

Protecting Our Neighbor's Honor

John 2:1-11

NOTE: This opening story was based on an incident as it was widely reported at the time. Later, corrections were made to the context, indicating that the young men in question were not challenging the Native American elder, as much as they were reacting to hostile shouting by a small band of Black Hebrew Israelites, who apparently instigated the confrontation. The elder claims he was trying to intervene to deescalate the situation.

This morning I watched a brief news report about a dismaying confrontation that occurred Friday at the Lincoln Memorial in our nation's capital. It was of a Native American elder drumming and chanting an indigenous song and being surrounded and seemingly mocked by a group of teenage boys attempting to intimidate him by obstructing his path. These boys were from Covington Catholic High School in Kentucky who came to Washington for the March for Life, though many of them had also donned red MAGA hats ("Make America Great Again"). In the photo was one of them menacingly standing a foot or so from the elder "wearing a relentless smirk."¹

Nathan Phillips is that tribal elder. He was part of the Indigenous Peoples March held also in Washington; he was singing the American Indian Movement song "that serves as a ceremony to send the spirits home"—he himself a Vietnam veteran honoring the Native Americans who died in that war. As he was being taunted, he kept thinking about his wife, Shoshana, "who died of bone-marrow cancer nearly four years ago, and the various threats that face indigenous communities around the world." As Rep. Deb Haaland, who is one of two Native American women recently elected to

¹ Antonio Olivo, Cleve Wootson Jr. and Joe Heim, "MAGA teens taunted a Native American elder," www.washingtonpost.com, 20 January 2019.

Congress commented: “To see a group of students from a Catholic school who are practicing such intolerance is a sad sight for me” as she, herself, is Catholic. It should be noted the Diocese in Kentucky denounced their students’ actions.

Religious prejudice isn’t anything new, of course. It’s always been part of human society and still flares up with ferocity around the world. We see it most commonly now in relation to Muslims; however, for most of American history, religious bigotry fell along different lines, usually over doctrinal or denominational differences, or more generally between Protestants and Catholics, or even in Christian/Jewish relations, with minorities usually suffering under the dominance of the majority. By the 21st century, most mainstream Christians have given up those battles, recognizing the commonality we have with others, or even with our parent faith in Judaism. The ecumenical movement over the last half-century has been an important advance in our culture, allowing us to move beyond the stereotypes and tribal mindsets that seem to come with strong religious identities and firm convictions.

As much as times have changed for the better, there are still some rubs that irritate thin skin. A pluralistic culture, for instance, requires a greater separation of church and state than we’ve known in the past, including a reduced role for religion in schools and at public events. Some cry foul that in academic or in public settings traditional religion is being left out, if not marginalized by secularism. That is true when we compare our current scene with the 1950s, but the loss felt is not over religion per se, but of Christian dominance of it within our culture.

Americans, in general, are still quite religious. It's just that with our increasingly multifaith culture, Christianity no longer dominates the public square nor defines the nature of religious expression. The "good old days" weren't so gracious toward those who didn't reflect or support the Christian norms yet had to tolerate in public institutions the celebration of Christian holidays with the customary religious stories, language, and songs. Our changing times have resulted in implicit and explicit tensions because white Christian identity no longer dominates every aspect of American culture—a change requiring us to be more inclusive and respectful of other races, religions, traditions, and beliefs. A more pluralistic setting today obligates us to honor the intent of our nation's constitution and ideals in the interests of our non-Christian neighbors.

For that reason, I believe the real challenge for "Christian unity" is in extending it beyond the usual ecumenical lines to include non-Christians—those of other faiths and even those who don't profess any specific faith. The reason is, denominational identities and differences don't matter as much now as they once did. The growing edge is for interracial, interreligious, interfaith relationships, as well as value-based alliances with those who have no religiously-based perspective. As many of us know firsthand, one does not need to share the same religious beliefs to share the same core values, which compel us to live and work alongside those we may otherwise distrust. More and more, this occurs interreligiously and interracially, as well as in more secular, humanitarian endeavors.

At this point in my life, that's an important and achievable good in a world that seems too often to lack a charity of spirit even among

those who claim to share the same faith. Typically, I'd rather spend time with those who share the same values, even if they're not formed out the same belief system. For example, our soon-to-be son-in-law, Zed Lamba (who is marrying Brenna this July), grew up in the Sikh tradition in India, so we are looking forward to having two ceremonies: one in the Sikh gurdwara in Southington on Friday and the Christian one on Saturday here in this church. Brenna and Zed could have opted for a nonreligious ceremony that reflected neither culture or tradition so as not to offend, but that wouldn't have meant as much given their backgrounds. Or, I suppose, both families could have resisted cooperating (e.g., we could have insisted on solely a Christian ceremony), but that would have only offended the very love with which these two have blessed us.

Brenna and Zed share similar values, so it's not difficult to respect and appreciate each other's distinct traditions. We're not threatened by the differences that exist. Cultivating common values is more fruitful than insisting on cultural conformity, let alone uniformity in belief and practice; focusing merely on one's tribal identity would only perpetuate old rivalries and prejudices based in mutual ignorance. It seems to me that the Spirit of God beckons us to be better than that—to move us to the side of inter-cultural reconciliation and mutual respect—protecting our neighbor's dignity and honor rather than to cast stones over differences.

