

God and the “gods”

Mark 9:38-41

February 4, 2018

There is no “them.”

Say it with me! “There is no ‘them.’” Let the words rest in your mouths. Let the words rest in your minds. Let the words rest in your hearts. There is no “them.”

What does it mean? It means there is no “us” and “them.” We are all members of one family, one race, one humanity. It means that the things that seem to divide us into parties and factions and groups do not. We are not divided by race or nationality or gender or religion.

How do we know? On what basis can we make such a claim? Jesus. All because of Jesus.

This is our name: First Congregational United Church of Christ. This is our name and this is our identity.

We call ourselves “first,” which has nothing to do with priority or any sense of entitlement, but only that we happened to be the first congregational church to be established in this particular community. There was at one time a second congregational church in Waterloo, named Pilgrim Congregational Church, but when that church closed its doors, many of its members joined us.

We call ourselves “congregational,” which points both to our roots in the English congregational movement and to our way of governance. We are accountable only to each other as we are together accountable only to God.

We call ourselves “united,” because we are, because our church was birthed through the union of previously separate churches: the Congregational Christian churches and the Evangelical and Reformed churches. We call ourselves “united” because we are, but also because we want to be.

We call ourselves “church.” A church is a gathered community and a gathering community, gathered in order to gather, gathered by God to fulfill God’s purpose. Several years ago, as an exercise during a study of Paul’s letter to the Galatian church, we crafted this statement of the church’s purpose: “The purpose of the church is to create a community that seeks to understand and embody the transforming love of God expressed in the words and life of Jesus.”

“Of Christ.” We call ourselves “of Christ.” We belong to Christ. We are defined by Christ. Christ is our head, the only head of the church. Christ is Lord. Christ is the way. The way of Christ is our way.

This is our identity -- “of Christ” -- and this is where we begin. This is where we begin to make an answer to the next question posed by one of you for our Epiphany sermon series.

How do we Christians relate to the “gods” of other religions: Hindu, Native American, Buddhist, Muslim?

The question is well-put. “We Christians.” We ask the question as Christians, as people “of Christ.” As people “of Christ,” knowing the God and being known by the God Christ reveals, how do we relate to other “gods?”

There is no “them!” That’s where we begin. There is no “them,” which means that even if there are “other” religions, there aren’t “other” people, only people like us, all of us bearing God’s image, all of us animated by God’s breath.

But I take that phrase in a double sense, meaning too that when we speak of other “gods,” there is no “them!” That makes answering the question rather easy. How do we relate to other “gods?” We don’t! Because there is no “them!” There are no other gods, there is but one God.

The Lord -- and the Lord alone -- is our God.

The Jews said “our God,” but they came to understand that this God -- creator, savior, provider, sustainer, beginning and end -- was not theirs alone. The Lord may be God of the Jews, but the Lord is not a Jewish God. The Lord is also God of the Egyptians and God of the Assyrians and God of the Moabites and God of the Greeks, loving them too, saving them too, loving and saving all of us.

And this same Lord is the God of Jesus Christ, the God of the gospel which is good news for Jews and Gentiles alike, good news because it is for Jews and Gentiles alike. With his own body, Christ has broken down the walls that divide us. In union with Christ, there is no difference between Greeks and Jews, between women and men, between rich and poor. There is no difference. There is no “them.”

But if there is no difference, if we are not divided by race or religion, how do we engage other people in a world populated by so many divergent faiths? Or to re-phrase the original question:

How do we Christians relate to our neighbors who believe in the “gods” of other religions?

Because other religions do have their gods. Hindus pray to many gods and native Americans to the Great Spirit. Muslims pray to Allah and Buddhists to no god at all. Buddhism is a pantheistic faith. All of us, all living things, indeed all things, animate and inanimate, in this universe or what this universe seems to be, are part of God and God part of them. Wisdom or enlightenment is understanding the connection, ridding myself of my “self.”

Already, just naming the gods, we recognize real differences among these faiths. So how do we relate? How do we enter into conversation? How do we engage?

The question matters, because religion has been and still is a frequent source of contention among peoples, a contributing cause to discrimination and animosity and outright war. Shame! Shame on us when we judge or alienate people in the name of the one who came to bring peace to the earth! Some might suppose the problem is religion itself, that humanity would be better off without, but I strongly believe just the opposite. We are divided, set against each other, not because we have too much faith, but because we have too little.

Let me explain. Christians have often viewed people of other faiths through one of two lenses, exclusivism or pluralism, but both have some serious flaws.

An exclusivist says my way is right and your way is wrong, my God is real and your god is not. And an exclusivist motivated by love (yes, an exclusivist can be motivated by love!) will seek to bring light into the darkness, to find and save lost souls. The goal of evangelism is conversion. But the problem is that all too often what these Christian messengers delivered was not Jesus, but their own cultural baggage. We have tried to make people not one of his, but one of ours.

