

The Beginning of Tolerance

Acts 5: 33-40

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Let us pray. Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds this morning to your Word, that hearing we might believe and believing, trust you with our lives through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the days after Pentecost, when the spirit of God descended and the disciples - frightened and cowering behind a locked door, transformed into courageous proclaimers of God's Word. In the days after that event, Peter and John and others are preaching proclaiming God's Word, proclaiming the worship of Christ in the temple in Jerusalem. And they're doing a pretty good job. The text says about 5,000 people were converted. Any preacher would like that event. Peter and John are called on the carpet. The officials don't particularly like what they're doing, "by what authority are you doing this?" Peter's response is essentially, "By the authority of God."

The officials consult and don't want to make a matter worse than it is, so they call them back in on the carpet and order them one more time to cease speaking about Jesus. And Peter and John repeat, "We cannot keep from speaking about what we've seen and heard." So they are scolded and put aside. They are back the very next day. They are arrested again. "We told you to stop, and here you are again." And Peter says important words, "We must obey God rather than human authority." And now comes the lesson for today, Acts 5:33, "And when they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law and respected by all people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, 'Fellow Israelites consider carefully what you propose to do to these men for some time ago Theudas rose up claiming to be somebody and a number of men - about 400 - joined him. But he was killed and all who followed him were disbursed and disappeared. And after him, Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him. He also perished and all who followed him were scattered. So in this present case I tell you keep away from these men and let them alone because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin it will fail. But if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow them, and in that case you may even be found fighting against God.' And they were convinced by him." This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God indeed! I learned my first lesson in religious diversity and religious tolerance a long time ago. When I was maybe seven or eight years old I went along with my chums in the neighborhood to a weekly gathering in the home of a kind elderly woman – Ms. Hurst. The name of the weekly gathering was The Good News Club. But at the very first meeting of The Good News Club it became for me a Bad News Club. Just a year before that we were living on the third floor of a walk up apartment building, and beneath us on the second floor lived Mrs. Alexander – Mrs. ‘A’ my parents called her – and her teenaged daughters Harriet and Ilene, my first babysitters. They were in high school and I thought they were gorgeous. Mrs. A, Ilene and Harriet were Jewish. They didn’t go to church on Sunday, they went to Synagogue on Friday night – that didn’t make any difference to me. I loved them, and my parents liked Mrs. A a lot and she and I became great friends. I visited her frequently down on the steps of the second floor and she allowed me to help with ironing. I liked that so much I asked for an ironing board for Christmas – and got it – which is way too much information. And she’d always have a plate of chocolate chip cookies. Well – ironing and chocolate chip cookies – it doesn’t get any better than that! I loved Mrs. A.

Well, at the very first meeting of The Good News Club, kindly old Ms. Hurst announced some very bad news. Mrs. A was going to hell because she was Jewish and didn’t believe in Jesus. And Ms. Hurst had more bad news – people who smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol were sinners and also in big trouble with God. My parents, being good Presbyterians, did both so I concluded that at least we were Presbyterian so maybe God would give them a little slack. But it was my friend Mrs. A in hell that bothered me. So I came home and asked my parents, “Is it true that Mrs. A is going to hell and Harriet and Ilene, too?” And they said they didn’t believe that at all. They asked, “Can you imagine such a thing? Mrs. A in hell?” Mother and Dad weren’t theologians but they gave me a good dose of reformed theology. They told me that God loves everyone pretty much the same – God loves us, and Mrs. A and Harriet and Ilene just as much. They didn’t say that God loved Ms. Hurst, but they should have. And they told me I was done with Good News Club. It was my first brush with religious – specifically Christian - exclusivity and intolerance, and I have never forgotten it.

I think that among the most important words and best ideas in human history are these:
Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the

free exercise thereof. It's the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. It was passed on March 4, 1789 just as we were getting started. In the entire history of human ideas tolerance of religious difference is among the most important - that all are welcome here; that each has the right to believe whatever their conscience tells them is true; that no one has the right to force anyone to believe anything – is regarded as the one absolutely necessary guarantee to enable a robust and peaceful experiment in Republican democracy and a free society.

The people who came here first and fought for independence and established this experiment had plenty of personal experience with religious intolerance. Just two centuries earlier English Catholics and Protestants – depending who was on the throne – were busily arresting one another, sentencing each other to the tower, chopping off heads and burning people at the stake. The people who wrote The Bill of Rights remembered a time not long before when Catholic and Protestant armies fought each other for a hundred years in Europe fighting and killing and dying in the name of Christ. So, many of the people who came here from Europe came precisely to escape that violence and the mentality that inspired and rationalized it. We Christians believe that we owe one another more than tolerance. But tolerance is the one thing absolutely necessary, punctuated every day in the news for our nation, and for the future of the world. And although this idea of tolerance is associated with the enlightenment – it actually emerges in an incident in our own Christian history involving a rabbi, a member of the high court or council in Jerusalem – a man who ought to be one of our saints. His name is Gamaliel.

