The Fellowship of Astonishment

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Last Christmas I attended church with my mother, my partner, Geoff, and my brother in Omaha, Nebraska. My mom’s church is part of a specific synod of a denomination which, like many denominations, identifies itself by an acronym, which I’ll call SEMS for S-E-M-S (not its real name). Christmas morning as we drove to church, I was praying for peace on earth, goodwill toward humankind, specifically for my own goodwill toward the SEMS service. I had attended the church a few times and felt that it was a bit stuffy; or – okay, maybe stifling, but what was important, I told myself, was that Mom had found a home there. That’s what mattered. So as we drove to the service, I prepared myself to listen to the sermon with an open and generous heart. It was Christmas morning, after all. When we arrived at the church, Mom went right up to the front. I think she was proud that we were with her. The problem is that we were seated very near the Advent candles, and sometimes I have an allergic reaction to candles. I didn’t notice their proximity until I began to cough during the opening hymn in a way that I soon realized was not going to stop unless I relocated myself. So, I left the sanctuary and went to sit in the foyer, which was equipped with speakers, and I could hear the sermon very well there. Communion was served that morning. One of the deacons kindly remembered that I was out in the foyer and he came through the doors and walked towards me with the bread and wine. He asked, “Are you a SEMS?” “No,” I said. “Oh,” he said, and just as quickly as he had appeared, he turned and disappeared back through the doors with the bread and wine. I was okay with that. I was okay with that because I knew I could have communion at my own church where I wouldn’t be asked if I could identify myself by an acronym first. And although I believe in an open table, I understand why some traditions feel that those who share in their Communion need to have specific understandings of what that sacrament means. I was okay with the disappearing communion, but nevertheless I was silently fuming as I sat there in the foyer that morning. It was the sermon, the sermon in which this glad morning celebrating the birth of Jesus was all because Jesus came to earth to die for our sins, such as that moment when we procrastinated last week, or when we were impatient with a family member – both things I was sure I had done in the preceding week and yet I did not want Jesus to die for these things. Meanwhile, on a projector in the foyer, I had been watching an eternally revolving image of Jesus along with an announcement of service times. The revolving Jesus was handsome, slightly rugged, and worst of all, CHEERFUL. Except for his white robe, this Jesus might have been playing volleyball at the beach in a beer commercial. It was all I could do not to run into the sanctuary and blurt out: “What kind of world do you people live in?” So much for peace on earth, goodwill towards all. Merry Christmas.

I’m quite certain that if the S-E-M-S came to visit me here at CPUC, they would have the same thoughts about me as I had about them. As much as we long for Christian unity as an ideal, it gets pretty tricky on the ground, when we cross the threshold of someone else’s foyer and meet someone else’s Jesus. There are some lines that trip us up, and while some of those could be crossed with generosity and imagination and large heartedness, not all lines are frivolous. Some of them matter deeply. We need prayer and searching and discernment and the Holy Spirit when we find ourselves at such lines.

The Book of Acts portrays Peter speaking to the Gentiles in Ceasara when the Holy Spirit breaks in and pours itself out on the gathered people, and they begin speaking in other languages. The circumcised believers who have accompanied Peter are astonished. The Greek word for astonish is existēmi , which means to throw out of position, to displace.

It may be difficult for those of us outside that tradition to comprehend how important the issue of circumcision was in the Jewish context and still is in orthodox Judaism; it is the sign of covenant with God, dating back to Abraham. In the gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life, as was the tradition. For the first followers of Jesus, it’s a huge shift to realize that the Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles and to accept them into fellowship without the rite of circumcision. Peter, recognizing that the Spirit has gone ahead of them, asks, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” No, they cannot withhold the water. The Spirit is already there. We might think of it as the fellowship of astonishment.

And yet, even as a division that had once seemed insurmountable became a bridge between rather than a gate, they were drawn together around a new identity, as people of the Jesus Way. And we know from the letters of Paul that the early churches did not settle magically into agreement about the Jesus Way. Thus it has ever been, it seems.

Sometimes we hear that the answer to this kind of problem is to just abandon all identity, not just in religion, but in all aspects of life. If we just weren’t so particular, we’d all live in peace, the thinking goes. But we are particular beings. Everything about us is particular. We love particular places in the world, particular people, particular stories, particular songs. No one wants to hear these words from a loved one: “I love you because nothing about you is very specific at all. In fact, you blend into the entire mass of humanity quite well.”

