

“Why We Should Seek Interfaith Relations”
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St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
4th Sunday of Easter, “Good Shepherd Sunday”
John 10:22-30
April 17, 2016

For Roman Catholics and most Protestant churches in the United States, every 4th Sunday of the Easter season is called “Good Shepherd Sunday”, after the passage from the Gospel of John chapter 10, in which Christ is described as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. This year we heard a final portion of Jesus’ teaching on being the Good Shepherd. In fact, all the scripture lessons that you have heard this morning were appointed so that Christians would be inspired to follow Jesus as the “good shepherd” of believers in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Messiah. Neither Stephanie nor I chose these lessons today. They are part of a 3-year lectionary cycle that was developed by an ecumenical group of biblical scholars, representation by the USCCB and several American Protestant churches. So today’s readings were not intended to help us discuss interfaith relations, and they might even be considered “problematic” in interfaith dialogue.

So my question for us today is, “How can Christians nurture our Christian faith and identity, and yet *not* claim exclusive access to God, the one and the same God, worshiped by other faith traditions? How can we as Christians, or as Jews, or as Muslims, be thoroughly convinced by our own faith tradition, and yet be passionately respectful and supportive of other faith traditions? And why *should* we seek interfaith relationships? These are questions that I have asked myself for over 20 years ago, and continue to ask others as the Ecumenical and Interreligious Officer for the Episcopal diocese of Washington.

I learned that the answers to most of these questions are not a matter of study, or increasing knowledge of other faith traditions. Although ignorance is a precursor to prejudice and misunderstanding between people, developing mutually respectful interfaith relations is not a matter of the head, alone. You can be a student of world religions for many reasons, and that knowledge does not necessarily lead you to respect or support of another faith tradition. Yes, it is helpful to know about the faith traditions of our neighbors, co-workers, employees, teachers, students, and clients, but the question of “*Why* seek interfaith **relationships**?” is answered by the heart, by one’s own faith, and for Christians, actually by the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus, who was a 1st C. Jew, was followed by Jews and non-Jews because of his compassionate healing of the sick, and including the poor, the outcast and sinners among his followers. Because he crossed cultural and religious boundaries to be in relationship with some *unseemly* people, he was often challenged by the Jewish authorities of his day about his knowledge of the Jewish Law - the Torah. Once, a lawyer asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” “Jesus said to him, ‘**You shall love**

the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39) Jesus was quoting the affirmation of Jewish faith, called the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and the Golden Rule found in Leviticus 19:18.

The Jewish youth from Adat Shalom, who are visiting with us today, may be surprised to hear that Christians also believe the faith stated in the Shema and the commandments in Leviticus about loving our neighbor as ourselves. "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. ... And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Both Jews and Christians are believers in the One God, who created us all, and we are both commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. The foundation of interfaith relations begins with the acknowledgement that we worship the one, the same and the only God, although we worship on different days of the week and we use different words to name God. Jewish people do not speak the name of God *aloud*, and so they use Adonai (Master or Lord) or HaShem (the name) in their prayers. And Muslims use the Arabic word for God, Allah. And the essence of the Golden Rule is found in every world religion. You should have received a handout with the Golden Rule as expressed in 13 world religions. Reflecting on this list has reaffirmed my conviction that there is one God, who has communicated with different groups of people, in different parts of the world, over thousands of year, and these groups recorded their religious experiences and guiding principles, such as love your neighbor as yourself and "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

On another occasion recorded in the gospels, a different lawyer asked Jesus to clarify his understanding of the commandment to ***"love your neighbor"***. He said to Jesus, but, ***"who is my neighbor?"***. Jesus answered with a parable about a man who was robbed, beaten and left in a ditch along the side of a road. Two men passed by the wounded man, one after another, until a third man, a Samaritan, who was moved with compassion, stopped and bandaged the man's wounds. Then he put the wounded man on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. Then Jesus asked the lawyer, 'Which of these three men, ***acted as a neighbor to the man*** who fell into the hands of the robbers?' The lawyer answered, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Jesus told this, now famous Parable of the Good Samaritan, to show the lawyer and to show us, that in order to be a good neighbor, we must have compassion on anyone and everyone, even those outside of our faith community. Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that ***all people are our neighbors, all people are children of God*** and, thus, we should show love and compassion to our non-Christian neighbors as much as we have for our Christian neighbors. ***The sin that separates us from God and our neighbor can be our reluctance or refusal to know and care for someone of a faith tradition other than our own; to be cold hearted, mean-spirited, and judgmental of our neighbors.***

