

*Joe Smucker, Sunday, Jan. 24, 2016*

## **Fellowship and Inclusion: Self, Faith and Secular Society**

Psalm 23; Philippians 2, 1-4

This is World Fellowship Sunday. The theme that is conveyed is a church group welcoming diversity in expressions of a common faith.

There is a short video available at [www.mwc-cmm.org/1618](http://www.mwc-cmm.org/1618) illustrating cooperative activity and joyous celebrations of people at the World Fellowship Conference in Pennsylvania, this past summer.

I couldn't help thinking how different this was from the often dour perspectives of some Mennonite groups I have experienced or have known in the past; Mennonites who hold to the dictum that they should be the "Quiet in the Land"; that they are "In the world but not of the world". The hope appeared to be that non-Mennonites will be so suitably impressed that they will want to be like us—the Mennonites. There are historical reasons for this stance but whether those reasons hold true to day is debatable. Certainly these themes can easily be converted into a sort of ineffective passiveness while believers take a bit of pride in their stance of humility.

The Scripture; the familiar Psalm 23. Walking as a metaphor for the passage of life and the challenges it presents to us as individuals. The Psalm emphasizes the importance of faith as we encounter challenges in our personal lives. We also have the metaphor of walking in the story of Christ appearing along with two of his followers on their walk to Emmaus, The experience renews the sojourners' faith.

A more radical metaphor appears in the story of Christ stopping along his journey across Samaria to reach Galilee to ask for water from a Samaritan woman. A normal Jew would have avoided travel in Samaria let alone contact with a Samaritan woman. To ask for water coming from her hands was almost unthinkable.. The conversation between the woman and Jesus reveals both Jesus' knowledge of the personal life of the woman as well as the saving grace of believing in Jesus message.

The scene shifts with the passage from the Philippians. Paul is dealing with diverse peoples who did not necessarily share the experiences and identity of Jews. He admonishes the Philippians to respect others, to "being one in spirit and purpose". The thread that is to hold these diverse people together is their common faith they share with others despite their different origins, cultures and identities.

These passages reveal three dynamic elements that are present in our "walk of life": Our Self (Psalms 23); Our Faith (Paul's letter to the Philippians); and Our Society —or secular identity (the Jews, the Samaritans, the Philippians). Walking along in life suggests a

constantly changing panorama involving these three elements of making sense of our voyages: Self, Faith, and Society.

Keeping these three components in mind, let's consider what our response might be to the plight of Muslim refugees fleeing the terror for which the West must share responsibility. These people are not necessarily fellow believers, although we share with them what has been called an Abrahamic tradition from the Old Testament. But that tradition matters less than the fact that these are our fellow human beings and we believe it is our mission to welcome them, notwithstanding a history of cruelty recorded in the Old Testament, the Koran, in the episodes of the Crusades and during the European occupation of North Africa until the 1950's and 60's (recall the Algerian rebellion against France) and currently stories of atrocities committed by jihadist groups.

In coming to the aid of refugees, we need to consider the idea that Christian faith goes beyond societal rules of secular morality. As Christians we need to offer help and acceptance, but recognize that our efforts are not diminished should the refugees insist on maintaining their identity. We need to have that Faith that whatever the outcome, we have served our fellow human beings to the best of our abilities. We have, in effect been agents in practicing our faith for people who have become victims of societal chaos. And yet, each of us has different talents, different personal resources in our participation in such an endeavor.

Flash back to Mennonite history—a different example of faith. We have the story in that ancient book, "The Martyr's Mirror" of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Anabaptist fleeing his pursuer across the ice in the Netherlands. He hears the ice crack, looks back and sees his pursuer about to drown, rescues him, but then is not thanked but taken off to jail by the person he just rescued! We preserve that story to remind ourselves that there is always a higher ethic than that constructed by human-kind; that there are instances where faith leads us to perform actions that are not always in our best interests.

We also have stories where living our faith has been replaced by strict religious regulations within the Mennonite Church. Disagreements over what should be correct practices have resulted in many divisions. Those of us from a Swiss Mennonite background are likely very familiar with stories of conflict and division.

My mother experienced this several times: once as a child she could no longer play with her cousins after her church split between those who felt they were loyal to the practices of the faith and those who had become "too liberal"—my mother's family being among the latter.

And, after my father returned from two years of relief work with the dispossessed Armenians in Turkey and Syria in 1918-1919, and intended to marry my mother, the minister refused to perform the ceremony because my mother had been seen in public wearing a dress whose sleeves revealed too much of her arms. They finally found a student-minister.

These incidents seem petty in retrospect, but in those times, “keeping the faith” meant adopting a unique life style in behavior and appearance.

In fact as we face a constantly changing world, we are forced to deal with differences continually and we find ourselves trying to discern what is a proper response, whether it is with respect to a family member or with a colleague at work. We no longer live in traditional family farm communities where we could enjoy the luxury of relative isolation from non-Mennonites. The Amish, still growing in numbers, have experienced this and have been facing the problem of defining acceptable occupations other than farming—as farm land becomes more scarce.

We have to constantly consider the inroads of secular society in our daily lives. How should we respond to the news that eight Muslims lost their jobs as meat packers because they wished to have Friday afternoons off for prayer? Do we argue that they need to adapt to our customs or do we make exceptions for their benefit?

The question that might be raised when we think of welcoming others is to what degree are we imposing our own definitions of inclusion on others? To what degree are we being subtle agents of power—of asserting that we have the truth rather than being open and respectful of the integrity of others?

