

## LIVING OUR VALUES: *WE WILL RESPECT ALL RELIGIONS*

Ephesians 2.14 & 15, Jitsuo Morikawa “Toward the New Creation”

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I am glad to be home. I never thought I would live to see the day I would feel like a tourist in Chicago. And it was a great time there. But home is here.

And I want to give a shout out to David Bloom and University Baptist Church for bringing me here 21 years ago. Thank God for you. You changed my life.

One of the ways making a home here in the Pacific Northwest has changed my life is that this place has taught me the value – the spiritual practice - of caring for the earth. It's not that the people in the Midwest don't care about the earth. I come from a long line of farmers. So, we were heavily invested in what was happening with the land and with the climate. I remember, as a kid, family members talking about that mysterious *Farmer's Almanac*. In continuous publication since 1818, the Almanac was supposed to help predict changes in weather patterns that would impact planting and growing and harvesting. And that mattered because the relationship between land and climate was a matter of financial survival to my family.

What changed for me here in the Northwest was discovering the wonder of those wild places beyond the boundaries of the farm; vast wilderness that has not been bent to our will but has everything to do with our well-being. The Northwest has taught me the value of paying attention to this connection between the city and the wilderness, the local and the global.

I was moved by Pastor Harriet's sermon last week about living our value of protecting the environment by walking humbly on the earth. And that intersects with the value for this week. You will find it printed on the front cover of the bulletin and I invite you to read it with me:

*We will respect all religions by learning about the beliefs, values, and struggles of our neighbors and by demonstrating our support for them.*

I was anticipating this value as I was listening to Harriet's sermon and I was reminded of one of my theological mentors, the Mennonite theologian at Harvard, Gordon Kaufman. Given the ecological crisis that implicates all of us, Kaufman says:

*... the central religious issue confronting humankind today is of a different sort than ever before. And we may no longer claim that Christians have a corner on the solution to it, nor do Buddhists, or Jews, or the adherents of any other religion. What is now required is a reordering of the whole of human life around the globe in an ecologically responsible manner – something heretofore never contemplated by any of our great religious (or secular) traditions. All of humankind must learn to work together on this issue, or it will not be taken care of.*

So here's the thing. I suspect there are people who will hear us say, "we will respect all religions," and they will think, "isn't that nice." By which they might mean, "isn't that naïve." Or, "there they go again, down there at Seattle First Baptist Church, being all politically-correct."

But that's not the point. This value isn't about being nice or naïve or politically-correct. This is about the survival of our planet. This is about the future of our children. This is about any hope we have of coming to terms with that "mystical union" that is at the bottom of all our prayers.

Respecting all religions and learning from them is not nice. It's necessary.

And here I take the wisdom of that old text from Ephesians seriously. I'm just reading verses 14 and 15 from that longer text in chapter 2:

<sup>14</sup>For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

<sup>15</sup>He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace ...

Sometimes I think we underestimate the challenge it was to create a new community made up of Jews and Gentiles in that first century. Maybe that's why we have such a hard time understanding the anti-Semitism of all those centuries since then.

Respecting all religions is not pretending that they are all the same. It's the differences that are the gift each religious tradition has to teach us.

Ephesians doesn't pretend that there are no differences between Jews and Gentiles. In fact, the writer makes it very clear earlier in chapter 2 that Gentiles should remember that they were "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."

In other words, the writer is saying to the Gentiles in the crowd: Who would you be without the gifts of your Jewish sisters and brothers?

But imagine the Jewish members of that community hearing that Christ "has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances." That would be devastating. You mean everything that has helped to order our lives, all the values that have shaped our community, everything that has helped us survive is all gone?

Throughout the New Testament there are hints that Gentiles and Jews, in that early community trying to follow the way of Jesus, had trouble respecting each other. There was outright hostility in some places.

So the writer says that what the spirit of Jesus is up to is not just making better Gentiles and better Jews but is creating the possibility of a new humanity where those differences do not become dividing walls of hostility. "Christ has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

Differences aren't the problem. Diversity isn't the problem. Hostility is.

