

“Enough Love to Go Around”  
Isaiah 56:1-8  
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 30, 2023  
Jim Segaar, Seattle First Baptist Church

Today we continue a series of sermons on our Affirmation of Values. Together we will focus on Value #3:

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

If your childhood was anything like mine, that is most definitely NOT what you learned in Sunday School. I grew up in a family immersed in the Christian Reformed Church, a denomination of mostly Dutch families that idolizes the teachings of John Calvin. It wasn't just our church that was Christian Reformed. My school was Christian Reformed. Most of our community was Christian Reformed. My husband Jim Ginn loves to point out that in Lynden, Washington, where I grew up, there are four Christian Reformed churches within a block of each other. First, Second, Third, and Bethel Christian Reformed churches. To us, Baptists were a different species, and Catholics were from a different planet. We were taught to steer clear of any church that was not of Dutch origin and Calvinist. And when I say Dutch, I mean representative of the Netherlands of the 1850s, long before legalized drugs and Amsterdam's Red Light District abutting the Ode Kirk.

I don't remember our pastor ever explicitly saying that Baptists and Catholics were going to Hell. Honestly I don't remember much that our pastors said. I spent most of my time in church enjoying the music, napping during the long prayers, and daydreaming about being somewhere else. But as a community there was no doubt that WE were right, other Christian denominations were on shaky ground, Catholics weren't Christians, and other religions were pagan and evil and had to be converted to our brand of Christianity to save their eternal souls. Occasionally we would hear that God is Love, but the church's behavior screamed that Love was only for the worthy. There certainly wasn't enough Love to go around for everyone. Love was rare. An exception.

Sound familiar?

I never checked, but perhaps texts like our scripture for today were crossed out in our Bibles. Not that the Bible is chock full of good words for other faiths. I had to hunt quite a while to find this text, but it's a keeper.

Isaiah 56:1-8. New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (*altered*)

Thus says our God:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come  
and my deliverance be revealed.

<sup>2</sup> Happy is the mortal who does this,  
the one who holds it fast,  
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,  
and refrains from doing any evil.

<sup>3</sup> Do not let the foreigner joined to our God say,  
“God will surely separate me from their people,”  
and do not let the eunuch say,  
“I am just a dry tree.”

<sup>4</sup> For thus says our God:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,

<sup>5</sup> I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.

<sup>6</sup> And the foreigners who join themselves to our God,  
to minister to them, to love the name of our God,  
and to be their servants,  
all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it  
and hold fast my covenant—

<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar,  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.

<sup>8</sup> Thus says our GOD,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel:  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already gathered.<sup>[a]</sup>

A house of prayer for all peoples. Did you hear that growing up? I didn't.

So why do so many of us learn to fear, even hate other religions? Why are so many kids still taught that lesson around the globe? Exclusivity isn't limited to the Christian faith. Many people believe that religion is one of the biggest dividers of humanity that exists. That most wars are fought over religious differences. That last bit doesn't hold up to close scrutiny, by the way. According to the Encyclopedia of Wars, less than 7% of known wars were really religious. Ethnic animosity and economics are the real causes. ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_war](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_war))

But religion is so handy. That's how we can claim that God is on OUR SIDE. We have a recent example to consider. Patriarch Kiril of the Russian Orthodox Church endorsed Vladimir Putin's invasion of the Ukraine. Does that make the current conflict a religious war? Putin might want us to think so, but economics and resources and a megalomaniacal desire to recreate "Greater Russia" are much more of a factor.

So how do we get out of this quagmire of fear and hatred to a place where we can respect all religions? It turns out that one way is to grow up without any specific religion.

Mirabai Starr is one of my favorite authors and teachers. She was born into a secular Jewish family to parents who renounced all organized religion. I quote:

"I didn't start off safely ensconced in a single religion from which I was eventually compelled to make my getaway. I am not a refugee from my ancestral Judaism, nor am I a recovering Catholic. My family was not evangelical, and I did not fall into the clutches of a cult. I was never ever taught to believe that one religion had all the answers and that the others were wrong (or worse, evil). No one ever told me I'd burn in hell for practicing yoga or chanting the Ninety-nine Names of Allah."

*(Wild Mercy: Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom of the Women Mystics, Kindle edition, Introduction)*

Growing up Starr was exposed to the wisdom of multiple spiritual paths, avoiding divisive dogmas that obscured "these treasures." (Ibid)

"What I found irresistible was the essential unity at the core of all that diversity; each faith tradition was singing the same song in a deliciously different voice: God is love."

*God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* by Mirabai Starr, Monkfish Book Publishing Company, p. 3)

My own background is starkly different from Starr's. I grew up hearing that Jesus Christ is the Only Way, the Only Truth, and the Only Life. If I believed that now I could not preach this sermon. It would be blasphemy. In my teens I began to have doubts about some of the teachings of my birth church. For one thing, I couldn't accept the implications for what God must be like. Think about what kind of God the Creator exclusive beliefs dictate. Either God is a bumbler with a horrible batting average, or he is a monster, sending all but a tiny fraction of his precious creations to Hell forever. Who wants to spend eternity with a god like that?

