

A Bigger Table
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Micah 4:3-5
Acts 17:22-28

October 5, 2008
Binkley Baptist Church

World Communion Sunday has traditionally been a day to celebrate the diverse expressions of Christianity around the world. It is a day for remembering our unity around the global communion table, for celebrating our spiritual connections as followers of Jesus. I applaud the ecumenical nature of World Communion Sunday; it makes me feel closer to my brothers and sisters in many different lands. However, I believe that we need to expand our thinking of world communion and move from the idea of ecumenism to interfaith dialogue. What is needed now more than ever in this post 9/11 world is a sense of our spiritual connection to people of all faiths and religions.

Someone once declared there were four easy rules for distinguishing people of different faith traditions:

1. Muslims do not recognize Jews as God's chosen people.
2. Jews do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah.
3. Protestants do not recognize the Pope as the leader of the Christian World.
4. Baptists do not recognize each other at the liquor store.

Well, maybe that last line is not so true for folks at Binkley, but I grew up in some Baptist churches where it was! And those same churches of my early years would also have declared that only Christians, and especially Baptists, are right and that people of any other religious persuasion were not only wrong, but headed for eternal damnation.

Religious intolerance. Where does it come from? Many think that it stems from a firmly held belief that MY truth is the whole truth, that there can be only one way of seeing God.

A few years ago, Dr. Dharampal Singh, a member of the Sikh community, was the invited speaker for the adult class at my home church in Raleigh. He told us about the Sikh religion and shared stories from his own life. Dharampal told me that he enjoys coming to other religious communities because he believes in building bridges between people of different faiths. He is one who does not presume to have the whole truth. While he was with us, he told the following story, which is not Sikh, but was written by the Sufi Muslim poet, Rumi, hundreds of years ago:

*Some Hindus have an elephant to show.
No one here has ever seen an elephant.
They bring it at night to a dark room.*

*One by one, we go in the dark and come out
Saying how we experience the animal.*

*One of us happens to touch the trunk.
"A water-pipe kind of creature."
Another, the ear, "A very strong, always moving
Back and forth, fan-animal."*

*Another, the leg. "I find it still,
Like a column on a temple."
Another touches the curved back.
"A leathery throne."*

*Another, the cleverest, feels the tusk.
"A rounded sword made of porcelain."
He is proud of his description.*

*Each of us touches one place
And understands the whole in that way.
The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark
Are how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.*

*If each of us held a candle there,
And if we went in together, we could see it.*

(Barks, The Essential Rumi, 1995, p. 252.)

"If each of us held a candle, and if we went in together", we could see a much larger truth, a much bigger God. For God does not fit in our religious boxes. With our own particular cultural and religious backgrounds, we can only describe a fraction of this holiness.

Even with our best efforts, we are touching only in one place, fingers feeling in the dark. Paul says, "Now we see through a glass darkly." It is a warning that we don't have the whole picture. To give our fraction of truth the status of the whole is not only misleading, it is dangerous. Religion is created by a human hunger for the Holy. And so, all religions are creations of humans. They are our attempts to connect with the Divine Reality which is God. And this is good.

Religion also implies the use of stories and rituals. These can be wonderful vehicles for catching glimpses of God.... "points of intersection between Creator and creature", as Aldous Huxley says.

But, they can also be impediments. When particular rituals, stories, and ways of talking about God become too entrenched, too magnified, and too much an end in themselves, then they have lost their magic. The forms, which were there to help point the way to a God who is the ground of all Being, have now become wrongly identified with that God and are seen as the **only** way to experience this holiness.

Huxley reminds us that "almost all the Hebrew prophets were opposed to ritualism. 'Rend your hearts and not your garments', they say. God tells the people, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' 'I hate, I despise your feasts; I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.' And yet, in spite of this fact... the Temple at Jerusalem continued to be... the centre of a religion of rites, ceremonials and blood sacrifice."

"What the Jews did in spite of their prophets," says Huxley, "Christians have done in spite of Christ. The Christ of the Gospels is a preacher and not a dispenser of sacraments or performer of rites; he speaks against vain repetitions; he insists on the supreme importance of (love); he has no use for sacrifices and not much use for the Temple. But this did not prevent historic Christianity from going its own, all too human way." (*Parabola, vii, 3, p. 71*).

Like its older cousin, Judaism, and younger cousin, Islam, Christianity began to confuse religious forms and messengers with the much bigger Divine Reality that is God. The sacred texts of all three religions contain injunctions that are very difficult to reconcile with the inclusive views of pluralism: Yahweh's demand that we put no other gods before Him; Jesus' claim, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me;" and Mohammed's revelation that "There is no god but Allah; and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah."

These assertions, that there is a unique, exclusionary God and only one path to salvation, make nonsense of a concept of pluralism. But this is because we take these sayings literally and misunderstand their context.