I've been reading the story and the sermons of Jitsuo Morikawa, a Japanese-American who helped to shape our life together as American Baptists. In the biography his wife published in 1990, she writes that Jitsuo's parents arrived in this part of the world in the early 1900s when: *There were ambitious politicians who rode into office on the waves of racial unrest by trumping up false accusations and arousing people's biases. Influential newspapers ran inflammatory stories keeping alive the "yellow peril" threat. By and large, the Asian immigrants were not welcome. They often became victims to satisfy the ugly need to have someone to kick around. Lacking any political clout or economic strength, immigrants were easy targets. They were called demeaning nicknames ... They were labeled inferior. Without any means to defend themselves they endured endless humiliation and mistreatment.*

That was the world into which Jitsuo was born.

And then there was WWII and Pearl Harbor and the hostility and the literal dividing walls of the internment camps. Jitsuo was already a well-educated and well-respected leader by the time he was carted off by the American government to the desert.

Soon after the war, in an unexpected act of courage - perhaps recognizing, in the fallout of the war and the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, the need for some new kind of humanity - First Baptist Church of Chicago called Jitsuo to be its pastor. He wrote that he never fully understood that act. And, of course, there were people who left the church and some who stayed but would never speak to him. There were those who nurtured that hostility that kept some people in his church divided.

But Jitsuo stayed. And later became the national director of evangelism for our denomination.

I know. The “E” word can make us a little jittery.

But Jitsuo said:

*Proselyt[ising] is not evangelism ... Evangelism is the good news of something new, God’s activity in history liberating men [and women] from the slavery of being merely used, humanizing the world toward the new society, freeing [humanity] to be authentically human, breaking walls of separation.*

The good news is that the new humanity we need to save the world is not some weapon that will wipe out our differences and not some privileged universalism that washes out the colors of our diversity.

The good news is that there is power at work right now breaking down those dividing walls of hostility that separate us.

That power is work right here in this very room.

I remember Rabbi Waskow here in that joint program with our partners from the Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue reflecting on the Jewish and Christian teachings about creation. Rabbi Waskow was preaching the same day that the young people of Diverse Harmony were singing in worship. When he got up to speak, his voice cracked and he said: “This feels like home.”

A few weeks later on the eve of Ramadan, a leader of the Muslim Association of Puget Sound was in this room to talk about the meaning of fasting and food in Islam. When he got up to speak, he said: “You know, this feels like home.”

Is it too much to hope that this is the delivery room of new kind of humanity? Not that we will go from this place all looking alike and talking alike or that somehow here our God-given diversity doesn’t matter. What if, instead, this is the incubator of way of living where those walls of hostility that divide us, begin to break down.

One of my favorite photographs of this room is from a World Communion Sunday where Rabbi Ted Falcon and Imam Jamal Rahman and Pastor Cathy Fransson and Pastor David Kile are all standing at this Communion table.

Each one has a place at the table.

Each one has shared the gifts of their own tradition.

Each one, in their own way, is chipping away at those dividing walls of hostility that keep us from seeing the mystical union that is our birthright and is the reality at the bottom of all our prayers.

That happened here. At this very table. In this very room.

And unlike Las Vegas, what happens in this room is not meant to stay in this room. At least that's our hope – that there is quite enough hope and quite enough power and quite enough love to send you out into the world with whatever you need to keep chipping away at those dividing walls of hostility that keep us separated.

So today, whoever you are sitting in this room, if you hear that voice that welcomes you and includes you and sends you out with just enough hope and power and love to imagine a new way of being human – today, if you hear that voice, well for God's sake, for the world's sake, and for your own, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Gordon Kaufman, *In the beginning ... Creativity* (Fortress Press, 2004), p.38. The biography of Jitsuo Morikawa by his wife, Hazel Takii Morikawa, *Footprints* (Jennings Associates, 1990), p. 15. The book of sermons by Jitsuo Morikawa, *A Prophet for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, was edited by Paul M. Nagano and William L. Malcomson (Council for Pacific Asian Theology, 2000), "Toward the New Creation," p.94.