

## Transforming the World One Dream at a Time

### INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

<http://www.thewaytohappiness.org/thewaytohappiness/precepts/respet-the-religious-beliefs-of-others.html>.

During March, April and May, there have been numerous worldwide conferences, programs and gatherings dedicated to raising awareness of pluralism, a term used in philosophy, meaning “doctrine of multiplicity,” the ideology that there is not one consistent means of approaching truths about the world, but rather many. Within religion, pluralism acknowledges that there are a variety of ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life all of which offer diverse resources of wisdom. It calls us to move beyond differences to creating a better world through understanding, action and respect and encourages dialogue to alleviate fear, hostility and divisiveness arising from ignorance.

I commend all of us for our faith and understanding that as Christians, while we affirm the teachings of Jesus, we are aware of and open to the traditions of other faiths. Sadly, the unsettling and frightening reality is the escalating intolerance between religions that is evidenced by the almost weekly reports of yet another house of worship coming under attack, resulting in the death of innocent worshippers.

In his article, ‘Religious violence is on the rise,’ Robert Muggah writes, “Religious violence is undergoing a revival. The past decade has witnessed a sharp increase in violent sectarianism or religious tensions. According to the Pew (Research Centre), in 2018, more than a quarter of the world’s countries experienced a high incidence of hostilities motivated by religious hatred, mob violence related to religious, terrorism and harassment of women for violating religious codes. The spike in religious violence is global and affects virtually every religious group.”

In an April 19, 2019 NBC article Senator Kirsten Gillibrand wrote that attacks on houses of worship have become an epidemic that must end. In response to the attack on the Chabad Synagogue in Poway near San Diego, Gillibrand said, “Something is fundamentally broken in our society when any house of worship is made unsafe by gun violence and hate - again and again and again.”

In March, the Associated Press published an article entitled ‘From Sanctuaries to Soft Targets: House of worship grapple with the threat of attacks.’ “For many, houses of worship are sanctuaries where congregants bond with their shared sense of faith and community. The recent attacks have made some question whether houses of worship have turned into targets, losing some of their sense of sacredness.” In April, 290 Buddhist worshippers were killed in Sri Lanka. Ten synagogues have come under attack over the last years. Twenty-seven mosques have been targets over the past 18 years with three strikes in May alone. Everyday eleven Christians are killed while

attending worship and many Sikhs, often mistaken for Muslims, have died as they worshipped.

The President of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder, said, "it is inconceivable that, yet again, innocent people have been targeted simply for their religion and for choosing to attend a place of worship. People of all faiths must stand together and declare that we will never tolerate such hatred."

Pluralism invites faith communities to stand against the violence by promoting justice, compassion, open-mindedness and, by upholding the gold rule that is the core value in all faiths, "to treat others as you would want to be treated." Jesus taught that in the kingdom of God, no one should live in distress, dread, or apprehension of the other under one God. This vision was repeated and upheld by several other great spiritual reformers, including Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Zarathustra, Gandhi and Bahauallah.

When I read the lectionary readings for this Sunday, there could not have been better suggestions of scripture for this morning's theme. After the anthem Eldon will read from the Acts of the Apostles a compelling story that has an urgent message for our time about dismantling the walls of distinction and from the Gospel of John and book of John, we hear a description God's love.

The book of Acts articulates the story of the rise of the ancient Christian church and the increasing tensions within the church around the inclusion of Gentiles because most of the attendees were Judaic-Christians. Peter is featured in the story we heard.

Peter has learned about open-mindedness, acceptance and love from Jesus. He was not a natural learner. He doubted and denied, he argued and he ran in fear. However, the message of Jesus stayed with him and became a dominant focus in his ministry.

Peter is challenged by the Jewish-Christians for including Gentiles, people deemed unclean because they were uncircumcised. They did not like that Peter was hanging out with the wrong crowd. Peter addresses their prejudice by sharing a dream he had after the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius whose family had been welcomed into the faith.

Peter tells how he was tired and hungry and fell into a trance. He had a dream in which he saw something like a large sheet coming from the heavens and upon the cloth were the four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. A voice instructs him to kill and eat. Peter is shocked; the meat on the cloth was unclean according to Jewish law. Peter has never eaten unclean food because to do so would violate the purity codes of the Hebrew faith. The purity codes are a long list of rules of what to wear, whom to talk to, food that you could or could not eat, places you could not go and so forth. There is nothing wrong with rules and doctrine, however, these can be damaging when taken to the extreme or perverted, thus encouraging behaviour, attitudes and actions that can lead to hatred and violence.

Three times this interchange between Peter and God occurs, bringing into question the purity codes and then the voice declares that it is not up to Peter to decide what is clean or unclean.

Peter understands the message of his dream. He tells his Jewish brothers the story of how the Holy Spirit descended on the household of Cornelius, a Gentile, and Peter knew at that moment that God does not make distinctions between Jew and Gentile. All are included in the faith.