If you are of my generation, "Baby-boomers" born between 1946 and 1964, your priest, or pastor, or rabbi probably never encouraged you, to be in a relationship, as an individual or as a congregation, with another faith tradition. Most Christian congregations didn't engage in activities with a neighboring church, a neighboring synagogue, and there may not have been a mosque in your town. Until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Roman Catholics were not permitted to attend Protestant worship services. Jewish kids were taught not to visit a

church. Protestants were expected to marry Protestants, Roman Catholics should marry Roman Catholics, Jews should marry Jews, etc. When I attended seminary in 1984-1988, we studied Christian history, Christian liturgy, Christian Ethics, but there were no courses on other faith traditions.

Why and how have I become so involved in interfaith relations? I was inspired to learn about other world religions on my own. The timing is a bit of a mystery to me, but in the summer of 2000, I felt moved to take an intensive 10-day course on interfaith relations at Hartford Seminary, where as imams, rabbis and Christian clergy, we studied together, ate and talked together. In that course, I got to know some amazing people and began to sense that God was doing a new thing, and we were each being called into it. It was a prophetic insight that we all shared. God was guiding us all to “Love our neighbor as ourselves” and to answer the lawyers question, “***who is my neighbor?***”.

When I returned to my parish, we, as congregations, participated quarterly local interfaith dialogues with the rabbi, imam and other Christian clergy in the town. At each gathering we shared our hopes and concerns for our local town and its residents. From the local imam, I learned a verse from the Quran, Sura 49:13, that instructs Muslims, “O mankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the one who is most righteous of you.” And then, within weeks, there were terrorist attacks on NYC and Washington, DC on Sept. 11, 2001. Although most of the Muslims had lived in the town for 10 or 20 years, they were suddenly under suspicion. Muslim residents lost connection with long-time friends and their children were afraid to attend school. But because the local clergy and congregations already knew each other, the synagogue and Christian churches responded with compassion to the Muslims in the town. We had interfaith Adult Forums on the Sunday after 9/11, which changed the hearts of those who were suddenly afraid of their neighbors. We took care of our Muslim neighbors who were wounded by prejudice.

Interfaith relations have changed dramatically since 9/11. Our understanding of who is our neighbor has changed, and our neighborhoods have changed. We live and work with people of many different faith traditions, and it has become acceptable to ask politely and respectfully about the religious practices of our neighbors and friends. There are groups of “dinner dialogues” where neighbors of different faiths meet for dinner with the intention of sharing how we each practice our faith tradition. Interfaith organizations, dialogues, roundtables and study group have developed everywhere. World religions are now taught in Episcopal seminaries, public and private schools and in local adult continuing education classes at OASIS and OSHER. The Episcopal Church’s official statement is that “ Interreligious encounter and dialogue is an invitation to discover God’s presence and the activity of the Spirit in people of other religious traditions.”

And lastly, ***Why am I so involved in interfaith dialogues and interfaith organizations?*** Because I have discovered, to my joy, that when we engage in discussion about my Christian faith with someone of another faith tradition, my own faith is deepened, not diminished. Ongoing interfaith dialogues do not cause us to question or change our faith tradition, but our understanding of God’s mission is broadened. This may be surprising to hear, but I have become a better priest, a better Christian and a better neighbor because I have had so

many opportunities for me *to listen* to others describe their faith tradition and for me *to respond* to questions from others about my own faith. When I share my Christian faith with someone of another faith tradition, I can't use Christian jargon and have to speak from my personal understanding. Suddenly I hear myself saying what is truly in my heart. This encourages the other person to share their faith, deeply from their heart. And this dynamic process has been true for everyone I know who is involved in interfaith relations. We learn to see the image of God in each others' eyes. No one acts as if they are right and the others are wrong. As Verna Dozier is known to have said, **"The power of darkness is our need to be right."** Light and love are found in these interfaith dialogues. We become better human beings when ***we "love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind" and "Love our neighbor as ourself"***.

