May 29, Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time: 1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43; Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10

by Safwat Marzouk in the May 11, 2016 issue

Religious pluralism can be difficult. So can diversity within the same tradition. Some people's firm grounding in their own articulation of faith leads them to reject those who believe otherwise; others are willing to give up on any peculiarity of a tradition in the interest of tolerance. Both approaches make interreligious or ecumenical dialogue difficult, for different reasons.

The first approach blocks dialogue by assuming there is no chance that others hold some truth or goodness in their conviction. This can lead instead to a monologue, in which the other faith functions as a foil. It can also point toward thinking of evangelism and mission in the narrow terms of coercive conversion. The second approach blocks dialogue by assuming that tolerance happens only through focusing on what is common and shared. This reduces each person's faith to a set of universal values, leading to a sort of subtle reductionist aggression toward both traditions. The challenge, then, is how to be grounded in one's own faith tradition while also showing respect, love, and cooperation toward others.

In Galatians, Paul is confrontational. He knows what he believes in, and he is addressing a community that he is familiar with—one that has deviated from the teachings and commitments that he sees as central to the gospel. Paul reminds the Galatians that some of their beliefs and practices are not in accord with the gospel of freedom that he has taught them. Paul is engaged here in a process of discerning the truth, and he urges the church to do the same.

While we should be more cautious than Paul about calling other people "foolish," we can learn from him the importance of taking a stand. The challenge is how we relate to those who are different from us: tolerance should not depend on denying one's faith, and being grounded in one's faith should not lead to intolerance or coercion.

How do we create boundaries for ourselves as we try to get this right? Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8 offers an insight. Solomon prays to his own God, holds a unique place for his deity, and operates out of the theological framework of the covenant.

But he also creates space for non-Israelites who, volitionally, pray to YHWH and come to Jerusalem as pilgrims. Solomon intercedes on their behalf and shows concern for their needs, needs they express in their prayers. These foreigners are not forced to pray or make pilgrimage, nor are the doors shut before them. They are received, with their needs.

Luke's story of the healing of the centurion's slave is relevant for interreligious encounters as well. The story shows divided people overcoming barriers in order to attend to human need. A Roman leader and the Jewish elders work together to bring healing for a person who is "highly valued."

The story is also about seeing the goodness in the other. The Jewish elders acknowledge the centurion's love for their community, expressed in the synagogue he had built for them. The centurion acknowledges his need for the Jewish elders to mediate between him and Jesus—and although he is a man of authority, he expresses not only his need for Jesus but even his reverence. This acknowledgment of goodness is also expressed in the words of Jesus, who declares that he has not seen a deeper faith than the centurion's in all of Israel. Even Jesus is amazed.

This mutual recognition of the goodness within the other allows for real encounters between those who are different. And it leads to the healing of a human being who is valued deeply by all of these individuals who are different from one another.

With these texts in mind, we return to the challenge: how to be grounded in one's own faith while showing love and respect for others. I believe that interreligious and ecumenical dialogues are enriched when all parties

- engage as equal subjects who speak for themselves and about their own faith;
- articulate what makes them grounded in their own faith tradition and what contribution that tradition makes to the conversation;
- are self-critical about the way they articulate their own faith and the way they understand the other's faith;
- articulate what they might learn from the other tradition and what they might continue to ponder in their own;
- open their hands, hearts, and minds to receive the gift of the other for who the other is, finding ways to serve one another and with one another.

When people take both their own faith and the other person's faith seriously, when they find healthy ways to both cross boundaries and maintain them, then they can

turn their differences into a source of theological enrichment. They can join together to bring healing, well-being, and peace to our broken world.