

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Learning humility as interfaith travelers

The Rev. Bob Linstrom

Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church

As a lifelong Lutheran-flavored Christian, I love my faith tradition, liturgy and theological grounding. I could easily reside exclusively in that familiar rich heritage and a spiritual tradition, a way of discipleship that calls one to the service of God and neighbor as a manifestation of the freedom of a Christian. It is what I know best, and the foundation for my experience of Emmanuel, God with us, in this life.

However, I have had the privilege of studying comparative religion since my earliest undergraduate endeavors. Always enlivened by interfaith engagement, it has been a privilege since arriving in Grand Rapids five years ago to be a partner with the Kaufman Institute's initiatives in interfaith understanding, service and friendship.

A recent manifestation of that partnership was a trip to Israel with "Standing Together" colleagues from Grand Rapids, plus gathering with others from around the United States, for an interfaith pilgrimage of rabbis, pastors and an imam. Our 10-day journey included a dynamic itinerary that brought us to the holy sites of all three of the great Abrahamic faiths, and conversations with Israeli Jews, Muslims and Christians who sought to share their vision for coming together as a nation at peace.

As we traveled, I learned to see the holy sites of Jews and Muslims through the eyes of those who claimed those traditions as their own. Likewise, some of my fellow travelers indicated how much they appre-



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ciated coming to Christian sites with those for whom those sites were also rich in meaning. At the Mount of Beatitudes, the traditional setting for Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Arnie, a rabbi from New Jersey who had visited the site before, commented on how much more meaningful it was to visit such a site with those who knew the story of Jesus' great teaching and perceived that site as holy.

EXPLAINING THE INTERFAITH PERSPECTIVE

After more than a week of travel together, our delegation began to return to the United States. Our Grand Rapids delegation had arranged to stay an extra day to continue to experience the great city of Jerusalem, and we received an email that day from Arnie, who had already arrived back in New Jersey. He described an email he had received while in Israel from someone asking why he didn't believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Arnie had replied asking whether the man was seeking to explore his own faith, to understand Arnie's faith, or for some other reason. Joshua replied that he was a Christian and was writing to debate whether Jesus was the Messiah or not.

Arnie shared his response with all of us with whom he had traveled across Israel. He

had written:

"Dear Joshua,
Thank you for reaching out. You will be interested to know that I have just returned from an interfaith clergy mission to Israel that was a journey and a pilgrimage to the roots of our respective and collective faiths. We were six rabbis, six Christian ministers, and one imam. It was moving and spiritually uplifting to witness each other's holy places through the eyes of those for whom they are part of their living faith narrative. What we did not do, and would never have thought to do, was to engage in religious disputation or polemics.

"Truth is an elusive thing for us human beings who are so limited in our capacity to know things with certainty. So, we agree that it is better to be humble in our claims to certainty, to stand together in the love that we all feel flowing from the Divine, and to witness with awe and appreciation the testimony to faith that each of us embodies in our tradition and in our lives. Joshua, I commend this path to you, as well. I urge you to live your faith with integrity, conviction and humility so that those who encounter you will say, 'There is a man who walks with God. Praise be to God!'

"May God bless you, your loved ones, and us all!

"L'shalom."

BRIDGES, NOT WALLS

Rabbi Arnie managed to reflect a deep truth in his simple but compassionate response to his anonymous "Joshua," one who reached out to claim and define the

walls that separate faith traditions. As children of God, we have much to celebrate in our standing together, building bridges, not walls. In the spirit of our shared pilgrimage to Israel and in all of our efforts to grow in interfaith understanding, "we agree that it is better to be humble in our claims to certainty, to stand together in the love that we all feel flowing from the Divine, and to witness with awe and appreciation the testimony to faith that each of us embodies in our tradition and in our lives."

As the Kaufman Institute launched its "Year of Interfaith Friendship" last month, a few of us in the Grand Rapids' "Standing Together" initiative traveled together to a land of division and strife to discover that which binds us. We will continue to share the significance of newfound friendship that transcends that which separates us. May we all be known as the women and men who walk with God, living our faith lives with integrity, conviction and humility.

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'Jerusalem' film returning

The Academy award-winning film will be shown in Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and Lansing.

When: 10:45 a.m. March 3-4

Where: Celebration Grand Rapids North, Celebration Lansing, Celebration Crossroads in Portage

Details: Interfaithunderstanding.org