

## **REFLECTIONS for Oct 18, 2020, at Knox Church by Rev. Peg Pfab**

The children's story for today is very simple. The Cat walks through the world; all the creatures see and imagine/envision the Cat differently...depending on their own needs and context: their feelings, fears, hope. Yet it is the same Cat.

If you were hearing it as a metaphor it might seem very simplistic, but let's play around with it as applying to interfaith relationships. We all, as individuals or groups, see God through our own lens: culture, gender, history, our individual experiences and upbringing. Why might some of us see God as angry and terrifying; some as distant and negligible; some as sweetly personal? God is still God...regardless of the names or the images we create. We humans develop particular structures, worship, rituals, even ethics and morals based on our particular vision of God.

And the more significant question: why is it seemingly so threatening to know that others have different contexts and different perceptions of God, which then lead to different faith traditions, different moral constructs, rituals, forms of community, even different core values?

That question came into sharp focus in the questioning period after Helen Clark's roundtable discussion about World Peace on September 30. A questioner asked, "Wouldn't the world be better off without any religions?" Obviously in this questioner's mind, religions only seemed to create war, hostility and destruction. And that is partially true, there is no way around it.

We can also look at the way religions have been, and can be, a force for peace and harmony. So the brief readings I chose today come from that perspective; admittedly again, simplistic because we cannot contain the whole of any religious or philosophical system within a few verses. I deliberately chose readings that represented a commonality, rather than polarized views; with a more hopeful focus.

The commitment I carried away from the forum with Helen Clark (and Jordan and others in the chaplaincy program at the University) was again to find interfaith connections that could create spaces for people to know and respect each other. I don't presume to speak about interfaith relationships in NZ...but I thought I might share a bit of my experiences in the United States...and some of them may resonate with you...or not. Perhaps they will be a cautionary tale for what NZ does NOT want to become.

There are many facets to Interfaith relationships and understanding: I would like to use the Four Types of Inter-religious Dialogue mentioned by Kris Chan... and share a bit about my experiences with all of those:

There is, of course, the dimension perhaps most of us think of:

--- **The Dialogue of Theological Exchange**, which is perhaps the most cognitive. This usually involves listening to “experts” explain theological beliefs, the history of the religion; rituals & worship. This involves lectures, books and scholarly articles. In the campus ministry situation and congregations I served, we tried to offer as many as possible of these opportunities. I invited speakers from Jewish, Bahai, and Muslim faiths for Sunday worship time and for adult education. I have always appreciated these and yet been personally more drawn to dimensions which speak to my heart and feelings more directly. I invited the president of the Bilal Mosque, Shahriar, to preach at Southminster once. He was shocked to be asked to preach in a Christian church and said he couldn’t possibly “preach”, but he would speak. It was one of the most powerful sermons I have ever hear about the need to be open, truthful, committed to justice and to speak truth to power. It was much more compelling than any lecture about the history or theology of Islam.

**Another dimension of Interfaith Dialogue is the Dimension of Action: working or peace and justice together.**

-----So, for example when Shahriar was “invited” to have a conversation with an FBI agent, which you might imagine to be a bit intimidating, a Rabbi and I accompanied him to offer support.

-----Another example: in Washington County, near Portland, I was a member of an Interfaith Action Network for a number of years: This was a very diverse group including Protestants (of various denominations), Catholics, Jews, Bahais, Muslims, Church of the Latter Day Saints, New Thought religions and Scientology. At monthly meetings we had a brief presentation and prayer time from different members, but our main focus was action: cleaning up the environment; an interfaith Thanksgiving Service and combined food drive; anti-racism work. In working together, we developed respect and friendships that would not have happened just by listening to lectures. I have to admit there were some private discussion with Mormans and Scientologists which were very challenging for me; and perhaps for them.

----At Southminster Presbyterian Church, the last congregation I served before retiring, we often organized interfaith events as a way of remembering those who died on 9/11 and the first responders, and committing ourselves to peace.

We would have a brief interfaith prayer service in our sanctuary, or outside around the Peace Pole, then spend time working to clean up and repair the grounds around the elementary school nearby; and perhaps share a pizza lunch.

There are so many possible actions to take as faith groups which can focus on positive values shared by all, that don't demand we fuss about theological differences.

----- **Another Dimension of Interfaith Dialogue is the Dialogue of Religious Experience:** This is the dimension which speaks most to my heart and soul. Usually it involves groups in which people share their spiritual practices and how that affects their daily life. One such experience for me was after the shooting at the Mosque in Christchurch. I happened to be in NZ when that happened. When I returned home, the mosque near my house was sponsoring a discussion about healing after violence (which of course there are so many more examples in The US), and asked me to say a few words about my observations here. It was for me a profound experience to see how New Zealand embraced and supported the Muslim community, allowing for some healing to happen. After that discussion, Faiza, a Muslim women, a social worker and founding member of the mosque and I decided to form a small interfaith group. The idea was to have a group which would meet for six weeks in the summer, the focus of which would be building relationships. We invited some folks we knew at first, men and women of various faith traditions...then opened up to whoever wanted to come. The group focused on questions such as: what do you most appreciate about your faith tradition and what is difficult; what are your spiritual practices and how do they impact your daily life? What is difficult or good about practicing your faith in the United State? One wonderful surprise was that five teenage Muslim girls wanted to participate; it was a great opportunity to hear how they experienced public school and the teen culture in the US. Of course, after the six weeks, people wanted to continue. We had developed friendships and learned so much from each other. This group had forced us in a very non-threatening way to confront our stereotypes. It also pushed us to learn more about our own faith traditions. When asked a question about what we believed or what the Bible said, or why we did certain things, we sometimes had to go home and do some real thinking about ourselves and our beliefs.

