

You may have missed the news but Ann Rice has quit Christianity. Rice had an outsized impact on our culture with her bestselling novels “Interview With a Vampire” and “Queen of the Damned.” But she put the nail in the coffin of that career when she proclaimed in 2002 that she would no longer write anything that wasn’t for Christ. But after eight years she again exhibited her talent for capturing the spotlight by releasing this statement:

I quit being a Christian. I'm out. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen.”

Those sound like the words of somebody who was never really experience the breadth or depth of Christianity. I’m sure from the outside, based on what makes headlines, some people think that all Christians can be painted with one brush. But on the inside we know that there is great diversity within the church – yes, you do have people who are anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-science – anti just about anything. But you also have people who want to be inclusive, are fully engaged with science, and always welcome meaningful dialogue with other faiths and other disciplines.

And it’s not just Christianity: In every major religion you will find those who are driven by a tribal instinct – whose view of religion is dominated by all the differences and dividing lines that let them know who is in and who is out. And you will find those who are driven by a universalist instinct – whose view of religion is dominated by areas of common practice and belief with others that lets them know the basis of our unity as children of one God.

The religious person driven by a tribal instinct does not care much for the person on the outside, but their greater wrath is reserved for those on the inside who have this universalist instinct, who seek common ground with those outside the tribe and actively work to built bridges where the tribalist wants only walls.

In New Milford, for example, the dividing line in terms of working together and even meeting together is not between Protestant, Catholic, and Jew – it’s between the evangelical and mainline churches. And in the bigger world, as much as from the outside it might appear that there is a united Islamic jihad against the west, there is a similar struggle within the Muslim community.

We know at the tribalist pole of Islam we have groups like Hamaas, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. I think, though, most of us are not familiar with the other end of the spectrum – with the universalist element - the Sufis, what one writer described as the Protestants of Islam. Sufis have a history of teachers who preached a pluralist view of Islam – a view that finds common ground with Christianity and other world faiths. These teachers often sound like prophets of the Old Testament and echo themes familiar in the Gospel: God is not found in the ritual of the mosque but at the gateway of the heart – not by judgment but by love.

Sufis are under severe attack by the Taliban and other Muslim fundamentalists. After a Saudi financed madrasa was built near a historic Sufi shrine in northwest Pakistan, visitors to the shrine were harassed

and the worship was disrupted by madrasa students shouting out accusations of idolatry and immorality. Finally, in March 2009, the shrine was dynamited and destroyed. Luckily no one was killed. But another bombing, this time at a Sufi shrine in Lahore, Pakistan, resulted in 42 deaths – that was just last month, July 2.

So as much as from the outside we might want to paint Islam with a single brush, just like the Christian faith, it is made up of many groups with different temperaments and widely varying agendas. The group that wants to build the Islamic center in lower Manhattan is Sufi, and as much as the project has generated resistance here, it also increases the hostility between the fundamentalists and the Sufis and makes them more of a target in Islamic lands.

We see that kind of hostility in the Gospel lesson today when the authorities confront Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. For those who wanted to know who was a Jew and who wasn't, the Sabbath was a critical dividing line. When the people had been uprooted from the land of Israel and sent in Exile to Babylon, they no longer had their temple or the city of Jerusalem at the center of their identity – but they did have their Sabbath, a completely portable symbol of their covenant with God and their cultural cohesion. It wasn't just a religious observance; it was identity politics, tribal politics. According to the book of Exodus "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death." (Exodus 31:15, NRSV)

It is especially offensive to the authorities that Jesus heals while teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Now the number of people who might have been at this synagogue service is not mentioned, but remember that Jesus has drawn crowds numbered in the thousands when he taught on the mountainside or by the lake, so it's safe to assume that this synagogue was overflowing with interested listeners. In front of this crowd It might have been good protocol for Jesus to have given special attention to the important people who were there that day – the wealthy patrons, the teachers, the leadership of the synagogue. If he did this, Luke has not included it in his telling of this story.

But what Luke does tell is that out of the crowd Jesus takes notice of one person – a woman, a bent over woman, a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. Unlike the story of the woman who presses through the crowds to touch the hem of Jesus garment and be healed, unlike the story of the woman who forcefully intercedes with Jesus for the healing of her child, there is no mention that this woman sought his attention or had any hope of her healing.

In my imagination she is off to the edge of the edge of the crowd, bent low, avoiding the eyes of the worshippers, hardly visible from the front where Jesus stands. She is trying not to be noticed. Many times people thrive on attention, they want to be noticed, they hunger for recognition. My mother told a story then when I was born her mother came over to see the new baby – what excitement. Then my brother, who was six years old at the time, pulled on grandmother's dress and said, "Nana, I'm still here!"

But there are other times we don't want to be noticed, don't want to be singled out. Maybe we don't feel or look our best on a particular day and all we want is to fade into the background. My guess is that a

woman who has been a cripple for eighteen years has probably gotten too much of the wrong kind of attention – that she has been stared at and judged, made to feel less than what she was when she stood up straight.

We don't know her name, and maybe nobody knew her name. When she walked from place to place people might have simply said, here comes that bent over woman. In place of a name they gave her a label. My guess is that she would not be welcome in certain circles, or made to feel at home even in this place of worship - but on this day, with so many people crowding in, she felt safety in numbers and slipped in to hear this preacher that everyone is talking about.

So she stands on the edge, bent over. After my eye surgery I was bent over for 10 days – and the worst part, aside from the pain in my back, was not looking people in the face when you talked to them. It's not that pleasant to keep your gaze to the ground, to see only the floor and people's feet. Even when you're with someone you don't feel with them – you feel isolated and different. So she cannot look up, she cannot see the face or the expression of this remarkable teacher – she can only see the feet of the crowd that surrounds her.

And out of this crowd Jesus notices the bent over woman; in front of everyone he turns his full attention to her – he turns away from the crowd, away from the dignitaries on the dais, away from the teaching of scripture. He calls her over and says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

You might think this would be a cause for general rejoicing. But no, the leader of the synagogue becomes indignant and says to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”

Perhaps the leader of the synagogue was already half ticked off because there was never such a big crowd when he was leading the services. Or maybe Jesus did not offer the proper acknowledgements to him when he stood to speak; or maybe he thought “of all the people here, why did Jesus take notice of this bent over woman?” But he won't admit his petty annoyances; he wraps his wounded pride in a religious garment by attacking Jesus and the woman for violating the tribal prohibition of working on the Sabbath.

Jesus does not mince words in reply: “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

In addition to healing her, Jesus bestows an honor on her - this one you call “the bent over woman” has now been given a name: daughter of Abraham. In all of scripture, by the way, she is the only one given this name. The authorities treated her as someone on the outside, but now Jesus, by calling her “daughter of Abraham” has put her at the head table, at the center of the family circle.

The healings of Jesus are acts of mercy, but they are also signs that he is who he says he is: the one sent by God in fulfillment of the promise. He brings a message not of tribe, sect, or nation, but of God, creator of every tribe, Lord of every nation. Jesus starts with his own people, not for the purpose of separating and elevating them above others, but with an invitation to humility and service. Jesus preaches a religion of the heart, not of the synagogue, church, or mosque. Those who were dominated by a tribal instinct, who thought religion was all about dividing lines that told them who was out and who was in, these are the people who could not hear his message – these are the people who conspired to have him killed.

In the crowd at the synagogue Jesus took notice of the bent over woman. He healed her ailment and called her daughter of Abraham, God's own child. Let us give thanks that the same love of God still reaches out to us today, takes notice of who we are, calls us by name, and offers us healing and blessing and hope.

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