As you remember the followers of Jesus are still in Jerusalem. In the weeks after Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection they are still traumatized by the whole experience and they're afraid. For seven weeks they were hiding in fear not to be identified with Jesus could get them arrested, and punished, and perhaps even crucified. And then on the day of Pentecost something happened that changed all that. Something as mysterious as the resurrection itself they came out from hiding and began to speak publicly. And as Jesus has instructed, they began to heal the sick and lame, paying particular attention to the marginalized, the outcasts, the poor people. So, large crowds gathered wherever they happened to be - the curious, the vulnerable, but also the weak and the sick and the needy. At every opportunity they talked about Jesus and how he was God's son, the promised messiah and redeemer. The religious and political

authorities – the same ones who had conspired to get rid of Jesus – were not pleased obviously with this new development. They assumed that crucifying him would end the matter. So now they arrested Peter and a few others and ordered them to cease speaking about Jesus. Peter’s response was that he had to obey God and not any human authority. That struck a nerve obviously – the implication being that the religious and political authorities themselves were not obeying God. And so as always happens in that circumstance the authorities were offended and insulted and were then very angry and were discussing what to do with these troublemakers. The options were keep them in prison, stone them for blasphemy, or ask Rome to execute them. And just then one of the most respected and revered members of that Sanhedrin, that council in Jerusalem, spoke up. His name was Gamaliel. He was wise and when he spoke everyone listened. “Slow down,” he said, “think again. Consider carefully what you propose to do with these men.” And then these decisive words let them alone. “If their project is of human origin it will fail. It will collapse under its own weight. But if it is of God you will not be able to stop them. In fact, in that case, you may end up fighting against God.” Think of that – you don’t have to stamp out ideas you don’t like or consider dangerously wrong – you don’t have to crush ideologies and movements you regard as dangerous and wrong-headed. Think of the enormous implications of what that wise rabbi said that day. Essentially we may not have the whole truth here. Our religion is about the one God and was given to us by the one God – but maybe, just maybe God has more truth – truth bigger even than our religion. Ideas might be worth dying for but no idea is worth killing for. That is the tiny seed of tolerance and it’s one of the best ideas anybody ever had.

The story of religious intolerance is sad and tragic. The late Shirley Guthrie, longtime professor of theology at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, was deeply loved by a generation of students for his teaching, but also his gentle spirit. In his classic text which is still being used in seminaries and divinity schools always being reformed, he wrote and I quote “The results are always the same. First those who are sure that their interpretation of the Gospel is the correct and only one try to help others understand and accept the true religion, the true morality, true vision of a just and peaceful social order. And if that doesn’t work then in one form or another – violent or nonviolent – come the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the religious wars and colonial and economic, or cultural imperialism that tries to force everyone to live this or that version of true Christianity.

Sadly, we Christians whose religion was born in the midst of intolerance and persecution in the final analysis are no less guilty historically than anyone else. Former President of McCormick Seminary, Cynthia Campbell, in her fine book *A Multitude of Blessings*, a Christian approach to religious diversity, observes that when absolute Christian certainty, a certainty that our ideas, our truths, our church, is the only one true religion - when that religious certainty combines with political and military power the result is always tragic. So Christian Europe, Cynthia observed, turned on its Jewish population demeaning, demonizing, persecuting, ghettoizing in a way that laid the foundation for the Nazis attempt to eliminate the Jews all together – the final solution. Long before that in 1492 as Ferdinand and Isabella were commissioning and financing Christopher Columbus’s exploratory voyage, they were also issuing an edict that all Jews and Muslims in Spain – who by the way have lived together peacefully for centuries – could either convert to Christianity, or be expelled. And then to multiply that evil the Church did not trust those who decided to be converted as Christians, and so the Spanish Inquisition was formed and hounded and investigated and tortured and executed thousands.

When diversity in thinking and practicing emerged within Christianity proponents of different views come to regard one another somehow as enemies, or as members of another religion, enemies of the one true faith, and therefore enemies of God. When we’re not physically fighting we’re hurling epithets and insults at one another – ‘you’re a fundamentalist’ ‘You’re a liberal, apostate, heretic’ – Presbyterians are pretty good at that. Is there no way out of this tragic story? Are we condemned to permanent religious animosity and hostility? Our way is the *only* way? And the only way you and I will ever reconcile and live in peace is for you to recognize the error of your ways and believe what I believe and become what I am.

