

Last week a student questioned me closely about Isaiah's proclamation that Israel, restored after the Exile, would be a "light to the nations." Wasn't that proselytizing? he wondered. Wasn't Isaiah suggesting that everyone should convert to Judaism, and if so, when and why did Jews stop proselytizing? His line of questioning forced me to recognize more explicitly the link between God and nation in the way human beings think. I told him that what Isaiah probably had in mind was that Israel would be restored to its former glory and that all nations would acknowledge its dominance and, by implication, the dominance of its God. That *would* mean, obviously, that the nations would be worshiping Israel's God, which in theory would make them the religion that later became Jewish. But we're really being anachronistic there. At that time "religion" was not separate from national or ethnic identity; it was part of it. It's only when the people of the Mosaic covenant lost their land and self-governance that they could be described as having a religious identity separate from that of their neighbors in Babylon, Persia, or Rome.

We still slip into conflating religious identity with national or cultural identity in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Another student recently compared Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, with what he termed "the Christian New Year" on January 1. The culture wars are fueled in part by a Christian desire to represent our faith to the rest of the world in a way that affirms whatever we think is best about our own brand. So for instance, in a recent *New York Times* editorial, conservative Catholic Ross Douthat asked whether Christianity is under attack. He cited progressive thinker Serene Jones' dismissal of the Virgin Birth as an

example of the combination of repudiation and co-optation, the desire to abandon and the desire to claim and tame and redefine, that so often defines the liberal relationship to Christian faith.

See, he can't quite even call Serene's stance "faith." Douthat went on:

If you aren't a liberal Christian in the mode of Serene Jones, if you believe in a literal resurrection and a fully-Catholic Notre-Dame de Paris, this combination of attitudes encourages a certain paranoia, a sense that the liberal overclass is constantly gaslighting your religion. That elite will never take your side in any controversy, it will efface your beliefs and traditions in many cases and be ostentatiously ignorant of them in others ... but when challenged, its apostles still always claim to be Christians themselves or at least friends and heirs of Christianity, and *what's with your persecution complex, don't you know that (white) American Christians are wildly privileged?*

Now, the distinction that Douthat actually wants to make between Christianity and American privilege is totally fair. Worldwide, Christians are *not* Americans, and Christian does not mean American, whatever my students may think. Christians are in fact worldwide. But this is because of missionary efforts based on the Great Commission of Matthew 28: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." And too often the missionizing went hand in hand with colonializing, and the disastrous fallout from colonialism is inextricably associated with the missionary effort, which I think Douthat underplays.

Today it's often observed that Christianity is thriving in Africa and Latin America, not so much in Europe and North America, and perhaps we need missionaries from there to come to us now. I'm dubious of that, especially given the recent experience of the United Methodist Church with the vote on LGBTQ inclusion. In fact, I'd argue that we need to re-examine the Great Commission itself and ask whether converting people from one religion to the religion of Christianity is really

what it's about.

“Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations,” says Jesus. A disciple is not necessarily a convert. “Discipleship” implies studenthood, implies commitment to lifelong learning and formation. In confirmation I ask students to think about the forms that discipleship might take for them, so that for instance Anna named friendship and providing sanctuary as her ways of being a disciple; Sara identified caring for wolves and for her family, and Justin has included problem-solving and being passionate among his foci. Those are not things you do and then you're done, like switching on a light; they are ways of being over a lifetime.

Matthew also tells us in today's reading that when the disciples saw Jesus, “they worshiped him, but some doubted.” If even the disciples weren't sure, after months or years of companionship with Jesus, how in the world are they going to make disciples? Obviously they're going to do it slowly, in God's good time and with God's patience. The building of broken humanity into a fellowship of disciples will occur relationship by relationship, and each relationship is constituted by many, many encounters.

Barbara Brown Taylor's new book, *Holy Envy*, tells about her experiences teaching Survey of World Religions at Piedmont College in Georgia. Obviously I had to buy that one right away, and I resonated with much of what she says in the book. But one passage toward the end strikes me with special power. She says that she knows her students do not retain a lot of the information that was delivered during the class. They do, however, remember the people they met and the flavor of those encounters. (Swami who needs a cat) And she too has moved beyond contacting

people who can tell about their religion to a closer status: a rabbi now sends her Advent greetings (etc.). (Quote about relationships)

Point: Mark Davis says that the Greek actually says “as you go,” or “having gone,” “make disciples. Like it’s a thing you’re always doing. Point: Jesus sends the disciples to Galilee, not Jerusalem—because Galilee is home. “Go home and while you’re having your life, make disciples.” Point: the Incarnation is the disclosure of God in human form *through relationships*. Just as Jesus disclosed the presence of God, now his disciples are called to disclose the presence of God—not by extracting confessions of faith, but by spreading the reign of God. “If you want to know what God is like,” the gospels tell us, “look at Jesus, his life, his way, his deeds, his character.” And what has that character been? Jesus’ way has been compassion, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, inclusion, and love from beginning to end. The reign of God is made manifest when we are good to each other, compassionate, fierce for justice, and don’t take ourselves too seriously. The reign of God is not limited to Christianity, although that language is ours.

We are charged with making manifest the reign of God. I am privileged to get to spend the better part of a year with each of our young people as they become ready, listening to them think about how they take that on. You know I’ve especially appreciated Justin’s talent for discerning a theme in the Christian story and identifying it in another piece of literature like the “Star Wars” series or the movie “Smallfoot.” I think he’s disposed to recognize the reign of God in its many guises, and also disposed to see where he is called to play a role in making it manifest, by being kind, by being passionate, by problem-solving. The call to discipleship is also

a call to growth, which he will continue to do by the grace of God in our congregation. As do we all, relationship by relationship, upheld by one another and by the Holy Spirit.

John Shelby Spong has written,

Ultimately the resurrection is a call to universalism. Go to all the world, go beyond the boundaries of your fears. Go to those who have defined as unclean, unworthy, unsaved, uncircumcised and unbaptized. Go to those you have reduced to being the object of your prejudices. Go to those who are different. Go to the rejected of the world and teach them what I have taught you, namely that God is love and that love embraces all that God has made, that love has no boundaries, that love rejects no one, and that love is the essence of the Gospel. The Great Commission was never meant to be a charge to us to convert the heathen, as it as so often been interpreted to be. It was and is a call to see everyone as living inside the love of God.”

God, You call us to be your light in the darkness,

your voice in the wilderness,

your hope for the hopeless.

You give us strength in our weakness,

peace and gentleness, words and boldness,

to proclaim more of you

and of us, less.

written by John Birch, and posted on his **Faith and Worship** website.