INTERFAITH INSIGHT

How big is my family?

Religion can show how we are all different but interconnected

Douglas Kindschi *director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

"I was born into a community of radical love," writes Linda Sarsour, co-chair of the 2017 Women's March and former executive director of the Arab-American Association of New York. She continues, "It echoed through my home and the streets of my neighborhood. Sunset Park was a noisy, happy place, filled with Palestinian, Dominican, Mexican, Ecuadoran and Honduran families. A place where families and neighbors were one in the same. You did for your neighbor just as you would do for an immediate family member. ... If I hadn't grown up believing that my neighbors are my family, I may not have cared, but it was in my nature to care about all these groups of people."

Healthy families do not always agree, but they do care for one another. How big can our family sense be? Is it possible to consider all of humanity as a human family?

Ted Hiebert, former professor of Old Testament at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, writes about how the biblical writers in the book of Genesis claim a breadth of family understanding that extends to all people. Last month, I wrote about his recently published book, "The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World."

Our understanding of difference is critical in these days of racial discrimination, fear of immigrants and refugees, political polarization, and even hate. Religious differences as well contribute to anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attitudes and actions.

In the first chapter of Hiebert's book, he writes that the understanding of difference begins with the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel. He understands this short, nine-verse story as one of an early people seeking to create and preserve their own cultural identity. It is, he writes, "an important human experience — the need for meaning, belonging, and identity that can only come from being a member of a common cultural tradition." But then the story continues by noting that while people sought to construct a single culture, God responds by introducing difference through multiple languages and multiple cultures. Thus different cultures and identities are a part of God's plan for diversity. Hiebert concludes, "Difference is God's idea."

Hiebert begins his second chapter with the quotation from Sarsour about neighbors as family, and then addresses how the biblical writers understand family. The Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths each refer to Abraham as they trace the beginning of their spiritual families. Hiebert writes that we should rather look to Noah to understand the different cultures and identities as a part of a single family story. It is the language of family, kinship and relationships that the Genesis authors use to describe how we are to understand our own identity along with the diversity of other identities and cultures. He refers to the Genesis passages as constructing "Israel's great family tree."

If we only trace back to Abraham, we miss much of the larger family tree that goes back to the new beginning with Noah following the flood. The Genesis authors chose Noah as the founding ancestor, providing them and us a broader and constructive way to view the whole world in familial terms.

With Noah and the flood, everything begins anew, as is the case with other ancient flood traditions. Following the flood, the biblical writers describe the various family branches as they report the genealogies, not just the single line from father to eldest son. In this way, they recognize the relationship to other branches and affirm the coherence of the whole human family.

In the flood story, the world has become thoroughly evil, but Noah is described as obedient and righteous and as one who finds favor in God's eyes. He builds an altar, establishes religious rituals and is portrayed as the moral turning point in the Genesis story. God provides commandments for Noah prohibiting violence, the consuming of blood and murder. Jewish tradition refers to seven Noahide laws or commandments required of all persons, not just Jews.

Noah is also the beginning of specific blessings from God. Following the flood, God reverses the earlier curse on the soil and guarantees stable agricultural seasons, saying, "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:22) The biblical story continues with God's blessing that they should be fruitful and multiply, and establishes a covenant with Noah saying, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals and every animal of the earth with you ... never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood." (Genesis 9:9-11)

This blessing for all of Noah's descendants is inclusive of all people of the world, placing all ethnic identities within the human family. Hiebert summarizes, "Noah is thus a powerful image for understanding the relationship between identity and difference, between a single ethnicity ... and all the other distinctive cultures." It is accomplished by the image and language of family. He continues, "So the fundamental structure in the world underlying all its differences is the structure of relatedness. ... Difference is real but always related in some way to one's own identity."

From our Muslim neighbors and friends, we learn of a similar affirmation of inclusiveness in the diversity of humankind. The Quran states, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you." (49:13) We are different, but related, and with the call to do what is right.

May the words from our Scriptures, including the Noah story, be our guide as we affirm our various cultural identities, while always being sensitive to and inclusive of our relatedness to all in the human family.

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An interior scene inside Noah's Ark, part of the Ark Encounter exhibit in Williamstown, Kentucky. Columnist Douglas Kindschi says the story of Noah illustrates that humanity is a family. *AdvanceLocal files*

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>
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