

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

October 6, 2019

Singing in a Strange Land

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Psalm 137

In the year 587 B.C.E. the small nation of Judah was conquered by the Babylonian empire. In punishment for its resistance, the Babylonians killed the king, blinded many members of the royal family and tore down the temple, which was the symbol of God's presence and protection. But the act that would forever be remembered was that they took many of the Jews into exile, settling them hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem in Babylon. The psalm that we just read is a sad song, which laments the struggle of those exiles to adjust to a new place. They were used to a unified country, ruled by a king, united by a common religion. Now they had been set in a pluralistic context, in which they were free to practice their religion but they could not assume it was shared by most of their neighbours. And so they wondered: How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

In many ways that is our challenge as well? When many of the elders in this congregation grew up, Canada was a Christian nation. The settlers who came here came from the Christian nations of Europe, and they assumed that the aboriginal peoples who lived here would quickly adopt the "superior" Christian faith. There were a few Jewish people, who were recognized as special, but most people were one of two broad groups: Catholic or Protestant. There were certainly tensions between Catholics and Protestants, but they actually shared more than they often realized. And one of the things they shared was a conviction that religion was important and that you should belong to one; which one didn't matter so much, but if you weren't a part of a faith community, then you were deficient in some way. So, I learned recently that there was a time, not very long ago, when you could not play hockey in Central Alberta unless your Sunday School teacher signed a card saying that you had been to Sunday School that week. Your coach checked, and if the card wasn't signed, you were benched.

Today that has all changed. Canada is a multicultural country with many faiths. Christianity is still the most commonly held, but it is no longer privileged in the same way. There are many more faiths beyond the Christian, a bewildering array of other faiths: Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and subgroups and sub-subgroups of each of those. And the largest religious group in Canada, and perhaps the fastest growing, is the nones, the Atheists and agnostics and people who don't label themselves in any way. The old assumption that everyone should have a religion has withered.

Churches that are surviving, and even thriving, are those minority churches that historically have always assumed that becoming a Christian meant to step outside of the majority view, and then intentionally taught in what ways being Christian was different than being a Canadian. Churches like ours, historically majority churches, have struggled to adapt. We have had a tacit assumption that people grow up Christian and that most of the basic values and beliefs are kind of obvious to most of us. We were, after all the majority. None of that is true anymore. And that can be quite unsettling. It is a strange land for us, a foreign land. How are we to sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

Perhaps we can learn something from the world church in this context, for there are many places in the world where Christians live cheek by jowl with people of many different faiths. In many parts of Africa, for example, Christian and Muslim communities are growing rapidly at the expense of the adherents of the old African animist religions. Both are missionary religions and when they are trying to convert each other, it can cause problems. But for the most part those problems are resolved relatively peacefully. As people get to know each other, they learn to respect each other, and while keeping their own identities, they learn that God is greater than any of us, and that neither virtue nor vice are unique to any given tradition.

Sometimes, however, for reasons that often have little to do with religion, those tensions between communities boil over into serious conflict. In Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, Christians and Muslims have long lived as neighbours, mostly peacefully, and there have been many efforts, by leaders of both groups to bring peace and reconciliation. But in recent years, there have been violent attacks

on Christian churches and reprisals against mosques, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives. A joint Christian/Muslim team investigating the conflict concluded that “the primary causes of the current tension and conflict in Nigeria are not inherently based in religion but rather, rooted in a complex matrix of political, social, ethnic, economic and legal problems, among which the issue of justice – or the lack of it – looms large as a common factor.” Working together to establish a greater commitment to social justice is one way in which people of different traditions can find common ground. Justice, in fact, is one of the most sacred values of many religious traditions, including our own.

The great religious scholar Huston Smith once compared the world’s religious traditions to the effort to tap into a great underground aquifer. Each community, each religious tradition, has its own well, he said, and some think their well is far superior to the rest, but the tradition is only the way to get to the water, and it is the water that is important, and the water is the same, no matter what well it comes from. You just have to choose a well. Unless you choose, you will always be thirsty.

That metaphor has helped me to articulate my sense of what it means to live as a person of faith in this strange land. I believe that God is greater than any religious tradition. Each tradition, someone wise once said, is like a finger pointing to the moon. It is as important to distinguish the tradition from the spiritual reality it points to as it is to distinguish the finger from the moon. But without the finger, would we find the moon? I find that the tradition I belong to helps me to appreciate the mystery of God. I respect other traditions, and the more I learn about other traditions, the deeper I am able to go in my own tradition. If I remained outside of all traditions, I would be more vulnerable to the materialistic and individualistic impulses of our culture than I am already. I would be thirsty, very, very thirsty. I see a lot of thirsty people around me, and so I believe it is important for me to share the value of my tradition. I work closely with people of other traditions, both other Christian traditions, but also Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs. I respect and admire many people from different traditions, not all, but many. They are people of deep faith and deep wisdom and I learn a lot from them.

We don't always agree. Sometimes one of us is wrong. More often, we are each deeply committed to one aspect of a greater truth, and we need each other to see the whole more clearly. In matters of faith, we are all like the proverbial blind men, each of whom is touching a different part of an elephant. The one holding the trunk thinks he is holding a snake. The one holding the ear thinks he is holding a palm leaf. The one holding the tail thinks he is holding a rope. The one with his hands on the elephant's side thinks he is touching a wall, while the one holding the leg thinks he is holding a tree. Each has a piece of the truth, and needs the others to fill in the rest.

I do not mean to underestimate the challenge of negotiating these competing visions of truth. The deep truths of religious perspectives on the world are not easily reconciled with each other, and the tensions between religious perspectives on the one hand, and the perspectives of various humanist, scientific and secular perspectives are equally challenging. One of the things that is strange about this strange world we live in is that there is no unified perspective on truth. We have to embrace what I call a "pluralism of mind," which is able to hold widely different, even competing visions of truth, recognizing that the beauty and magnificence of the universe is beyond any of us, beyond even all of us together.

How can we sing the Lord's Song in a strange land? The challenge is to keep singing, but to keep listening as well, listening for the different voice, the different truth, and confessing that our song is inadequate, and our voice is incomplete, and then singing, singing again, chastened and yet persistent, humbled and yet called.

So let's sing together a song that celebrates the diversity of the World Community, "In Star and Crescent." the star of David, the Muslim Crescent, the Zoroastrian Flame. The Wheel is central to Indigenous Spirituality, as well as Buddhist and Hindu thought.