

A Crisis of Loyalty

On this world communion Sunday, I want to ask: Is there room for people of other faiths in our Scriptures? Or is Christianity exclusivist and tribal?

I think that the answer to that is yes, there is room. In fact a world wide faith open to all is there throughout the Bible, and specifically in Solomon's temple dedication and in Jesus statement that we find in Matthew: "You have turned my House of prayer **for all the Nations** into a den of thieves." Even the Jewish Temple according to Solomon and Jesus was not intended to be only for Jews but also for the stranger who loved God in any nation.

The Dalai Lama says:

Looking back, I see that my crucial learning experience was the shift that took place away from...an exclusivist vision of my own faith as unquestionably the best... The move to a... position of interchange with other religions by no means involves abandoning one's central commitment to one's own faith; it hugely enriches the understanding and practice of one's own faith.

A Priest and a Rabbi were eating together when the priest started to tease the Rabbi. "Wow, this ham is really good" he said licking his lips, "I know it's against your religion, but when are you going to break down and finally have some?" After a moment's thought the Rabbi responded with a smile "at your wedding!"

Are we afraid that our faith will be compromised if we get involved with people of other faiths? Or do we have a split in our thinking that for an hour a half a week we can hold our faith and then be secular for the rest of the time so that we don't get into religious arguments?

Let's be rigorously honest for a moment. Do we really think that our faith is the best? And we must be loyal to it to please God?

I was writing to the former Chaplain General of the Canadian Armed Forces, a Presbyterian, and I asked him why he believed in God and Christianity. His answer was incredibly profound and simple- "Because my father did."

I thought about that and decided that that was definitely how I began. If your parents were Catholics, it is quite likely that you were raised as a Catholic. The same goes for any faith although I know many who have left the faith of their fathers and mothers. Even there though, there is often a loyalty, even if they no longer attend or participate.

I was reading an article by Dorothy Rowe in The Telegraph Newspaper. She is a psychologist who as a child was told to attend a Presbyterian church by her mother. In that cold and austere church, she concluded that the Presbyterian God was cruel and vain... but she felt at home with Jesus who she saw as kind and loving like her own father. She went on from there to make a comment about why many religions practice exclusivism. Here is her take. She says:

No religion accepts us as the person we know ourselves to be. Rather, we are told that we are inadequate, unsatisfactory and helpless. We fear that this is so, and to give us hope we construct a fantasy about how we are superior to those who do not share our views.

I was taught that we Presbyterians were infinitely superior to Catholics and all the rest, while Aboriginals were not even human.

I thought that the man Jesus wouldn't have approved of such views, and this set me on the path of understanding that, although people differ as individuals and in terms of culture, basically all human beings are the same.

We all want to be the person we know ourselves to be, and for others to recognize this and treat us with respect. We want to live without being dominated by fear, to enjoy good relationships, and to have a secure place in our society....

When we are able to be the person we know ourselves to be, without vanity or self-pity, we have the wonderful experience of feeling at home with everything that exists.

What I personally find interesting is that she identifies with the man Jesus. I find it quite common amongst lapsed Christians that they maintain their respect for Jesus while parting ways with the institution. My own path has similarities. Through a broad theological education, I came to see that The Jesus of History was radically inclusive of all kinds of people including prostitutes, tax collectors, muleteers and the riff raff of society. He was truly interfaith in the Dalai Lama's understanding that one can stand in one's own faith and accept people of other faiths. It was

Jesus who said; “Many shall come from East and West to sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God.” That was an incredibly radical statement in his time.

On another occasion He said to a Roman centurion: “I have not seen such faith, no not in all of Israel.” St Peter and St Paul said that “God has no favorites and that the person in any nation who does what is right is acceptable to God.”

But by AD 90, some 60 years after the death of Jesus and 45 years after the earliest Gospels, in St John’s Gospel, a different more exclusivist Jesus seems to emerge. As Bishop Swing former Dean of Grace Cathedral San Francisco said to me “This could be a matter of tone when Jesus says ‘I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to God except by me.’ He could have meant the values that Jesus lived by are the ones acceptable to God, much like the prophet Micah said: ‘What does God require of mankind? To do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly each with his own God.’ This is the way to come to God.”

Many scholars maintain that the Historical Jesus never actually said that he was the only way to God. That came later after his death. Marcus Borg a Bible scholar originally believed that The Christian Faith was exclusivist, but after deep study of the faith, he abandoned that position, and had an encounter that he wrote about in the book: Meeting Jesus again for the first time. He found a Jesus he never knew before, who had been there all along: the non- tribal non- exclusive, open to all, Jesus of Nazareth.

That too is my experience- The historical Jesus was originally welcoming of people of other faiths, much as King Solomon had been before him.

A dear friend gave me the book Toward a True Kinship of Faiths written by the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama says some very interesting things in the book. He says that the differences between religions are real. For instance, Buddhism does not believe in God as the Abrahamic faiths do. That is huge. But he says that we all live in an ever- smaller world and if we don't get along with one another we shall perish.

DNA research shows that we all began as human beings in Africa. But over millennia we have migrated all over the globe and became cut off from each other. Then, tribal exclusivism may have worked to reinforce survival values, but no longer. In this world of mass communications, it is counterproductive and downright dangerous when peace is the only way forward to survival.

The exciting news however is this: whereas the religions differ in terms of *doctrine* they remarkably converge when it comes to *ethics*.

The convergence is greatest when it comes to a ministry of compassion for the world. All religions agree on the golden rule. We agree that we are our brother and sister's keepers. That is huge. We practice this when the earth quakes or a tsunami strikes and we get together to help as in Climate Change.

It doesn't matter whether we are Jewish or Christian, Muslim Hindu, Buddhist or atheist. There is humanitarian work to be done and so we roll up our sleeves.