It is easy to love in the abstract; it is easy to declare that we love everyone, especially when we are at a safe remove from them. Then we meet one of them.

Matt Fitzgerald, a United Church of Christ pastor, recently wrote a short piece for the UCC online Daily Devotional. His article was titled Coexist? with a question mark following it. In it, he critiqued bumper stickers that spell out the word “coexist” by using the symbols of major faith traditions, such as the star and crescent moon that represent Islam for the letter “C”, the star of David that represents Judaism for the letter “X”, and the cross of Christianity for the letter “T.” It troubled him that the cross was made into a consonant letter, which he felt was a serious reduction of what the cross means. He wrote: “Of course we ought to coexist, but employing the symbols of different religions to spell out a bland appeal for tolerance does damage to the religions themselves. You can't subsume the funky particularities of different faiths into a larger whole without silencing them. I wish I could fit this onto a bumper sticker: "Stop playing with the cross. Stop assuming you can get on top of all these different religions. Quit moralizing from the sidelines. Either get in the game or get out." I note that the prayer he included at the close of the devotion was rather brief. It said, “Dear God, give me patience. Amen.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Matt Fitzgerald found himself in the midst of controversy with an overwhelming response to his devotion, which means that he received 62 replies, compared to the typical number of 0-2 for a daily devotional.

Many people pointed out that the message of the Coexist bumper sticker was not about watering down each faith tradition, but about promoting cooperation and respect among them. One person put it bluntly: “Coexist or coexterminate.” Another person felt it necessary to tell Matt that he found the term “funky particularities” offensive and added, “You might want to get into the game.”

So Matt wrote another piece, a Commentary, to try to explain his position.

“What frustrates me about that bumper sticker,” he wrote, “is its assumption that all religions are either saying the same thing, or can be easily synthesized into a grand whole that just happens to reflect western secular values. A deeper, more personal concern is the tendency of liberal Protestantism to surrender the power of Christianity to the religious right, settling for a vague universalism that leaves us unable to either speak or hear as Christians.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

He wrote that the world would, indeed, be a simpler place if we put away distinctive religious claims, but in doing so we would be “watering down those differences that make religions vital in the first place.” Although religions share similar ethics, they do more than exhort you to be a better person, which, he said, Dear Abby or your conscience can do that.

As I read Matt’s Commentary, I thought about a moment in seminary when our class had split into small groups to discuss Christology, the meaning of Jesus. One student, who is a humanist, not a Christian, turned to me in frustration and said, “Do we really need Jesus?” After a moment’s pause, I said, “Yes.” I said, very inexpertly, “Jesus brought something into the world, that without him, wouldn’t be here.” I didn’t mean that everyone needs or must accept Jesus. What I was trying to say is that Christianity takes a particular shape in the world, a shape comprised of grace, mercy, sacrifice, love and justice, and that it took that shape in a person and a movement, not in abstract ideology. It lived. It breathed. That’s how it becomes real and vital and life giving. It’s not the only shape in the world. Buddhism takes a different shape, Judaism another, Islam yet another, Native American religions, which also can’t be condensed into a uniform Native American spirituality, all these take specific shapes in the world, and it is those shapes in them that transmits something life giving, something that speaks in the universe. We can listen in and hear each other’s stories, we can sing each other’s songs, and we can get a sense of that shape from outside the tradition, and we can learn from it. But the deepest way to know what a religion means is to live it, to practice it, to take it claims to heart.

Matt wrote: “We experience God by immersing ourselves in particular religious traditions… if we don't practice a specific religion, one that makes unique and strange claims which are bound to contradict the unique and strange claims of other religions, our sense of God will remain hopelessly vague.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

It reminds me of the poem by Mary Oliver called, “The Spirit Likes to Dress Up.”

Oliver addresses spirit as “an Airy and shapeless thing,

[that] needs

the metaphor of the body,

[that needs] lime and appetite,

the oceanic fluids;

it needs the body's world,

…

to be understood,

to be more than pure light

that burns

where no one is --”

The spirit, she is saying, needs the body in order to be something that we can perceive, in order to be known.

