

Different paths, different goals

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 16, 2010.

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 it is part of human nature that there would be differences and disagreements, but he prays that nothing irreconcilable would threaten the strength and effectiveness of the newly formed Christian community. Not only are there differences within Christianity but serious differences with other 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 message do not understand their basic beliefs teachings and practices. A Buddhist has no god; Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in one God and a Hindu believes in many gods. There may be basic goodness in the teachings of the world's religions but there are also basic differences that cannot be denied.

You only have to read and watch the news to know that much of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East is 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 that we are in an age of greater religious understanding and tolerance, it is a mistake to claim that we are all the same. There are important differences between the world's religions. One important difference is that Christianity is concerned with salvation from sin while Muslims and Jews believe in sin but their basic message is not concerned with being saved. Confucians and Buddhists are primarily concerned with personal harmony and peace. The differences within Protestantism and between Protestants and Roman Catholics weaken the effectiveness of Christian witness. We don't have to go very far to see the split within our own Episcopal Church.

The essential problem is when one religious tradition places itself in judgment over another. When one church claims authority to judge others regarding legitimacy and eligibility for heaven, there are serious differences. You may have heard of the story of the man who arrived in heaven and was being given the tour. He asks about the various doors that remain closed. It is explained to him that behind each door is a denomination that thinks they are the only ones there!

Just as various sports have different rules, goals and scoring, we can't assume that all religions live by the same rules or have the same goals. 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 those twisted minds that manipulate their religion to suit their own need for political power and random violence. The tragedy of the conflict in Iraq that became a quagmire began over false rumors of weapons of mass destruction that led to our being engaged in a conflict with nations whose religious cultures are not understood by either side. 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 with Christians and Jews in a dialogue designed to help us understand our similarities and differences. Someone tested me by asking 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 sharp divisions within Christianity, we are torn between not wanting to sacrifice our integrity for the sake of unity and at the same time not wanting to weaken the effectiveness of Christian witness in the world.

You may have read about the controversy in Saint Paul's Catholic church in Hingham in which the parish priest departed from the policy of the Archdiocese by not allowing a child of lesbian parents to enroll in their parochial school. I would remind him that Jesus said, "Let the children come to me."

We are part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church whose divisions go back to the earliest times. We all draw from the same source in Christ as we follow different paths toward the same goal. Our salvation does not depend upon membership in any one institutional church, but upon our faith in Christ. Salvation by faith is one of the most basic teachings of Christianity. When churches claim exclusivity, "churchianity" becomes more important than Christianity. I never talk about being a good Episcopalian, I am far more concerned about being good a Christian.

I envision the Christian church as a large tree that is nourished from the same roots reaching up to bear good fruit. We are one branch of the many branches of that large tree. If we are truly one in Christ, no one branch of Christianity should try to cast judgment over the other by claiming to be the one true church. The effectiveness of Christian witness in the world depends on our working together as one in Christ.