faith that we can be. Perhaps the truest expression of faith is this: that around, through, in between and because of our differences, God is revealed. As people of faith, let us commit ourselves to walk in this truth.