Indirectly, the lectionary text from John's gospel illustrates my point. It's the familiar episode of when Jesus turned the water into wine. This may appear to be worlds apart from what I've just been talking about, but trust me, there is a relevant word.

Most interpreters read this story metaphorically—that John’s intention is to illustrate the transformation that began with Jesus’s ministry: that Jesus is the bearer of the divine Spirit, illustrated by him taking the water used for ritual purification and turning it into wine, symbolizing the living presence of the God’s own Spirit within us.

That’s what is illustrated in this story of the celebration of a wedding feast—from the water to the wine—a new relationship with God creates a new outlook and spirit in human relationships that transcends the old tribal walls. This represents the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s proclamation (Jer. 31:31ff), where the New Covenant is made with Israel, with the divine Spirit writing the intent of the Law into the hearts and minds of people.

Yet, taking a step back from the theological metaphor, the story itself demonstrates how Jesus protected his neighbor’s dignity and honor. Let me explain.

Marriages were not about romance between two people in love; instead, they were arranged by fathers (or heads of households) for the intent of uniting families for a variety of reasons: economic, political, social ties, or religious purposes. Typical to traditional cultures, weddings would be multi-day, community-wide events. There would be preparations, ritual processions, food, dancing, storytelling, more food, and more dancing. The host family would be responsible for making sure everyone was fed and satisfied. The last thing any host wanted was to run out of food or drink for the festive occasion—usually not a problem for wealthy households, but a significant burden for those who were not. Therefore, family

members and friends would help. To run out of provisions would be socially humiliating and bring shame upon their household and family.

As the story goes, the host in Cana ran out of wine at some point during the celebration, indicating a shortfall of either resources or friends. Wine was essential for ceremonies and meals; it was also an expression of hospitality. To be without wine, meant you lacked a spirit of hospitality and care.

Hence, it was no small concern when Jesus's mother came up to him to step up and avoid this humiliating circumstance. Mary apparently was trying to protect this family's honor when she went to Jesus, who immediately indicated to her that they were not obliged to—meaning they weren't kin or even particularly close to this family.

According to custom (and maybe common sense), Jesus could have let it go and avoid feeling any urgency to protect the husband's family from facing the consequences of public shame. This is where the story makes a more direct point.

Instead, Jesus broke custom and the norm by empathizing with this other family's predicament and responded in a manner beyond all expectations. In a miracle vintners still dream of performing, he turned ordinary water into a fine tasting wine!

Aside from wishing to know how to do that, what we see is Jesus's charitable embrace of his dishonored neighbor. Not only did he come to his neighbor's aid when called upon (though not obliged to), he did so in a manner that protected and even enhanced the family's reputation and honor! With Jesus's help, they brought out their best wine. Jesus treated this family as he would his own.

This simple response suggests how you and I might similarly cross thresholds in ecumenical and interfaith relationships. We're not obliged to do this, but it brings so many positive results. Rather than keep our distance because of religious or cultural differences, a Christ-like spirit would be to embrace non-Christians as kinfolk by being attentive to their wellbeing and, when given the opportunity, by going the extra mile for them.

Minorities are often targeted for shame. It's not enough to remain silent when others are harmed or harassed, or to keep our distance when people are in trouble or they're being targeted, directly or indirectly. Without standing with those who are persecuted, we are then aligning ourselves with the persecutors. Instead, a broader moral obligation is called for, i.e., to stand with those who are publicly persecuted and protect their dignity and honor and wellbeing. If we stand with them, they will stand with us.

It's not hard to figure out the benefits and challenges of doing this, especially in any public way. On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, remember how over the years standing with African-Americans for racial justice has built relationships interracially. The same has been true with the Jewish and Native American communities. We're in a time where it's imperative to include Muslims in that embrace, who seek our help to correct misperceptions about Islam in America and, in turn, they will help correct misunderstandings of Christianity in the Muslim world. It all comes down to human relationships and being willing to learn more about each other, then cultivate genuine friendships and empathy for one another as spiritual friends and families. These are challenging

thresholds to cross, I recognize that. But they are important acts of goodwill and righteousness.

We can do the same with Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, and with any other religious community we might not know very well, or those who might be disparaged or ridiculed by us or anyone else. Spiritual unity is more than tolerating religious differences and denominational distinctions; it means for us to find ways to forge unity with all faiths and even with those of no faith by focusing on common values. It's for breaking out of our tribal mindsets and customs that include some and exclude others. It's overcoming the fears and distrust we have from ignorance or due to arrogance. In effect, it's turning toxic water into incredibly good wine by sharing the sweet, sweet Spirit of God with others.

Spiritual unity is not merely a pipedream. It's a goal to which we should aspire. We can follow the wisdom of St. Augustine: "In necessary things, unity; in uncertain things, liberty; and in all things, charity." This is a great motto for building human relationships and experiencing the grace of God. We live in an age that desperately calls for a spirit of charity and graciousness between people, even though we come out of a heritage that has demonstrated too little of it at times.

However, when we view it from the eyes of heaven, as G.K. Chesterton put it: "we are all in the same boat in a stormy sea and we owe each other a terrible loyalty"--loyalty, not only to those who are like us, but to the many throughout the world who aren't, yet still bear the image of God. May our generosity of spirit abound and initiate a

new effort to be generous to others who, through their own customs and beliefs, simply seek to do God's will.

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