Did you know that the population of Montgomery County has doubled in the past 35 years? In 1980, there were 580,000 to 1.1 Million in 2015. And, if you have lived here for more than ten years, you have probably noticed the increasing diversity of our neighbor's faith traditions and ethnic backgrounds. As of 2015, 1/3 of MoCo is foreign-born. In Montgomery County alone, there are 700 faith communities, including 37 Roman Catholic parishes, 36 Jewish congregations, 25 Episcopal churches, 10 Hindu mission centers, 8 Muslim community centers or mosques, 7 Latter-Day Saints chapels, 4 Sikh Gurdwaras, 6 Buddhist temples, and many other Protestant congregations.

Toward Our Mutual Flourishing - ECUSA statement

As Episcopalians, we insist on the centrality of our baptismal vow to recognize the image of God in all human beings, and treat each one with full dignity. If we believe that God created human beings, then people of every generation, everywhere on earth are children of God, regardless of their faith tradition. So in our Baptismal Covenant, we promise to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being." No qualifiers, not to strive for justice and respect for Christians, but for all people.

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Judaism also teaches the Jews to "repair the world" - Tikkun olam.

"Tikkun olam" (literally, "world repair") has come to connote social action and the pursuit of social justice. The phrase has origins in the Mishnah (the body of classical rabbinic teachings codified circa 200 CE) and in Lurianic kabbalah, a major strand of Jewish mysticism originating with the work of the 16th-century kabbalist, Isaac Luria.

Islam also teaches charity and social justice

Giving Zakat = Support of the Needy is one of the five pillars of Islam. Since all things belong to God, wealth is held by human beings in trust. The original meaning of the word zakat is both 'purification' and 'growth.' Giving zakat means 'giving a specified percentage on certain properties to certain classes of needy people.'

The Nicene Creed begins, "I, or We, believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, creator of heaven and earth". The creed is a profession of faith used in Sunday worship services throughout the Christian world. The Nicene Creed gets its name from the original version

adopted at the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, (present day, Iznik, Turkey) in 325 CE. This council was the first effort to attain theological consensus in the church through out the Roman Empire through an assembly of Bishops brought together by Constantine the Great, the first Roman emperor to claim conversion to Christianity, representing all of Christendom.

Jews and Muslims also believe in the oneness of God. We are all monotheists and believe in only one God exists, and we all worship the one and the same God.

The Shema is the creed of Judaism. Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

Shema Yisrael "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

"Hear, O Israel" are the first two words of a section of the Torah encapsulating the monotheistic essence of Judaism. Its recitation twice daily (morning and evening) is a biblical commandment. In addition, it is recited before retiring for the night, as well as in the candle lighting service on Shabbat. Indeed, this succinct statement has become so central to the Jewish people that it is the climax of the final prayer on Yom Kippur, and is traditionally a Jew's last words on earth.

The Shahada is the creed of Islam. "La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasoolu Allah."

The Arabic creed translates to: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger." The Shahada is divided into two parts: the first—"There is no god but Allah"—is a confession of the oneness of God upon which all Islamic theology is based. The second—"Muhammad is [God's] messenger"—confesses the belief in the prophethood of Muhammad, from which comes Islam's complete ethical code. The testimony of faith is the first and most important pillar of Islam. The word "Shahada" comes from the verb shahida, meaning "he testifies" or "he bears witness." In reciting the Shahada, a Muslim bears witness that Allah is the only true god, and that Muhammad is Allah's prophet. In fact, Muslims hold that, belief in the content of the Shahada is the foremost distinguishing characteristic that defines a Muslim as a Muslim. Allah is the Arabic word for God. Palestinian and Arab Christians also pray in Arabic and use "allah" to refer to God.