



SUNDAY SERMON

Love One Another ~ the Rest is Gloss

I am a lifelong Episcopalian. My father is a priest. I grew up in the church and was nursed on the sacraments and scriptures of our Christian faith. College and travel abroad awakened my curiosity to understand and experience other faiths. Living in Kyoto, immersed in the practice of Zen Buddhism, I had my first experiences of the presence of God in prayer – the God of my Christian upbringing. When I went to seminary and embarked upon ordained ministry, I thought it best to put aside my interest in other religions.

But some years ago, I found myself once again restless, intrigued, drawn out to explore; to taste and see. On sabbatical in northern India, following a ten-day silent Buddhist retreat where I received these lotus prayer beads blessed by the Dalai Lama, I went on pilgrimage to a sacred Hindu mountain in the Himalayas. A Christian priest on pilgrimage with Hindus, praying with Buddhist prayer beads, reciting my own Christian mantra – “Maranatha” – an Aramaic word, that means “come”; come, Lord Jesus, come. The further my wanderings, the deeper my faith in Christ, and the greater my love of God.

As revealed in the Book of Acts, since the earliest days of the church, we have wondered what it means to be in or out of the community of the faithful. For the most part, we’ve been clear that God’s love and promise of salvation is generous, perchance even limitless. But many treatises and much blood has been required as we debate how that love shall be mediated and meted out – by whom and to whom – and what shall be required of each. Soon after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the apostle Peter and others too, were startled by revelations of the Spirit that called upon them to embrace any and all, regardless of their lineage, faith, or formal initiation.

If you think about it, it’s odd that we’ve devoted so much energy to delineating the boundaries, drawing lines that include and exclude. Jesus was crystal clear, as he is in his parting words to his disciples in today’s Gospel: Love one another. Love one another. Everything else is human gloss. Sadly, our focus on difference often leads to action both sinful and tragic. I’m not championing color blindness or some rose-hued Pollyanna. There is beauty, grace, and vitality to be found in our difference. I’m suggesting we stick to the basics and imagine that Jesus actually meant the things he said: Love one another. The effort and attention given to differentiate and divide is a human project – and often sinful at that; whereas God’s preference is ever for integration, wholeness and fullness.

As my Himalayan pilgrimage drew to a close, Diana Eck, a Christian professor of Hinduism and director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, gave me language to understand my experience. In her book, *Encountering God*, Eck posits that each person of faith is somewhere on a spectrum as to how we view those of differing faiths – ranging from exclusivist to inclusivist to pluralist.

Continued

DATE

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May. 6, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

VERSE

John 15:9-17

At one extreme are those of us who say that our path is the only true path to salvation, that if you do not believe in the God of our belief, then, sadly, you will fry in hell – or some equivalent thereof. In the inclusivist middle, where a great many well-meaning people of faith reside, are those who respect the traditions and beliefs of others, and believe that our faith is the culmination of all others, that the God of our own faith is somehow gracious enough, loving and powerful, and will in the end, gather us all in one. Which is generous if one is offering, a bit patronizing if one is on the receiving end of that largesse.

At the other extreme, in a posture of religious pluralism, one may be deeply devoted to our God, our tradition and path, and, at the same time, acknowledge that on a really good day, I can only apprehend a glimpse, a whisper, of the sacred or the fullness of God. And if with us, so too with others. That glimpse and whisper fuel a holy yearning – to seek and find the holy – at home, within, in you, in them, in this house of prayer, or that mountain stream, or temple, mosque, gurdwara, or shrine. The pluralist resides within his or her own tradition, yet actively seeks the holy wherever it may be found. Love one another.

In my own experience, I have been surprised to find that the more time I spend learning and practicing the ways of others, the more clearly and deeply I follow and seek the love of God in Christ. Jesus calls and I follow. For me, the call to love one another begins and ends in Christian community, with our Holy Scriptures, the sacraments of the church, the community of the faithful gathered and sent – a blessing to the world.

But did Jesus not tell us to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? And do we not see Peter doing precisely this? Yes, indeed. But it was Peter's task – as it is ours – to do one thing: to bear witness to the love of God within us. You are beloved of God – before all things and beyond all time. You have been blessed with enough awareness of that calling to make your way here today and to practice your life in Christ, however fulsome or halting that may sometimes be. It is enough. You have faith enough to bear witness to Christ. Let others see and hear. Let others experience the love you have to give; love one another. God will take it from there.

Differentiation is the lens and language of our day; divide, divide again, and conquer. A perpetual spiral, unless we step back and embrace a simpler truth – that in God we are one. Today, love one another. Amen.