The narrator of this story is counselling the founding Christian churches that they were not “to hinder God” through their distinctions and beliefs but rather to understand that God was working in a new way. In the church of God there are no distinctions between people.

There are a few important things to note in this story: the cloth and food harken back to Jesus’ sharing of meals with all sorts of people. The voice spoke three times because sometimes we need to hear the message over and over before we get it. There were six observers of the conversion of Cornelius so the story could be validated. It is vital for everyone to hear the message.

What is the message? According to Walter Brueggemann, it is “that there are no distinctions; there is no ‘them and us,’ the same gifts are given to ‘them’ and to ‘us.’ The good news of the Gospel is that “old distinctions produce death everywhere by way of fear, of anxiety, exclusion and, sometimes, of violence.” Heaven broke open with a new message to the earth’s people to move beyond their elite and limited arrangements. “We are all invited to ‘the same gift’ - no distinctions, no privilege, no advance notice and no advantage in better faith or better future.” All are ‘clean.’ All are worthy to be part of God’s household of love.

Whether we be Christian, Jew, Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist, Ba’hai, agnostic or atheist, we are all acceptable and we must be aware of how our rules, doctrines, views and interpretations of theological texts can generate ideas such as that we are better than the other, that our faith is the right faith and that our God is the one true God. Intolerance happens when people become self-righteous about their beliefs, doctrine and ideas. These can set us solidly for or against others and lead us to take sides and be close-minded.

Extremism occurs when people become conditioned and controlled and where rules and codes are perverted and fuel certainty and sanity martyrdom. Fundamentalism exists in all religious traditions and it breeds terrible violence as extremists use aggression, guns and bombs to exact revenge against the ‘unclean’ or the ‘enemy.’ Unfortunately, most of their violence is directed toward innocent people gathered in sacred places.

Peter’s dream is an urgent callout to all of us to examine our contemporary ‘purity codes’ that deem ‘impure’ all those unlike us. This could include not just other religions

but also blacks, Hispanics, Indigenous people, LGBTQ2 plus folks, immigrants, poor people aging people. All people who do not meet our expectations of who fits and who does not, who is productive and who is not, who is right and who is wrong, who is clean and who is unclean and who is righteous and who is not.

Mike Ghouse is a Muslim and a worldwide interfaith speaker and writer about pluralism, hope and world peace. He writes, "God has intentionally created diversity; each one of us has a unique identity with our own thumb print, eye print, DNA and other uniqueness. If we can learn to respect and accept the God given uniqueness of each one of us, then conflicts fade and solutions emerge."

Religious pluralism encourages us to tear down the walls of prejudice and pride that fuel cultural clashes and lead to violence between nations and religions. It affirms that your religion is as good as mine is for me. It acknowledges that there are multiple understandings of truth among the religions and that my way is not the only way and that my faith is not superior to yours.

In his book, *A New Christianity for a New World*, John Spong writes, "There is such a rich diversity of human life. In God who is the Ground of Being, who manifested that gift of being, there is neither east nor west, tribe nor ethnicity, male nor female, gay nor straight, true believer nor heretic, Christian nor Jew, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. There is only a God-filled humanity, wonderfully diverse, yearning to live, eager to love, daring to be and wanting to journey in community into the wonder and mystery of the God who is Being itself."

The Acts story harmonizes beautifully with the readings about love. In his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Brian McLaren suggests that what should matter in one's faith is not the container, the beliefs, rules, regulations, denomination and doctrine, but rather the content, what resides at the heart of one's faith and what must be the heart, is love.

McLaren writes, "Of the many radical things said and done by Jesus, his unflinching emphasis on love was most radical of all. Love was the greatest commandment, he said. It was his new commandment, his prime directive - love for God, self, for neighbour, for stranger, for alien, for outside, for outcast and even for enemy, as he himself modeled." This love recognizes no distinctions, no boundaries or barriers.

Where there was hatred between religious groups, Jesus invited discussion and encouraged reconciliation. Where children were shunned, he embraced them, and when people were stigmatized, cast out and denied, he welcomed them to the table and treated them with dignity and respect. Where women were undervalued, he listened to their concerns and when confronted with accusations, Jesus responded with calm and wisdom.

Such love requires intention, vigilance, grace and humility. Scripture reminds us that fearless and active love is the only way to save ourselves and each other from the

religious wars that ravage life and rage around us. There is an urgency to love as we have never loved before. Cultivating pluralism within our faith means not only accepting the other but also actively engaging compassion that transforms ignorance and hatred into authentic connection. Jesus advised, "Don't come this way unless you're willing to stretch, bend and transform for the sake of love."

I end with a quote by Unitarian minister, Rev. Jean Rowe. "We have a calling in this world; we are called to honour diversity, to respect difference with dignity and to challenge those who forbid it. We are people of a wide path. Let us be wide in affection and go our way in peace."