



# FACE . . .

## Conversation or Conversion? Hearing God from the Other

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In her April 7th column in the *New York Times*, Maureen Dowd laments: “All of Abraham’s faiths and Abraham’s children are roiling.” She recalls these words recently scribbled on a Washington wall: “Dear God, save us from the people who believe in you.” It all began with Abraham, to whom the outsider, Abimelech, said: “You have done things that ought not be done....What were you thinking of, that you did these things?” (Gen 20:9-10).

The story of Abimelech’s encounter with God and Abraham in Gen 20 addresses this Face-to-Face feature by highlighting two major points: (1) God initiates a conversation with an outsider; (2) the outsider, as both teacher and confessor, engages the insider in conversation.

Gen 20 is part of no lectionary series of which I’m aware. Perhaps this is because Abraham, that exemplar of faith, is not so favorably portrayed. Perhaps it’s because the story gives such a positive portrayal of Abimelech, a person who stands outside the chosen community. We may also find the text unsettling in that it invites us to hear comparable stories from our world, wherein outsiders may at times be more in tune with God’s purposes for the creation than we are.

When Abimelech awakens from the dream in which God informs him that Sarah is really Abraham’s wife, Abimelech heads for a confrontation with Abraham. Without introductory niceties, with no fear as to how this prophet might react, and claiming no divine authority, Abimelech pronounces Abraham guilty and functions as his confessor: “What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?”

In response, Abraham makes an elaborate and ironic effort to justify his actions. “I knew there was no fear of God in this place”: but that, of course, proves to be Abraham’s problem, not Abimelech’s. And, “Sarah is really my half-sister,” which may or may not be true. And, he continues: “I’ve *often* passed off Sarah like this.” The more you do it, apparently, the more right it gets. And, in any case: “God is the one to blame for sending me on this journey in the first place.”

Given such an intricate rationalization, Abimelech’s response is magnanimous and carries its own irony. Unlike Abraham, he maximizes Sarah’s welfare, restores her honor, and loads them up with gifts—refusing to respond in kind. And like Abraham’s earlier treatment of Lot, he offers Abraham land wherever he chooses. Abraham does intercede on behalf of Abimelech and the prayer of one whose righteousness has been brought into question avails much.

(continued on page 306)

# TO FACE

## Conversation or Conversion? Proclaiming Christ to the Other

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I was having a wonderful conversation with my kids, Bjorn and Kristian, a couple of days ago. We were talking about hockey cards and the respective players on each. The dialogue quickly moved from player to player in comparative fashion. The interaction over goalies was the most interesting. The elder son is a goalie and thus claims special insight by virtue of his experience. Goals against... save percentage... minutes played... total shots against: all were common phrases for this level of conversation.

Sprawled on the living room floor, this benign interaction provided a learning forum. The learning (or relearning) was that all conversation has purpose. Even the simplest, seemingly insignificant interactions about the weather, the latest town gossip, or the price of corn on the commodity market or at the supermarket have purpose. There was a clear purpose in the minds of my sons: to convey their truth about a given player in an attempt to convince the others about that player's ability. There was purpose in my words: to facilitate a constructive dialogue between two boisterous boys each convinced that his thought was the best.

So what of Christianity? Is there a specific purpose in Christian dialogue? Of course there are many possible purposes depending on the forum. But what about dialogue with people who have not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior? What is the purpose in that conversation? Is it simply to get to know them? Is it to learn of their need and care for their need? Is it to talk benignly about the weather or the latest town gossip?

No. Scripture gives a clear purpose for conversation with those who have not accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. When Jesus first sends out the twelve, he sends them out "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:2). Later, the resurrected Lord commands the disciples, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). Peter closes his Pentecost sermon by urging those who are listening to him to "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38). Paul states the purpose of his conversation with the Corinthians, saying, "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). From Jesus' first sending of the disciples to the church-planting accomplished by the Apostle Paul, the purpose of conversation is clear. The im-

*(continued on page 307)*

Christians may be uncertain how to relate to outsiders such as Abimelech. Certainly we embrace such persons in our missional understandings. Yet, it seems, we have not wanted to link God too directly or too positively with such outsiders, lest our missional goal be blunted or, perhaps, lest the advantages of being Christian seem too few. What shall we say about this?