So what's the alternative to religious exclusivity? Do we need to give up the tradition we were born into? The answer is a definite No. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a Tibetan Buddhist with an extensive record of loving across religious lines. He said the following:

“Religion, for most of us, depends on our family background – where we were born and grew up. I think it is usually better not to change that. The more we understand each other's ways, however, the more we can learn from each other.”

*(The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions, Kindle Edition, Forward)*

Mirabai Starr, and possibly the Dalai Lama, are living examples of a concept called Inter-spirituality. This concept has developed among mystics, contemplatives, from many religions. Wayne Teasdale, a champion of Inter-spirituality, was a Catholic lay monk who combined the traditions of Christianity and Hinduism in his life. He lived from 1945 to 2004, and wrote the following:

“There is a desperate need for spirituality in our time, yet this spirituality must be in dialogue and communion with everything of value in our mystical and religious traditions. We require a spirituality that promotes the unity of the human family, not one that further divides us or maintains old antagonisms. At the same time, this inter-spiritual approach must not submerge our differences; it must see traditions in relationship to each other, and provide options. The truth itself is big enough to include our diversity of views. They are all based on authentic inner experience, and so are all valid.”

*(The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions, Kindle Edition, Introduction)*

I love the line: “The truth itself is big enough to include our diversity of views.” One might add: “And God is loving enough to love across our diversity of views.”

An inter-spiritual person maintains their faith tradition, and learns about other faith traditions. As we follow the way of Jesus Christ, we can and should maintain our Christian traditions and Baptist heritage. And we should not only respect other faith traditions. We should learn from them. We have much to learn from Buddhism, Hinduism, Indigenous faiths, Judaism, Islam, and the list goes on.

I've had some shocking moments in my own path of inter-spirituality. A number of years ago I traveled to Bangalore, India on business. I was plunged into a culture I did not understand. The hotel I stayed in felt like a palace. The business park where I worked was surrounded by razor wire and guards with semi-automatic rifles. And in between was the chaos that is India. People and animals everywhere. Six lanes of traffic on a two-lane road. It took 2 hours to drive 14 miles from the hotel to the business park. At one point I ventured into a shopping mall, and in the air-conditioned collection of shops I saw what looked like an enormous purple elephant squatting in a large alcove. People were lined up in the mall to enter the alcove. My companion explained that the statue was of Ganesh, a popular Hindu deity, and the alcove was the entrance to a

temple. Years later I learned that the Hindu faith includes many deities such as Ganesh who are aspects of the one God. They provide multiple paths for people to take toward the Undefinable, somewhat like icons in the Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions.

According to Teasdale, Starr, and many other spiritual people today there is much that unites the world's religions. We share common threads that are most visible to people who are mature in their faith tradition, and who are mystics – people who desire to have direct experiences of the Divine through meditation and other methods of contemplation.

Mysticism itself is one of those common threads. People in all traditions are contemplatives who seek connection with the Divine in this life. This Spring I facilitated an Exploring Contemplation small group here at SFBC. We experienced meditation from our Christian tradition as well as other faiths. Many of us were most comfortable doing Buddhist meditation. For me, it just felt more natural than the Christian techniques I'd tried.

Closely related to mysticism is Naturalism, a connection to and respect for the Earth, the Cosmos, all life, all of nature. Francis of Assisi was an early Naturalist. He sensed a connection to everyone and everything around him, a connection that extended to the Divine. Native American and many other indigenous religions are combinations of mysticism and naturalism. In these climate-challenged days we would do well to learn much from them, to emulate them.

And let's not forget where this all started, with Love. Listen to these passages that were translated by Mirabai Starr (*God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Introduction):

From the Odes and Psalms of Solomon:

“All those who love you are beautiful;  
they overflow with your presence  
so that they can do nothing but good.  
There is infinite space in your garden;  
all men, all women are welcome here;  
all they need do is enter.”

And from Ibn' Arabi, a Muslim poet in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century:

O Marvel! a garden amidst the flames.  
My heart has become capable of every form;  
it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,  
and a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba,  
and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Quran.  
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camel takes,  
that is my religion and my faith.”

Our Judeo-Christian scriptures are chock full of conflicting information, and it is up to each of us to select those bits that will guide our lives. When it comes to God, we can pick the flood maker (Genesis 6+), the one who sends bears to maul disrespectful children (II Kings 2:23-24). Or we can pick the One whose house is a place of prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56:8), the One who says “Come to me, All You who labor and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The One who inspired the words “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them.” (I John 1:16)

Love. Infinite. Free. Enough for everyone, with plenty to spare.

The anthem that the choir sang has been in my heart ever since I started working on this sermon. It says what my heart longs for.

O Love, O Love, O Love that WILL NOT let me go.

That will not let me go.

That will not let you go.

That will not let any of us go.

O Love that holds all of us and everyone and everything, now and forever.

O Love...

May it be so.