

The Value of an Open Mind

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Psalm 23
Acts 9:36 – 43
Revelation 7: 9 – 17
John 10:22 – 30

Text: But you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep – John 10:26

Hi. My name is Ishmael, but you can call me Ish. I like Ish better than my given name of Ishmael because Ish doesn't sound so old-fashioned. Ish sounds more modern. Ish also puts me more at ease. My parents say they named me after Ishmael, the son of Abraham, the great legend of old Scripture. Sometimes I find it hard to live up to my parents' expectations, being an Ishmael. So just call me Ish.

I'm standing in the portico of Solomon, or Solomon's porch if you will, in the great temple. I'm here with family and friends for the eight-day Hanukkah celebration. It's cool outside, but that's what one would expect at this time of year when the sun is low in the sky. Thank God for sheep's wool. The tingling warmth of the wool against my skin is comforting.

Even though there is much going on, and people all over, I hear the voice of the person who I was told about. I've been told that when he shows up, it seems as if he is just coming out of nowhere – and suddenly, there he is. And suddenly he says, or does, unusual things. Like when he recently healed a blind man at the pool of Siloam. Suddenly the blind man could see again. Who ever heard of such a thing, healing a blind man? I heard about the healing and the man's sudden appearances from my Uncle Nicodemus.

My Uncle Nicodemus first met the man who did this mysterious healing one night not too long ago. Uncle Nicodemus told me that the man was a teacher who really made him think. Made him think about the laws of Israel that my uncle knew so well.

Curious thing though, even my Uncle Nicodemus was surprised when his Pharisee friends kept going on and on with this man who was once blind. For instance, the Pharisees didn't believe he had been blind and actually called in the parents of the healed man to question whether or not he really had been blind. In the end, my Uncle Nicodemus' Pharisee friends were angry and in disbelief; the Pharisees labeled the healed man a sinner and drove him out of the synagogue. Terrible to be banned from ever being able to enter your place of worship. Terrible that the Pharisees wouldn't even listen, maybe didn't want to listen. Maybe they were just stubborn.

So I pull my over-garment tighter around me to keep out the cold, and I lean in closer to hear this man of mystery say, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

Then some of the people at Solomon’s porch got angry at the man for what he said. They even started to pick up stones to throw, but then the man slipped through the crowd and disappeared. I hope he gets away – unharmed.

While I don’t quite understand all that he says, I do somehow feel like a sheep. When he speaks, there’s a curiosity in me that I can’t quite describe. I somehow want to hear more. I, Ishmael, want to listen.

This Ishmael narrative may seem to you like just a dumbed down version of the Bible, but there is a purpose. I used “people” instead of “Jews” in this narrative to take out the anti-Semitism bent, and illustrate that all “Jews” and all “Pharisees” weren’t negative on Jesus – as is sometimes thought by the casual reader of John. I also purposefully kept out Jesus’ name because most first-time observers in Jesus’ time probably didn’t know that his name was Jesus.

The key point in this narrative, however, and in the Gospels for that matter, is that many folks gave up quickly on trying to understand Jesus. Their minds were closed. They reverted to what they already knew: old habits, rules or laws. This is shown over and over again. The healing of the blind man story is an example, as is the sheep and good shepherd story that immediately follows in the book of John.

Comfort zones... something that the “Pharisees” had gotten themselves caught in. The “Pharisees” thought they were listening just fine. They thought they were being faithful and religious – as they knew it. They had a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred matters, what was forbidden and what was not. These beliefs and practices united them into one single moral community called a church.

We here at this church, in this sanctuary, this Sunday morning, think we are different than the “Pharisees” portrayed in the reading from John. But are we really? Are we immune to the close-minded thinking that got the “Pharisees” into the position of being one of the longest held examples of how NOT to be? I propose that we here at Faith UCC are just as susceptible to the close-minded thinking that Jesus preached against 2000 years ago.

Think back to what happened almost 17 years ago. You, me, with haunting clarity, knew exactly where we were, and what we were doing on that clear, sunny day.

When nineteen Muslims hijacked four planes and used them to destroy the World Trade Center and a section of the Pentagon, they forced into the open a belief that many in the Western world had harbored since the 1980’s: that there is a special connection between Islam and terrorism. Commentators on the right were quick to blame Islam. Commentators

on the left were just as quick to say that Islam is a religion of peace and that the blame should be on fundamentalism.

I'll bet you, like me, haven't been the same since, when it comes to thinking about the various religions in our world. There's a right way and a wrong way; a right way and wrong way when it comes to our views on the various religions. And these views have become somewhat immovable in our minds. We have a hard time listening to the wrong way. Many of us have stopped listening. Many of us have closed our minds.

Before I go any further with this modern-day, scary, example of being close-minded, let me shift us back to the Ishmael story...

My Uncle Nicodemus told me that we should never stop learning. I particularly like Uncle Nicodemus for that. He is always willing to teach me something new. He said that we should always keep our eyes, ears and minds open to new things. Once we shut off our minds to new information, Uncle Nicodemus said our minds begin to rot. I surely don't want that to happen.

Oh! I hear my Uncle Nicodemus' voice... Hold on... Uncle Nicodemus is asking if I want to join him on a quick trip to Bethany on the other side of the Jordan. He heard that Jesus is staying there and sharing more of his thoughts. I better grab an extra sweater in case we stay overnight.

May your desire to learn, like mine, never end. Amen.