God is present and active among outsiders; indeed they are surrounded by experiences of divine graciousness, whether they realize it or not. Even more, God takes the initiative and communicates with the outsider. Indeed, God engages the outsider in dialogue, and this bears fruit in the life of all concerned. The sharp, direct questioning on the part of this non-elect one counts with God. We may find it disconcerting that God engages such a one apart from the ministrations of the community of faith, but this story makes clear that God does not run a closed shop on who receives a word from God and who can engage it.

God also chooses outsiders to be teachers of the community of faith. Abimelech has a keen sense for truth and justice and moves in ways that properly discern the will of God in this situation. It is, of course, all too easy for us to generate Abraham-like suspicions of such unchosen folk. But we are encouraged to recognize that much of our daily life has been positively informed and undergirded by the wisdom, insight, imagination, and common sense of the Abimelechs among us. God can work through them to further God's work in the world, often independently of churchly words and deeds, and, sadly, often in spite of them.

God also raises up outsiders to be our confessors. God makes this move because of problems let loose on the world by the sins of the righteous. We may be uneasy that an outsider speaks a prophetic word to an insider, indeed an insider prophet, calling him to account for his behavior. How often are we willing to hear a critical word from the outsider as word of God to us? Given the unattractive face that the church often presents to the world, may it be that God is raising up even more Abimelechs from unexpected corners of our life to speak to us? Are we listening?

We pray for ears to hear God's word from unexpected places and unchosen people. We pray for wisdom and insight, informed more than we realize by those who are not persons of faith. We pray for courage, modeled more than we recognize by those visionary individuals among us who do not confess our creeds. We pray for compassion, and may God help us see that we often learn to be compassionate from those among us for whom Jesus is a stranger.

As we ponder our sins against our neighbor—not least against the outsiders among us—as we ponder our complicity in the tragedies of our world and our massive attempts to justify ourselves, hear with me this word of God from an old Canaanite friend: “You have done things that ought not be done; what were you thinking of that you did these things?” Lord, have mercy. ☩

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perative nature of these statements works to fulfill God's divine, eternal plan: "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth" (Eph 1:10).

It seems that much of Christianity has lost its sense of urgency for proclaiming the "word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (Eph 1:13). We have become comfortable with leaving conversations about similarities and differences as just that, conversations about similarities and differences. We have become immune to the significance of sin and the call to repentance. We have fallen prey to "plausible arguments" (Col 2:4) and subsequently have become "Christian secular humanists" or "Christian universalists." I was pained recently to hear a Christian preacher address truth in this way, "Let's talk about what is ultimately true for you, because what is ultimately true for me is not necessarily ultimately true for you."

The Christian proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Savior annihilates relative truth as it pertains to the one claiming to be the Son of God. Jesus says, "I am the truth" and "the truth shall set you free" (John 14:6; 8:32). Those claims are either of ultimate importance or of no importance. The gospel does not allow them to be considered as moderately important.

And if they are of ultimate importance, then Jesus himself bids us to share them with others. Yes, this sharing necessitates moving out of our comfort zone. Yes, it compels us to deal with our own sin and need for repentance. Yes, it demands that we acknowledge that many people are lost. Yes, it mandates that we recognize temporal and eternal consequences for those who do not accept Jesus as savior. Having wrestled with those issues and many more, the person with a heart of love does not sit idly by watching and waiting. The heart of Christian love uses conversation to build relationship. In the midst of relationship the final purpose of Christian/non-Christian dialogue is revealed: to proclaim Jesus as savior of the world and invite those who do not believe to receive him.

I find it interesting that the words conversion and conversation differ only in how they end. So it is with Christian dialogue. The difference between conversion and conversation is how the dialogue ends: Is the other invited to receive Jesus or not? And though we can never force a conversion of the heart (conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, after all), we are called to be "ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us." Christian conversation with the non-Christian has the natural purpose of conversion.

Back to the hockey cards. I guess that critiquing goalies and engaging in Christian/non-Christian dialogue aren't so far apart, after all. Finally, both are about one who "saves"! ⊕

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