

THE OUTSIDER'S VOICE

October 2020

"Sometimes the outsider's voice draws us to deeper wisdom, beyond the expectations of our own tradition." Catherine Cavanaugh's observation [in an article, "Be Still, and Breathe"] was an insight I've needed to hear for a very long time. From time to time I go through 'a dry period,' needing opportunities to explore theological depth. Navigating our coronavirus pandemic has been a struggle to keep from going 'dry.' Cavanaugh, a Christian Chaplain, had received a copy of Thich Nhat Hanh's book "Living Buddha, Living Christ" from her Buddhist godfather. It spoke to what she called a "thirst for some deeper understanding of the presence and value of the sacred within a confusing and challenging world." That she was open to a voice outside her own tradition made it possible for her to receive a gift from within a gift.

It got me to thinking: when have I heard the voice of an 'outsider?' and what 'outsider's voices do I need to hear? Mind you, I am not comfortable with the naming of some as 'outsiders' while looking upon ourselves as 'insiders.' But perhaps if we listen to others, we can learn from them and, in the process come to deeper understanding of the presence and value of the sacred.

I once had the privilege of sharing in two book studies with several people who came from different faith traditions. One of the books was "Resurrecting Jesus: Embodying the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic," by American-born Buddhist spiritual teacher Adyashanti. I found much to ponder in what he saw in Jesus, and in the insight that "When the eternal and the human meet, that's where love is born." Looking at the story of Jesus through Buddhist eyes was a wonderful gift from what for me was the voice of an 'outsider.'

Maybe we need to listen to other voices of 'outsiders.' I find it ironic that a nation of immigrants can now be so hostile to immigrants. While we may call them 'illegal aliens' as a way of devaluing and excluding them, the Bible asserts: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." [Leviticus 19:34] Yet, in the risks they have taken to come here they give voice to hopes and dreams, and express gratitude for opportunities that often we have taken for granted. Here the 'outsider's' voice draws us to a deeper wisdom by reminding us that we are all one people under God.

Oddly, the voice of the Bible is sometimes heard as an outsider in our day. The Bible is not owned by one political point of view or one national perspective. If there is any biblical bias, it is toward the poor, the dispossessed, the hungry, the marginalized, the powerless. Of those who are comfortable in their religion the Bible asks, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" [see Micah 6:8] To those who are caught up in what they own, the Bible calls for a Year of Jubilee when the balance sheets are restored. [see Leviticus 25] And, if we forget compassion, Jesus still calls us to feed the hungry, to offer the cup of cold water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and the prisoner, and to welcome the stranger. To many of us in modern America that is the voice of the outsider!

To be sure, it is important to be discerning when we hear an outsider's voice, for not all of them are helpful - some can be hurtful, even dangerous. But when they draw us to a deeper wisdom, when they reveal the presence and value of the sacred, when they engage us and build us up, then they become our teacher, then they connect us to the divine, then they deepen us spiritually and show us a new path to health and wholeness. Sometimes this outsider's voice will draw us to deeper wisdom, beyond the expectations of our own traditions, leading us to a deeper understanding of the presence and value of the sacred within a confusing and challenging world. And it may just help us get through the confusing and dangerous time in which we live.