Once I asked Bishop Swing, who founded the World religions initiative, whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about the human project on earth. He paused and then said that he was optimistic until it would become too late. He saw two overarching threats to our survival- nuclear proliferation and Global climate change and the loss of the biosphere.

What I notice about the Dalai Lama and Bishop Swing is that both men have a sense of urgency. The Dalai Lama puts it this way: "...if we fail, and if our differences continue to lead to discord, and discord to violence, the consequences may be catastrophic. The stakes are higher than ever- not only for the survival of our species but also for the very planet itself and the myriad other creatures who share our home."

So, what is the way forward?

We must live the values of compassion and respect for others from our hearts.

When my friend who became Chaplain General of the Canadian armed forces told me that he had become a Christian because his father was a Christian, I began to think about loyalty. I too, because I loved my father dearly, was greatly influenced to become a Christian because he was a Christian and I was loyal to my father.

But over the years I have come to realize that there are levels of loyalty. **There is I believe a highest level of loyalty.**

Here it is: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself.” Here is the highest loyalty against which all levels of loyalty can be measured.

Jesus made it quite clear that any person in need was our neighbor. They could be people of different faiths like the man beaten up beside the road that the good Samaritan found. That Samaritan crossed over the line between loyalty to his own traditions to help a beaten-up Jew. In other words, he had a higher loyalty than his own tradition. Jesus also made it very clear that we were to love our enemies, not just look after our own. We were to help ‘the least of these’, as the great parable teaches, and in so doing we were doing the will of The Creator God and Jesus Christ.

The time was the second World War. Eighteen-year-old Private Boyer was on patrol ready for any unexpected encounter. In the late afternoon shortly before he was to go off duty, he heard him, before he saw him.

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!”

A young boy in the uniform of a German soldier appeared from a nearby woods with his hands over his head, his eyes wide with fear. He looked to be about 16 years old, if that.

Boyer grabbed the boy, indicated that he should keep his hands over his head and marched him back to camp. He decided to take him to the C.O. to see what he wanted to do with him.

He found the C.O. and said “ I picked up this deserter on patrol.”

“I see.” said the C.O.

The C.O. looked at the prisoner and then at private Boyer. Silence followed.

Finally, the C.O. spoke: “ We have no time or manpower to take care of prisoners here. Take him out five miles and one minute from Camp Private. That’s an order.”

“ Yes sir!” said Boyer.

Boyer took the boy back out towards the Woods. He knew the order meant him to shoot the boy.

But despite his loyalty to his commander, his country and to his own honour as a soldier, Boyer was conflicted.

This unarmed boy presented no threat to him or his unit. An order was an order but how could he shoot this defenseless boy? The more he struggled with the C.O.’s instructions, the more he knew he could not carry out the order. He was in a crisis of loyalty. What was he to do?

The pair kept walking. Suddenly another solution, a third way, appeared over the next hill. Another unit was camped there. Private Boyer knew immediately what he would do. He marched the German boy into the camp and asked for the C.O.’s tent.

Saluting smartly he said: “ Sir, I found this deserter while on patrol. Your unit is closer than mine, so I brought him to you.”

The C.O. said “ At ease private. We will take him. You better get back to your unit.”

The walk back to his unit felt terribly lonely. He had disobeyed a direct order. His fate was now uncertain. His knees trembling, he reported immediately upon arrival to his C.O.

“ I didn’t hear a shot” the C.O. muttered not looking up from his maps.

‘You didn’t hear a shot because I did not shoot, Sir.’”

The C. O. looked up and locked eyes with Boyer who said, “I turned him over to the unit that is camped about 4 miles from here.” Boyer did not lower his eyes, returning the steady glare of his C.O. and waited for his reply.

“ Dismissed.”

Some time after this he was assigned to guard duty at a prisoner of war camp in France.

As he was making his rounds one day a voice called out to him from the other side of the guard fence: “Boyer!”

It was the young German deserter he had refused to shoot many months before.

Often when it was Boyer’s turn to take prisoners for a walk the young German would hurry to be among them. In broken English he told Boyer that he had been conscripted. He had no idea if his parents were alive or if he still had a home.

None of this would have taken place if Boyer had not understood that in order to be loyal to his C.O. he had to surrender to a higher loyalty to his fellow man...loving God and his neighbor as himself, for Boyer had placed himself in the boys shoes and felt what he had felt, knowing in his heart that the golden rule was over his C.O. as well as him. That was how he was able to look into the eyes of his C.O. without wavering...

Similarly, opening ourselves to other faiths does not mean that we are not loyal to our own tradition. Rather, as the Dalai Lama has said: . *The move to a pluralistic position of*

interchange with other religions by no means involves abandoning one's central commitment to one's own faith...

But let me add this. There is a loyalty that is to the Supreme loyalty found in the Golden rule embraced by all faiths...to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. When we get that and Jesus central teaching to love the enemy,..

We can be loyal Presbyterians or whatever faith, and still lovingly embrace those who are OTHER because we have a higher loyalty to the One who made us all and told us that we were to love each other, no exceptions!

This Sunday is World Communion Sunday. Our table is open to all who seek God and those who embrace the Values taught so clearly by Jesus, who asked us to love our enemies and to do good to those who spitefully use us. It is the feast of the Founder, The Jesus of History who came into our lives to change them and draw us back to God across all continents and islands and all nations and tribes.

Many shall come from east and West, to sit down in the Kingdom of God, at this table of compassion and mercy. All those who are desirous of living a new life, all those who repent from any kind of wrong-doing, all who try to love God and neighbour as their highest value are welcome here. This table belongs to Christ and thus to all those who love him whatever our background, ethnicity or orientation. You are all welcome here.

Amen.