

Beyond Tolerance

sermon digest

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James 1:17-27

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The room was bright and welcoming. We removed our shoes before we entered as an indication of respect. Over the course of the next hour, members of the community entered with what appeared to be joy and reverence, and went to the worship area at the front of the room for prayer. One young woman on the right spent an extended period of time in quiet devotion and meditation. A group came in, seemingly an extended family or possibly neighbors who had gotten together to make the drive to the temple. A young couple with two small children came. We smiled as their beautiful little girl danced with quiet, childish joy while her parents spoke with the priest. Joe Shukla's wife and son came in and said their prayers and then sat to the side of the room to listen to Joe's presentation. Located in the peaceful countryside near the point where I-75 and I-40 meet, the Hindu Temple serves several hundred families in an area spreading over 50 miles.

As I sat watching the quiet displays of devotion, as I observed the priest warmly greeting each person who entered, conversing quietly, praying with them, and distributing a "communion" of holy water and nuts, as I watched the members ceremoniously circling the altar area and heard Joe speak of the Hindu faith as a total way of life, I could not help remembering earlier days when I am not sure I would have been as moved by what I saw. And I thought with sadness of the angry epithets still being hurled at Hindu people in our country today. I remembered the outbreak of violence against "dot heads" only a few years ago in New Jersey; and I recalled Kas speaking in Women's Interfaith Dialogue of her son being confused when children in his school told him that if he did not become a Christian, he would go to hell. And I listened knowingly as Joe sought to delineate the difference between seeing the multitude of deities within the Hindu faith as idols—false gods—and as a symbol pointing beyond themselves to the one God. Commenting on the three thousand names for God and the 330 million forms, author/religion professor Diana Eck suggests that the Hindu faith's very multiplicity of names and representations of God is a way of speaking of the infinite nature of God. "God," she says, "is not limited by God's capacity to be present, but by our capacity to see" [*The Life of Meaning*, 336].

Diana Eck goes on to tell of an elderly Indian friend who seriously asked her, "Do you really believe that God came only once, so very long ago and to only one people?" With Eck and increasingly with so many others within the Christian faith, I find that in good conscience I can only answer the man's question with a "no." I am a Christian and I seek with everything within me to make the way of Jesus my own way of life. I affirm with every fiber of my being that "God was in Christ reconciling the world". Yet as I form friendships and come to better understand other faiths, I find the God I know in Christ is not a stranger to my new friends and their faiths. I find myself and my church and any who would be faithful to the task of becoming ambassadors of reconciliation called beyond mere *toleration* to sincere *appreciation*. Toleration, you see, says, "You're wrong, but I will respect to be wrong." Appreciation, on the other hand, says, "I find the God I worship present with and in you. Commissioned by the God that we both know, let us be friends and partner to do God's work together."

Some, admittedly, would shutter. They would point the finger and accuse us of emptying diverse religious faiths of any and all of their distinctives in the name of fostering "one world religion." Are they right? Can we be faithful to our Christian calling while appreciating and respecting the religious faiths of others? Are we in danger of embracing a faith that is little more than watered down political correctness?

It *could* happen. It depends, as so many other things depend, on who God is.

The great protestant reformer Martin Luther, determined to get the church off of a religion of works, took on the Letter of James. The brief letter, Luther charged, was "a right strawy epistle" the church would do well to minimize or even ignore. And it is true that this little book of 108 verses is filled with directives. It contains fifty-nine imperatives—more than one command for every two verses. But notice where the writer of the book begins. "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (1:17). Every act of obedience, every good work, act of kindness, begins with who God is; and God is one who has given graciously, abundantly, and freely. Far from a situation in which we must scramble to please a God who hangs back in ominous shadows, we are in a situation defined by a God who is plenteous in the grace God bestows. Rather than existing in a situation where we must compete with one another like immature children competing for a parent's favor, we are, James is saying to us, in a situation where there is enough

love, enough grace for all.

“Therefore,” James tell us, “watch your mouth!” Rather than being quick on the draw, rather than assuming we are here to wipe out the competition, rather than mowing one another down with weapons or words, we should be “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness (1:19, 20).

Those are words of significant counsel as we head into yet another long hot summer. We find ourselves living in a society that settles problems by the culprit theory. Find someone to blame and let ‘em have it! The National Council of Churches has a social advocacy arm that goes by the name Faithful America. Established as a means of giving people of faith a means of joining arms to pose an alternative voice to the often strident tones of the Religious Right, Faithful America is moved by the conviction that our faith compels us to act to end poverty, restore community, and uphold the common good. A few weeks ago it initiated a competition for a slogan for a bumper sticker for its Summer to Simmer Down campaign. Several slogans have made the final four. One proclaims, “Another person of faith for social justice”; and another, “Social justice: I read about it in a good book.” My favorite, however, is “Driven by faith, not by fear.”

The Christian way to which James and Jesus and Christian scriptures call us is the way of faith, not fear. Far from the fear that is convinced it must silence or marginalize those who are different, those who disagree, those who may actually call God by another name than us, faith calls us to a trust and confidence that can be quick to listen. Far from endorsing those who would demonstrate their religious commitment by shouting down those with whom they disagree, James warns, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless (v. 26). If you would apply a test, apply this one: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (v. 27).

This morning as you come forward to receive Communion, I invite you to add your name to The Charter of Compassion. Initiated by respected author Karen Armstrong, the Charter reflects submissions of wording from over 150,000 people representing 180 nations and a widely diverse assortment of religions and ethical systems. It does not make direct appeal to the person of Jesus, but I would suggest to you it gives voice to foundational truths espoused by our own as well as other religious faiths. At bottom, it is a call to put down arms. It is a call to quit fashioning one another as bitter enemies. It is a call to simmer down so that we can restore compassion to the center of our faith and our relationships with one another, particularly our relationships with those who are different from us.

Signed at this point by 48,000 people, the Charter for Compassion says in part:

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women ~ to restore compassion to the center of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

If in the spirit of the Christ who welcomed those whom others would have readily denied entry, you would like to add your name to the Charter this morning, we welcome you to do so.