A Personal example: sponsoring Jay Kim with the idea that he would return to S. Korea and continue with the work of rebuilding society. He was sponsored by my family to finish his college degree at Goshen. Then get an MA in social work, with the hope that he would return to Korea and serve in that role. He then continued his studies at Michigan State where I was a graduate student. During his term there he gained considerable notoriety as a judo expert. I was getting worried that he was not continuing according to my idea of his future role. Jay Kim eventually became not only a judo coach at Michigan State but a judo referee in world meets including the Olympics. He married an American woman, raised a family in Michigan and continues living there in retirement. In the meantime he also supported his mother and his siblings while he was at Michigan State. (We are still good friends.) And, I must say it could be argued successfully that his choice was a better one than what I had in mind.

We can all think of examples of dealing with individual differences; particularly with our children. What we may hope for is not always what occurs. When we think about our children we are faced with discerning when to be strict, when to offer advice and when to shut up. It is truly like a journey with all its surprises, delights and disappointments.

The lesson here is to recognize the integrity of others; to learn from them; to be aware of the influence of societal context, and personal experience. We need to guard against always being in a defensive, even superior stance of what we consider to be our religious beliefs, but rather ask, “What can we learn?” “Do I need to adjust my thinking?” “Are prejudices slipping in?”

We have come a long way from the time when even animals were condemned to death for wrong-doing. We have learned that sexual orientation is not just a conscious personal

choice; that imprisonment is not conducive to moral behavior; that divorced persons cannot be automatically condemned by the Church, especially given the stress of contemporary society.

Of course society—the public domain—is also subject to errors in defining how diverse people should live together. We, in the West, take pride in individual freedoms and individual rights, but have we gone too far? In secular society we tend to revere Adam Smith's injunction that by pursuing our own interests everyone will benefit. But what is forgotten is that Smith also pointed out that this must occur only within a moral context of concern for the welfare of humanity, otherwise "animal spirits" will prevail.

A number of years ago, Richard Sennett, a sociologist wrote about the personal costs of a society that offered little security. Individuals would need to constantly reinvent themselves to gain employment and thus survive in society. The effect would be an "Erosion of Character" the title of one of his books. (Indeed, one observer of trends predicted that the current millennium generation could expect 5 to 7 employment changes in their working life-time.)

In one commentary, Sennett wrote that individuals must become hardened out of necessity for survival in such a society where flux and change is the norm. And yet constantly re-defining oneself could mean a loss of individual integrity as well as a loss or moral obligation for the welfare of others. But if one became harder or tougher in order to deal with this stressful situation, are we beginning to deal with Smith's "animal spirits"?

This cult of individual toughness seems to be illustrated by the tough talk of Donald Trump, now leading in the Republican presidential nomination race. It is sad to see a number of Christian evangelical groups endorsing his message.

Here in Canada, in an opinion piece in the Gazette of January 19, entitled "Why I Learned to Shoot a Gun", the author writes that as a woman, "a gun offers the illusion of control. It's a tool to overcome the horrible inequities of biology"—referring to victims of rape. One has to ask if we and particularly Americans have come to the conclusion that having a gun is the only way to survive in a society that has made a fetish of individual rights. Perhaps this is an example of Adam Smith's warning about the emergence of "animal spirits" where there is no "moral order".

Parker Palmer, theologian and sociologist wrote that the idea of adopting a tough stance by individuals in such a society would only make things worse; that what is required is a faith that emphasizes the virtues of care and support for our fellow beings and this could only be made strong by a religious faith that goes beyond any societal or cultural definitions.

As Christians, we need to remind the world that meeting violence with the threat of counter violence does not result in a peaceful world, nor peace within oneself. We only need to notice the increasing number of accounts of post-traumatic stress to note an additional cost in the toll of violence.

This leads us to the final component in our “walking experience”: Ourselves. In the discussion that followed Dave’s meditation last Sunday, two concepts emerged: “dogma” and “discernment”.

As individuals, walking along the Christian path, we are forced to “discern” when our dogma guides us toward correct action and when it interferes with performing that action. This is where the essence of our faith comes into play—not organized religion—but our personal faith in discerning the correctness of our thought and action. Discerning requires an attitude of prayer, meditation, learning and openness. We need to recognize that our faith goes beyond legal rules or church ritual. As individual actors the process of discernment raises questions about the durability of these rules and the continued benefits of clinging on to past beliefs as societal conditions change.

One rather ridiculous example: While serving with MCC in Korea soon after the Korean War our relief unit was informed that a flash flood had destroyed a remote village and people were in desperate need for food and clothing. But it was Sunday and so began a debate between two of us whether it was legitimate to work in delivering these necessities on that day or wait until Monday. Fortunately, we did load the truck with supplies and delivered them on that Sunday.

Conclusion: We need the church as a place to restore and re-evaluate our faith position as we commune with others. We also need to recognize the influence of secular society as it both informs us but also endangers us in our relationships with our fellow human beings. We need to be bold in our discernment, both questioning and learning. We might ask ourselves: Which is of more importance, reaching out to others in need regardless of their orientation or faith, or remaining “apart” and attempting to defend our own interpretation from any challenges of what it means to be a Christian?

The theme of the World Conference provides an answer: we reach out to others including not just those who offer delightful variations to our own faith but also to those who may not share our faith. We do this while taking into account the lessons we learn from secular society and the faith we have in deciding how best to contribute to the welfare of our fellow human beings.

-- Joseph Smucker