Clay Nelson, an Anglican priest in New Zealand, points out that many of the strict, exclusionary sayings in scriptures must be seen through the lens of history, a history which shows us a tribe or group trying to protect and insulate itself from other tribes or religious groups. The writers of the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were human beings who were fearful of neighbors who were different, and they wanted to ensure the survival of their own. And so, they attempted to protect their own beliefs and practices by clothing them with the trappings of absolute Truth and by creating additional sacred writings which pronounced all other religions as misguided or even evil. (*Clay Nelson, Anglican Priest, St. Matthew- in- the- city, Auckland, New Zealand, Sermon, May 12, 2007*)

But, if we can get past these problematic texts, these exclusionary sayings, and read them in light of their historical context, then we can see the bigger themes of compassion and reverence and forgiveness that are common to all three religions, and many others as well.

Likewise, if we can get past our tendency to idolize our own particular set of religious forms and rituals, if we can ask people of other spiritual traditions to go with us into the dark room and help us describe the elephant, then we get closer to that holy Presence, that “Unknown God” to which the people of Athens in their spiritual honesty had built an altar.

In the story Maria read from Acts today, we see that Paul had the good sense to speak to the Athenians with a vocabulary they knew, acknowledging the universal nature of the God they all held in common. Paul says to them, “As indeed some of your own writers have said: ‘We are all God’s offspring.’”

Paul preaches about a God who is not contained in shrines made by human hands, a God who created all the different peoples of the earth with a desire to seek the holy, who lets them feel their way toward this holiness, and helps them find the One who is not far from any of us, the Presence in whom we live and move and have our being.

This God is bigger than the reaches of thought. As the poet Wordsworth says, this Holy One is:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man...
(Wordsworth's, "Tintern Abbey")

How do we speak of such a presence? Words can never be adequate. And yet, they are all we have. It is not our right to judge another's faith by his or her choice of words.

The Muslim mystic Rumi tells the story of Moses and a Shepherd to illustrate the respect we must have for other people’s images of the divine.

One day, the story goes, Moses overheard a shepherd talking familiarly with God: he wanted to help God, wherever he was- wash his clothes, pick the lice off, kiss his hands and feet. Moses was horrified. The Shepherd was talking to the Creator of the Universe as though he were speaking to his uncle!

Moses rebuked the Shepherd, but God rebuked Moses. There are no “correct” ways of talking about God: instead, God looks into the heart to see if there is humility and burning compassion.
(Armstrong, The History of God, p. 241)

In Rumi’s story, God says to Moses:

You have separated me from one of my own. Did you come

as a Prophet to unite, or to sever?
I have given each being a separate and unique way
of seeing and knowing and saying that knowledge.
What seems wrong to you is right for him
What is poison to one is honey to someone else.
(The Essential Rumi, p. 166.)

We live in an imperfect world where religious language is used to create divisions, justify violence, and oppress others. But we also live in a world where there are certain people who come closer than others in embodying the divine image within us all. These are people who can see beyond the ritual to the truth... who know what their purpose is in life. These are the great ones who know that God asks only that we act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly.

Jesus, Ghandi, the Buddha. There have been people in every generation in every part of the world who have risen up like stars in the night and shown the rest of us more clearly the nature of God. They are more transparent than we. The Divine light shines more brightly through them.

God's light is One, a single beam. But it passes through a glass prism ... the prism of our human minds, our human cultures, our religions, and the light breaks into a spectrum of colors. Still, the colors are all aspects of one light. For red to fight with yellow, for blue to seek to convert green, for purple to scoff at orange, this would be sin.

Religious pluralism celebrates the colors of many diverse spiritual traditions. It doesn't require that we give up the beloved rituals and practices of our own faith.

Most religious people do choose to attach themselves to one particular faith. I have chosen the color that is Christianity, and I do so because, for me, Jesus was truly a supreme model of living with integrity and compassion, of working for justice, and of knowing the God within oneself and in others. I do so because I have grown up in the United States, in a western culture, in a family with long ties to the Christian church.

For me, the stories and rituals of the Christian faith are points of intersection with the holy. They help me glimpse beyond the dark glass and feel my way toward the Loving Presence that is God .

But I don't take the rituals, the practices, or the texts of Christianity to **be** God. I don't believe that Jesus himself claimed to be identical to God. What his followers chose to say about him after he died is a product of many things: a unique historical context, political oppression by other groups, hidden struggles for power.

Therefore, I do not take all Biblical writings about Jesus literally. But, I do take Jesus seriously. I believe he points a way to God by embodying in an extraordinary way the radical, embracing

love which grounds and surrounds all of us. He is my glass, my window to a holy Mystery that is much more than we can comprehend.

Religious tolerance is not only possible, it is absolutely necessary, even as we embrace our own faith traditions. It is what leads to peace, to hammering swords into plows and spears into pruning knives. It is what enlarges the table so that everyone can sit together.

I am a Christian, but I also choose to open my eyes to the colors of other faiths. The rainbow hues of God's Light shine out from people of many religions and cultures. And so, I close with a Sikh blessing that was given to me by my friend Dharampal:

Char di kala. He speaks it like petals opening on a rose:

“May you live with ever-blooming, ever expanding spiritual joy.”

AMEN.