Well there is a perfectly good alternate way to think about religious diversity and people of other faith communities without compromising our own convictions. Exclusiveness says ‘our way is the only way, our truth is the only truth, our religion the one true religion.’ Some go further and conclude that our church is the only church - the only one true church. Apparently, many Americans, if not most, believe something like that. And there are biblical texts taken out of context that seem to reinforce it. Belief in Jesus Christ belonging to the Christian Church is the only way to salvation *period*. The problem with that, as Cynthia Campbell points out, is that it conflicts with other things

we believe about God – that God created every human being in God’s image; that God loves every human being unconditionally; that God’s steadfast love and mercy are forever. “Why,” Cynthia Campbell asked, “would a God in whose image all people are created, a God the bible says loves all creation, devise a plan of salvation that would exclude most of the human beings who have ever lived?”

Well, there is another way to think about God. It’s also in the bible with plenty of supportive text. In the Psalter God is the Lord of all nations, all people, all cultures, races and religions. The prophet Isaiah had a universal vision of all nations coming to the Mountain of God. Saint Paul said that God was reconciling all things, all nations, all cultures. And Jesus himself said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” So, there’s an alternative way to think that diversity is part of God’s providential plan and that what God wants from us – from Christian followers of God’s son – is not only tolerance, but respect for others; respect for other faith traditions, and understanding and appreciation for their beliefs and practices, their truths. It means holding together two ideas in your mind at the same time – that God’s love is universal and unconditional and that Jesus Christ is the full expression of that love. But do you have to say the right words? Do you have to sign on the dotted line to belong to the right church? I’m not as sure about that as I used to be. Given all the trouble we’ve made for one another, for other people, for God, I’m more and more convinced that no church has a monopoly on truth; no church has the right to claim exclusiveness; no church has the right to claim God’s total approval. Given the historic tragedy that way of thinking has caused, I’m pretty sure that’s not what God wants. That what God wants from every human being is acknowledgment that the human race is one family with a wonderful diversity of races and colors, and customs and language, and poetry and music, and religion.

One family created, sustained and loved by God. I’m pretty sure that what God wants is not a relatively tiny minority claiming superiority over all the rest – Baptists over Lutherans, Catholics over Protestants, Protestants over Catholics, Christians over Jews, Jews and Christians over Muslims, Muslims over Hindus and Christians – I’m sure that what God wants from all of us and for all of us is gratitude and respect and care for one another, and love. Christianity is my faith. Presbyterian Christianity is my religion, my spiritual home. I’ve lived my life as a Presbyterian and pretty much loved every minute of it. And I will continue to live my life as one who fell in love with Jesus a long time ago and has been fascinated and compelled by him ever since. I believe Jesus is truth

incarnate. And I also have a deepening appreciation for the mystery of God. The God beyond anything I can see or understand. The God Saint Paul meant when he said, “Now we see through a glass darkly” – incompletely, partially that is to say. And I have a deepening trust that one day I – all of us – will see clearly face to face. In the meantime I am happy to leave to a just and loving God the final accounting for me and for everybody else.

I have in my files an article from the *Christian Sentry* by the late Ronald Getz who for years was Professor of Religion and Ethics at Elmhurst College. Ron Getz found himself in a predicament that is common to all ministers, all clergy. He was invited by two of his friends to preach at the funeral of their father who was a life-long, well known confirmed atheist. So the problem is – what to say that does not contradict either your own Christian faith or to violate the man’s honest atheism. Professor Getz produced what I regard as a small masterpiece. He said he would honor his friends’ father by not violating or even arguing with his atheism. And he said these words which I have kept and treasured, and on occasion used myself. He said, “I would hope that grace which God intends for the salvation of all human kind is not so fragile that it cannot stand up to human unbelief. Surely the God who dwelled among us in the person of Jesus Christ is both too powerful and too gracious to take our rebellious rejections for final answers. Surely the God who out of love made all things could never conclude that there is no other choice but to damn all but a few to eternal rejection. No,” Professor Getz concluded, “God and God’s freedom has left open countless avenues to God’s grace.”

Tolerance, respect for others, gratitude for others and their ideas is perhaps the best and most important idea in the whole history of human ideas. It is, I think, absolutely necessary for the future of our wonderfully diverse nation and world particularly critical at this moment. And for Christians it is our response to a God of truly amazing grace, a God who has found a way to love us, and accept us, and bless us. A God whose mercy endures forever, and from whose love nothing will ever separate us. Thanks be to God. Amen.