



Complexity

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This past week, Revs. Elmarie and Scott Parker visited several of our congregations (Rock Prairie, Sun Valley, United Beloit, Kettle Moraine, and Covenant) to share about their ministries in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. The Parkers are Presbyterian co-workers and ecumenical relations partners. I caught up with them at the lunch hosted by Kettle Moraine United Presbyterian Church.

They described the massive displacement of Syrians and Iraqis due to ISIS-caused violence and the generous response of two of our global partners – the National Evangelical Synod of Syria & Lebanon (our Presbyterian equivalent) and the Middle East Council of Churches. They spoke of tiny churches opening their doors to displaced families or organizing schools for the refugee children. What surprised me the most, however, was the lack of absolutes.



We've become conditioned, I fear, to see everything as good or bad, right or wrong. If we don't agree on issues like immigration, economic development, national security, or education, then one of us must be pure evil – and we're sure to disagree on which one of us it is.

For the Parkers, however, the world did not present itself in absolutes. Though living and working in a region that contains all the triggers for polarization, Elmarie and Scott didn't share their stories in black and white. They let us see the problems and responses in their full radiant colors. We heard about the popularity of Americans, which gave us the chance to puff up with pride, but also the citizens' desire that we would not use our military might to create a power vacuum in our push for democracy. We learned that feelings about the Syrian government varied among Syrians, who weighed both their freedoms and their restrictions. Our ears were opened to a place of religious pluralism (Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Yazidi, Druze, and more) in which diversity is respected and valued, but we also heard about radicalization that seeks to destroy this harmony.

If any of us came expecting to hear stories that reinforced stereotypes, we were sorely disappointed. From my perspective, what we received instead was a breath of fresh air. It was confirmation of what we know deep inside: the world is complex. Relationships are complex; wars are complex; geopolitics are complex. Too often, we flatten our discourse into absolutes and miss the richness of that complexity. Too often, we use labels to short-cut critical analysis. Am I alone in getting aggravated when labeled by someone who barely knows me?

Don't get me wrong: I'm all for naming evil when it exists and exposing it to scrutiny and criticism. The danger lies in doing this as our default -- when we take what we know intuitively to be a complex issue and superficially reduce it to either good or bad, right or wrong.

Jesus made friends with thieves, tax collectors, and adulterers. He lauded foreigners and outsiders. He did not, however, tolerate hypocrites well. When the law or societal norms were used to cursorily judge people as good or bad, right or wrong, Jesus corrected their thinking and ruined their neatly constructed absolutes. I suspect our world is even more complex now, giving not only continued relevance to Jesus' teaching, but urgency. May we cast off labels and absolutes for the complexity of being made uniquely and wonderfully in the image of God.