

Different paths, different goals

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2016.

Jesus prayed for his disciples, I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one John 17:20

On the night before he is to die, Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prays that his disciples will all be one. He knows that there will be differences and disagreements, but he prays that there be no irreconcilable differences that will threaten the strength and effectiveness of the newly formed Christian community. Sadly, history has shown that there are serious divisions within the Christian church, as there are also irreconcilable differences between world religions.

Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, has written that it has become fashionable to think that all religions have the same purpose and all lead in the same direction. Not so. Those who claim that Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam all have the same basic teachings need to learn about their beliefs and practices. For instance, a Buddhist has no god; Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in one God while Hindus have numerous gods. There may be basic goodness in most of teachings of the world's religions but it cannot be denied that there are also basic differences. You only have to read and watch the news to know that much of the ongoing conflicts in the world are based on differences between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Prothero believes that those differences are as likely to detonate a bomb as to defuse one. Too many wars have been fought over serious differences between religions from the Crusades to the Holocaust to present day suicide bombers.

While it is right and good to hope that there can be greater religious understanding and tolerance, it is a mistake to claim that we are all the same. Among the important differences is that Christianity is primarily concerned with salvation from sin through God's love while Muslims and Jews are more concerned with justice. Confucians and Buddhists are primarily concerned with personal harmony and peace. The differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and among Protestants as well as within our Episcopal Church all go toward weakening our effectiveness in Christian witness.

The essential problem begins with one religious tradition placing itself in judgment over the other. When one church claims authority over others regarding legitimacy, faithfulness to the scriptures and eligibility for salvation, it is a cause for serious division that weakens all Christianity. You may have heard of the story of the man who arrived in heaven and was being given a tour. When he asks about the various doors that remain closed he is told that behind each of those doors is a religion or denomination that thinks they are the only ones there!

Just as various sports have different rules, goals and scoring, not all religions live by the same rules or have the same objective. When basketball players shoot baskets, baseball players hit runs and football players make goals, we don't criticize them for not playing by the same rules. Likewise, Christians cannot criticize other religions for not playing by our rules. While we do not want to trivialize the differences between the world religions or within our own Christian faith, we can't minimize the differences either.

Much of the violence and terrorism in the world today is due to twisted minds that manipulate their religion to suit their need for political power and use their religion as an excuse for random violence. The tragedy of the war in Iraq that began over rumors of weapons of mass destruction led to our being engaged in a costly conflict that caused injury and death on both sides. Tolerance and respect between major religions of the world require understanding the differences as well as similarities.

Years ago, I took part in a public forum in dialogue with Christians and Jews. Someone asked if only Christians are going to heaven. My response was that God knows far more about salvation than we do and furthermore God is the only one who can make that judgment. With the sharp divisions within Christianity, we are torn between not wanting to sacrifice our integrity for the sake of unity while not wanting to weaken the effectiveness of our Christian witness.

Though we declare that we are part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, the divisions go back to earliest times. We all draw from the same source in Christ and we like to think that we follow different paths toward the same goal. Our salvation does not depend upon belonging to the institutional church, but upon our faith in Christ. Saint Paul's emphasis on salvation by faith is one of the principal tenants of the Reformation. We come to faith and salvation on our own, not by membership in any one church. When churches claim exclusivity, they are more concerned with "churchianity" rather than Christianity. In the final analysis, I am far more concerned about being a good Christian than a good Episcopalian.

I envision the Christian church as a large tree that is nourished from the same roots. The Episcopal Church is one branch of that tree. If we are truly one in Christ, no one branch of Christianity is going to try to cast judgment over the other with the claim of being the true church. The effectiveness of our witness to Christ depends on our working together as one in the body of Christ. Divisiveness only weakens our ability to be an example of Christ's love and compassion.

When Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Moslems, believers, skeptics and non-believers work together to serve humanity there is no telling what great things can be done to make this a better and more just world.

On this Mothers' Day, we are reminded that women as half the human race have been on a long slow road for equality. When my mother was growing up women were denied the right to vote. After 1920, when women were finally given the right to vote, nothing changed for residents of the nation's capital in Washington, D.C. where we were all denied the right to vote for President until the 1964 election. To this day, the half million residents of the nation's capital still have no voting representation in Congress. Having fought and won the war for independence over the issue of taxation without representation, there needs to be a greater effort to provide full suffrage for all Americans.

While there are still subtle inequalities to be addressed, there have been serious gains for women in leadership positions in our nation and in the church. As we work to eliminate all forms of racial and gender bias, the vision of a just society becomes more and more a r