Do you remember the worship series we did a few years back on the various ways Jesus is portrayed in different cultures? Do you remember the dancing Balinese Jesus, the Masai warrior Jesus, the Korean Jesus bearing the cross of a divided nation? All these images, as well as our own westernized Jesus, are equally true and equally false, true because Jesus comes to us, where we are, as we are, but false if we try to make our own image of Jesus the one and only true image.

Evangelism is about telling a story, an extraordinary story of self-giving and self-sacrificing love arising from God himself, telling it and living it. Evangelism is not about conversion, not about passing on our own systems of worship and governance and art and social taboos. When faith becomes ideology, it is idolatry.

Pluralism, on the other hand, attempts to find common ground among diverse religious faiths. All can be "right" in their own way, in their own context. But if all can be "right" and yet all are very different from each other in significant ways, doesn't that lead to the conclusion that there is no right, no truth? If God is faithful and loving, can a god who is capricious and cruel be equally true? And the search for common ground all too often yields a spirituality that is robbed of anything that gave it passion and meaning in the first place.

That's why I have always insisted that the last thing I want to do in an interfaith setting is to pray generically, being careful not to invoke the name of Jesus. If we genuinely want to understand each other, we need to understand each other in the fullest expression of our own faiths! A generic god is no god at all, useful and compelling to nobody.

In an article written for the journal of the Yale Divinity School, Victor Anderson writes:

Pluralism ... is a term that can actually minimize or smother difference, holding it at bay by a kind of ethical politeness ... Real-life diversity melts into an abstraction of false unity, rituals fold into symbols, and the encyclopedia of beliefs are reduced to their ethical import.
(Reflections, Spring 2016, p. 33)

An abstraction serves nobody. God is reduced to a symbol of our own best impulses, and we are left with no real God to worship, no real God to save us from ourselves.

In the same journal, Yvonne Lodico writes:

Multifaith engagement does not require a diminishment of one's own theological commitment or undercut the truth of other traditions.
(Reflections, Spring 2016, p. 60)

We do not engage by diminishing our own faith, but neither do we disrespect our neighbors by disregarding the truth of theirs. The truth of other faiths ...

Your duty is to treat everybody with love as a manifestation of the Lord.

Is it true? Of course, it's true. This comes from Swami Sivananda, a Hindu religious teacher. (<http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/hinduism/galleries/inspiring-hindu-quotes.aspx>)

*Give us hearts to understand
That to destroy earth's music is to create confusion;
That to wreck her appearance is to blind us to beauty;
That to callously pollute her fragrance is to make a house of stench;
That as we care for her she will care for us.*

Is it true? Of course, it's true. This is a Native American prayer. (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/nataspir1.htm>)

To squander is to destroy. To treat things with reverence and gratitude, according to their nature and purpose, is to affirm their value and life, a life in which we are all equally rooted.

Is it true? Of course, it's true. This comes from Zen Buddhism. (Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, p. 199)

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces to the east and the west [in prayer]. But righteous is the one who believes in God ... who gives his wealth in spite of love for it to kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the wayfarer, to those who ask and to set slaves free.

This comes from the Quran. (Quran 2:177, <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/306/righteousness-and-sin-part-1/>)

Is it true? Of course, it's true! If we seriously believe there is but one God, one God of us all, seeking to know and to be known, why wouldn't it be true that even with our imperfect seeing and hearing, we would be able to perceive something of who God is and what God wants? In many and various ways God reveals himself. God does not choose to be hidden from us.

How do we know if what we see and hear is real? You will know them by their fruits. Jesus said:

I assure you that anyone who gives you a drink of water because you belong to me will certainly receive a reward.

Offering a drink is an act of kindness, an act of love, and such comes from God.

Whoever is not against us is for us.

Just because they are not a part of "our group" doesn't mean they are not part of God's.

No, the answer to the question, "How do we relate?," is not to dial back our own faith or to set aside our dedication to Jesus. No, the answer is to go deep and wide, to go deeper into Jesus, and to let Jesus go deeper into us, transforming our minds and hearts and broadening the limits of our embrace. The more you know of Jesus, what do you know? Who do you know? And what does Jesus tell us, what does Jesus show us, God is?

God is love. Love that is unconditional and never-ending and particular. Love for each and every one of his creatures. The deeper we go into Jesus, the deeper Jesus goes into us, the more our love becomes unconditional and never-ending and particular, for each and every one of God's children. And to love your neighbor, any neighbor, every neighbor, is to respect them, to listen to them, to take them seriously. Because of Jesus. For his sake.

The purpose of the church is to create a community that seeks to understand and embody the transforming love of God expressed in the words and life of Jesus.

May we fulfill that purpose, by remaining faithful to the God revealed to us in Jesus, and by doing what Jesus came to do, making peace, being reconciled to God by being reconciled to each other, and not just to some, but to all.