

Sunday, May 22, 2011: Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-14

## **I love interfaith gatherings, but I would never invite Stephen.**

by [Quinn G. Caldwell](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

I hope you're like me in at least one respect: I hope you're lucky enough to find yourself frequently working and worshiping with people of other faiths. I have come to believe that the future will be made of such moments.

Interfaith gatherings, especially those about things that really matter, are always fraught; if they weren't, we wouldn't need them. There are two ways for planners to organize such events so that a minimum number of people are offended, hurt or caught up in a bloody conflict. In the lowest common denominator method, nobody does anything that everyone in the room can't agree with. The Christians pare God down from three to one in their prayers; the Jews leave their tallit and their chosenness at home; the Muslims find a way to turn their backs on Mecca and say what they have to say without using Arabic. All agree not to do or say anything that might offend anyone. This is not my favorite method, but it works well when those gathered don't know one another or don't yet trust one another. The problem is that to remove all that is potentially offensive in a conversation about ultimate things among people with conflicting truth claims is to remove the possibility of saying much of any import.

In a second method, we all bring our particularity to the table. We speak from our own traditions and are unafraid to do so. Christians pray to Jesus, the Jews bust out the Hebrew and the Muslims reference Muhammad with abandon. Rather than agreeing not to risk being offensive, we agree not to be easily offended. Good relationships and a high degree of trust are absolute requirements in this method.

I prefer this method, first because it allows me to be fully me in my prayer and work, but also and more importantly because the great challenge of our day is not to learn to live with watered-down versions of other faiths, but to live with them in all their fullness. What could I possibly learn about Islam from a Muslim who's pretending not

to be one? This method takes a lot of work and leaves unresolved tensions between conflicting and exclusive truth claims. But it's worth the effort for the relationships it builds and the peace toward which it points.

Yet whatever kind of interfaith gathering I might be in charge of planning, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't invite martyr-to-be Stephen. Think of the last interfaith gathering you went to. (If you can't think of one, you probably should get on that; the world needs people like you there.) Can you imagine what would happen if Stephen stood up at an interfaith gathering and said there what he says to the council in Acts? In this week's passage he's a persecuted, heaven-gazing and saintly soul, but back up a few verses and read what he's just said to the council. I would have been mad at him too. He may or may not have been accurate in his accusations, but he sure wasn't bringing his A-game in terms of interfaith dialogue.

And Jesus? Well, he makes plenty of exclusive truth claims likely to offend people of other faiths ("I am the way, and the Truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"). He certainly has plenty of ornery disputes with people of his own faith. And his conversation with the Syrophenician woman who asks for healing for her daughter—one of the only interfaith conversations about religious matters of his we have on record—doesn't start out well: he calls her a dog.

But I would certainly invite Jesus anyway. Here's why: remember that one interfaith conversation? The one that didn't start out so well? It ended much better than it started. Didn't Jesus end up hearing what the woman had to say, and didn't he end up extending all the grace in his power to heal her daughter? Didn't what started out as misunderstanding, anger, judgment, maybe even fear—didn't that end up with the Savior of the world learning a thing or two from a foreign woman of a different faith?

"What's the way to the place you're going?" asks Thomas. "I *am* the way," says Jesus. In other words, he is saying: "Learn what I've learned: don't call people dogs. Believe what I've come to believe: grace is for everybody, even the ones that don't believe in the same God you do. Do what I do: listen, be convinced, and if God's given you the power to heal somebody, don't you dare—don't you *dare*—refuse to use it."

Here's how it is: the world gets smaller and more full of people every day. Most of those people with whom you're sharing less and less space do not believe what you

believe. Even if you've so far managed not to spend much time with them, you're not going to be able to manage that much longer.

When you do come face to face with those strangers, don't feel as if you need to hide who you are or what you believe: bring your full-on faith and expect them to do the same. But don't do as Stephen did. Do it in this way: try to be gentle. Try to be unoffended. Remember that even if Jesus is bringing everything to its fulfillment at the end of time, for now he needs us to find a way to live with other people's gods. Remember that he promised that whatever he did, you would do even better.