

Faith Mennonite Church
May 29, 2011 – 6th Sunday of Easter
Turn to Jesus. Go with the Spirit.
Joetta Schlabach

Led by the Advocate
Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

On Thursday night I was with a group of women that meets once a month to share stories from our lives. These are mostly middle-aged women—I may be the youngest—and from a variety of religious persuasions: Buddhist, Catholic, Episcopalian, UCC, UMC, and UU. The one thing we share in common is that we all work in some sort of church or spirituality-related ministry. The facilitator of the evening has the choice of asking a leading question. This week, Marjory, with a thick Boston accent, couldn't wait to ask her question, "ripped right from the headlines this week!"

I wondered if it was going to be about the weather, with all of the violent storms. But instead she asked, "What will people do without the Oprah show?" After a brief pause I volunteered the first response. I admitted that I watch no daytime television and don't think I've ever watched a complete episode of Oprah. My world, at least, will not be much changed. Several of the women, one who is retired and another unemployed, said that they often turn the show on if they're home in the afternoon. One, especially, talked with genuine appreciation that bordered on awe, of the way Oprah was able to tell and draw out stories from others and to encourage people who have suffered deeply in life. She suggested that Oprah may be the most influential person in the world; "she's a powerful woman."

As I thought more about Marjorie's question the past couple days, as I was also thinking about our scripture texts for today, I found myself wondering several things: What did Oprah tap into, particularly among white women, over the age of 55 who were her largest viewing audience? Was she a conduit for a particular kind of understanding and growth, or was she herself, the main attraction?

I decided to do a quick internet search using just her name and I was surprised that only one of the top ten links—an article from the *New York Times*—offered any type of evaluative analysis of the impact of her 25-year daily show. The rest were either links to her own website or Oprah books or YouTube videos of her show. The *Times* article was titled "The Church of Oprah and the Theology of Suffering." It quoted one scholar, a sociologist, who identified elements of the black church in Oprah's "emotionality and her focus on justice."¹ At a young age Oprah memorized a set of seven sermons written by the late poet James Weldon Johnson and she preached them in churches all over Nashville.

Another scholar situated Oprah's appeal in a preaching style popularized by the evangelist Charles Finney prior to the Civil War. In the 1830s, Finney led a revival campaign that "formalized the 'anxious bench,' a pew or altar where sinners congregated while members of the crowd prayed for them to repent or become Christians. A whole plotline revolved around the bench, and worshipers eagerly anticipated its ritual. Who would sit there? Would they be

¹ Mark Oppenheimer, "The Church of Oprah and the Theology of Suffering."
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/28/us/28beliefs.html>. May 27, 2011.

saved? ‘At every point,’ Dr. Lofton writes, ‘the preacher prodded, focused, named and decried.’”²

While Oprah’s style may have been formed in the church, her message became a gospel of quite a different sort than the Christian gospel. While recognizing Oprah’s appeal, the scholars quoted in this article wondered whether her focus on suffering didn’t, in the end, actually glorify suffering, and whether her “brand of healing via personal will and therapy” didn’t have the effect of blaming people for their misery. And, they questioned whether she wasn’t somewhat of a false prophet by bringing in such a wide range of spiritual “experts,” who “brought some badly broken tools.”³

My point here is not to judge Oprah. If anything, Oprah’s popularity and her passion for justice and for those who suffer, is in some ways a judgment on the church. In fact, many of her faithful were people on the run from organized religion. Oprah has been very culturally astute—raising issues of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and an understanding of the lgbt community. She has gone to the heart of topics and issues that people are keenly interested in.

This is what Paul did as he visited Athens. He walked around with his eyes open to the life and culture of that city. When he got to the Areopagus, which had been a judicial meeting place during the classical Greek period, and was known as Mars Hill during the Roman period, Paul was able to speak positively about the spirituality represented throughout the city in its many representations of dieties. He noted that their deep interest in and reverence for the gods made room for the possibility that there remained a god unknown to them. In a respectful way, Paul took the risk of introducing to them the god who was unknown. On a hill named Mars, after the Roman god of war, he introduced Jesus, a man of peace, who represented God through suffering love, through death. He said the power of that loving justice was verified in the resurrection.

Paul was not talking about one more self-help program. He was not talking about a god who needed a shrine. Rather he was talking about a living, moving Spirit in whom “we live, and move and have our being.” This was not a god to merely discuss or worship. This was and is a God to follow. It may well be that Paul never read the gospel of John, but he certainly understood the power of the Spirit, the Advocate, that Jesus promised to his disciples, in the verses we read this morning. Speaking at a time when the disciples were feeling insecure and uncertain, Jesus promised that his Spirit would not simply bring inner comfort, but would be an Advocate, reminding and empowering those same disciples to remember the things Jesus had taught and lived so they would do the same. This advocacy extended to Paul and it extends to us.

For me personally, the challenge of Paul’s sermon in Athens, is to think *positively* about ways to engage and communicate about the gods in our culture—the consumerism, the militarism, the wasteful use of resources, the celebrity cults. My first instinct is to judge these things, to want to speak out against them or else to ignore them. But Paul sought a positive way to engage the people of Athens about their gods.

Perhaps the place to begin is to look at the human desires that lead people to these gods. Is consumerism only thoughtless greed or does it also reflect a desire for the good, for new technologies, for fulfillment? Can I, can we, in response, speak of ways that God in Christ has become our greatest good, has filled our deepest longings?

In a similar way, can I recognize that the lure of militarism grows from the human desire for security? Have not many who have followed the path of militarism set out with a sincere

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

desire to serve and to sacrifice? Can we raise our voices, respectfully and lovingly, to name the security we have found in trusting God to protect and to bring down the walls of hostility between enemies?

We have seen the best of these cultural instincts in our country in recent weeks as violent weather has demolished whole towns. People have flocked in to assist strangers in the clean-up, sharing goods and rebuilding structures of security. We have heard eloquent testimony of folks living in flood plains that have graciously accepted the intentional flooding of their land so that more densely populated, urban areas can be spared. These actions are the work of God in our culture even when not everyone recognizes God's spirit in them. But we can give testimony to what we have experienced and what we know.

Will people survive without Oprah? Of course, and especially if each of us respectfully and compassionately shares the stories of grace we have received. May the power of the resurrection continue to live in us.