---**The fourth type of Dialogue is that of Everyday Life**...one that should be very easy: it just involves simple courtesy and openness to neighbors of different faiths.

Those are some of the wonderful experiences I have had with interfaith relationships. Unfortunately all is not rosy, as you might imagine in a country so polarized as the US. Sometimes interfaith encounters can be very rough and tumble.

Earlier in my ministry I served as a campus minister at a very large secular university in Minnesota. There were representatives of almost every possible religion, and there was an interfaith ministers group, which I found exciting. I also found it disturbing that often the most **intolerant** members were Christians. I remember going to a meeting with the Director of Hillel, the Jewish campus ministry, and two men from an evangelical Christian ministry. Amy, the Hillel Director asked me to go with her because she felt a need to try to respond to their request for an interfaith conversation but was also very nervous about meeting with them. As well she might be: They told her they thought she was a “nice lady” but she would go to hell if she didn’t convert to Christianity. Their pretense at conversation was only a disguise to intimidate and harass her. They couldn’t allow her to have her faith and they have theirs...even though she never tried in any way to “convert” anyone to Judaism.

The university was also the venue, every spring and summer, of the itinerant “Christian” preachers who would stand outside the student union and hold forth: all Jews, Muslims, all gays and lesbians were going to hell and were the cause of every evil in the nation. Sometimes another campus minister or a university staff person would ask me to go out and counter their incendiary speech. Mostly students simply heckled them and thought of it as street theater...but some more mentally fragile students were truly damaged by these so-called preachers.

In another interfaith group of about forty people, I was one of only two women present when a Presbyterian minister called by views “disgusting” because I said I believed in universal salvation. “Disgusting” is a pretty strong word and not one he used when disagreeing with male ministers. When I called him on the way he spoke to me, the only person who spoke in support of me was the male rabbi. Sometimes it is harder to find respect among members of one’s own faith tradition than with people of a different faith.

When I moved to Portland, I heard similar stories ---mostly aimed at Muslims. A Muslim woman medical technician told of an incident at the hospital where she worked. She was to draw blood from patients for tests ordered by their doctors. One day a woman came in and seeing her in the

hijab, refused to allow any “terrorist” to touch her or draw her blood. The Muslim woman was devastated but tried to find another technician to handle this woman’s case. Another young woman who rode public transportation every day to her university classes told me she finally gave up and drove because it was so upsetting to experience almost daily harassment: someone pulling on her scarf, or telling her to go home (which was nonsense since this woman was an American citizen).

Some of these incidents may seem to be small and inconsequential...but when seen in the national context of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and racist government policies, become very terrifying. One of my Muslim friends told me that every time there was a mass shooting in the US, he prayed first that the shooter wasn’t Muslim...then prayed for the victims. He feared the backlash on the whole Muslim community if the shooter was Muslim.

Why would “Christians” live in such fear of others or preach such intolerance? Can our God be so small that there is no place in the universe for an alternative view? Is it simply arrogance and pride to think we have the only valid beliefs? These feelings of threat, fear, and arrogance make it so difficult for religious traditions to build bridges of peace and harmony in the world. It is that sense of distrust and intolerance, that makes it possible for unscrupulous leaders to manipulate nations to go to war (usually for egotistical and economic gain.) (This is a tangent, but if any of you are also intrigued by why we can feel so threatened by differences, you might be interested in a book called, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* by Jonathan Haidt.)

If we are confident in our faith why would we be intolerant of others who envision God differently or use different names for the Sacred; especially since Jesus, the one we profess to follow, seemed to be so expansive and inclusive in his love and caring. There are so many stories of Jesus breaking boundaries...building bridges between groups in his culture: tax collectors, Samaritans, the Canaanites.

Certainly from my observations, New Zealand does not have the same polarization and hostility that the US does. And yet I know that we all have stereotypes, often unconscious, that drive our fears and can pollute our relationships. I know I have certainly had to confront many of my own unconscious biases in relating to people of other faiths and cultures.

So here is a little exercise for you to do silently in your mind. Think of the first responses that come to mind when I say these words:

Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Bahai, Christian Science, Church of the Latter Day Saints, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhs, Wiccans, Unification Church, Sai Babba, Indigenous spiritual traditions?

Do any of them call up feelings of concern, alienation or fear?

Can you dig a bit into your consciousness: what about that group or tradition is disturbing? How did you learn about them? Do you know many people of that group? Do you know if your disagreements or fears are based on their religious beliefs or on cultural and geopolitical realities? Can we respect others and still disagree about certain beliefs or practices? How do we do that?

It seems to me that it is only by learning about those we perceive as “different”, through some form of interfaith encounter, that we as Christians, can make sure that religions **can** be a force for understanding. Then we can offer a resounding “YES” to the question posed today: can religions help create peace and harmony.

I will close with this thought from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Though he was speaking to conflicts between Jews and Gentiles, perhaps it can also speak to broader interfaith reality:

“Christ is peace... Christ has broken down hostility and dividing walls between us...Christ has proclaimed peace to you who were far and peace to those who are near...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

Let us pray that we may all live as members of the household of God. Amen.

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