When Jesus is drained of his particular and complex humanity, his identity as a Jew in first century Palestine, we get a spiritualized Jesus whose humanity is submerged, whose passion is submerged, and he becomes pure light that burns where no one is, a Jesus that is so far above us, so far out there, that we can pretty much make him into whatever we want.

I heard that there was a booth along the Cinco de Mayo parade route last Saturday with a sign that read, “Jesus Hates Sinners!” and further along the route there were people proclaiming Jesus as the only way to salvation and escape from hell. Along that same route came our float lifting up the Building Blocks tutorial.

A congregation takes a particular shape in the world, too. Cherokee Park United Church has a particular shape in this community. A ministry like Building Blocks has created a shape in this community that will go on in ways we can’t imagine. It is more than pure light that burns where no one is. It is a spirit that burned and became a concrete reality in the world. Our reconciling ministries with particular communities, our music ministry, all of these create a particular shape in this congregation that then takes shape in the community. There will be new shapes for us, too.

The idea of shouting Jesus into a crowd, of peddling Jesus like a product with fear and hatred as a marketing strategy, makes me angry and sad. The first Christians came together in a fellowship of astonishment and discovery, but our context is quite different from theirs. We now live in a Jesus saturated and Jesus weary culture, and I can understand why my seminary classmate asked in frustration, do we really need Jesus? Sometimes it seems to me that the best approach to the gospel is in the words that are often attributed to St. Francis of Assissi: “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”

But I think about Matt Fitzgerald’s comment about surrendering the power of Christianity, settling for a vague universalism that leaves us unable to either speak or hear as Christians. If I remain silent about the things that matter most to me, what caricatures fill that silence? And must I surrender the particular shape and story in the world that gives me life? That lives and breathes in my spirit? Why do I cherish it? Because it is life giving. How do I both hold to it so that it is something particular that can be grasped, so that it is more than pure spirit that burns where no one is – and also set it free?

Theologian Eleazar Fernandez writes about the tension in keeping a center of Christian identity, which he calls a “burning heart experience,” referring to the experience when Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and speaks with them about the recent events they have witnessed concerning Jesus, but they only recognize him after the fact, when they say to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32)

Fernandez writes: “Detached from this burning center, [the church] is nothing but an organization “with members who do some good things.” But at the same time, a burning heart needs an open door: “a burning heart is as large as the world.” He writes about the importance of having “porous borders.” He says that there is no doubt the church is called to be an alternative community in a world that is globalized by the forces of the market, but to do that we don’t have to be “a fortified colony of resident aliens” who turn inward towards fanaticism, but rather stand as a faithful witness in the world without being closed off and without being swallowed up by the world.[[4]](#footnote-4)  
 The name of Jesus is being inserted in the U.S. political arena again, as we go lurching towards another election, and some might say that name doesn’t belong there, that Jesus should be left out of it. But like it or not, his name is being thrown into the arena.

In our reading from Wendell Berry in the Adult Forum, Berry talks about the extremes of left and right that allow no nuances, a polarization that forgets the person at the center of our politics.[[5]](#footnote-5) All of us, no matter where we fall politically, must not put Jesus into the service of ideology. But we also must not create a Jesus of pure spirit that burns where no one is. Jesus did go into the public square and he talked about a God of grace who cares about people who are exploited by the politics of power.

Our Psalmist in today’s reading says,.”Sing to the Lord a new song…[the Lord] has revealed his righteousness in the eyes of all the nations.” This song envisions the earth, the sea and everything in it roaring in joy, the rivers, even, clapping their hands, the mountains rejoicing, because the Lord will establish justice rightly and among all people fairly. This, too, is a fellowship of astonishment in which not only all nations, but all creation joins. We may need to find new ways to sing it, but sing we must.

.Works Cited

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1. Matt Fitzgerald, "COEXIST?" United Church of Christ. April 20, 2015. Accessed May 5, 2015. http://www.ucc.org/daily\_devotional\_coexist. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matt Fitzgerald,. "Commentary: "Coexist"-a Response from Matt Fitzgerald." United Church of Christ. April 27, 2015. Accessed May 5, 2015. http://www.ucc.org/commentary\_coexist\_a\_repsonse\_from\_matt\_fitzgerald. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Burning Center, Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), 133-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wendell Berry, "Caught in the Middle" in *Our Only World : Ten Essays* (Counterpoint LLC, 2015), 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)