

# ***E Pluribus Unum***

*1<sup>st</sup> Kings 18:20-39; Luke 7:1-10; Galatians 1:1-12*

CWZepp, BWCOB, June 2, 2013

A little over two years ago, President Barak Obama began a speech on immigration by telling the story of his experience while delivering the commencement address at Miami Dade Community College. Miami Dade is one of the most diverse schools in the nation, with students from 181 different nations earning degrees in May 2011. He said, “At the ceremony, 181 flags – one for every nation that was represented – were marched across the stage, and each one was applauded by the graduates and the relatives of the graduates with ties to those countries. So when the Haitian flag went by, all the Haitian American kids shouted out; when the Guatemalan flag went by, all the kids of Guatemalan heritage shouted out.” And so on and so forth with the flags of all 181 nations. But then, the president continued, “the last flag – the American flag – came into view and everyone in the room erupted in applause; everybody cheered.... It was a reminder of a simple idea as old as America itself: *E Pluribus Unum* – Out of many, one.”

I first read about this story a few months ago in the conclusion of Diana Butler Bass’ book *Christianity After Religion*, which I was reading with the pastor’s book study group. The image was stirring to me, so much so that I followed the link to the video of the speech to see the President tell the story in his own voice.<sup>1</sup> I have heard the phrase before, of course – *E Pluribus Unum*. After all, it is one of the unofficial mottos of the nation, appearing on our national seal and on all of our coins and the dollar bill. And having taken four years of Latin in high school, it was imperative that I learned what such phrases meant. (Incidentally, I realized *after* submitting my sermon title for the newsletter that it was my second Latin title in four sermons. Miss Horioka would be so proud!) But this image of flags waving and students cheering brought a new and poignant depth to the phrase for me. It helped me to see in a new way not only how many separate peoples could come together to make one nation, but also how one common identity and purpose could arise out of and even in the midst of many separate identities.

Diana Butler Bass told this story in the conclusion of her book as a metaphor for the spiritual awakening of our day that she was seeking to describe. With the Rev. Dr. James Forbes, former pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, she asserts that “the next great awakening will have to be an interfaith awakening.”<sup>2</sup> As such, the image of *E Pluribus Unum* at Miami Dade’s graduation evoked an image for her, which she describes in this way:

On the stage of awakening, I imagine Christians carrying high the cross, all the different varieties with the Bibles, prayer books, icons, and rosary beads; Jews holding the Torah; Muslims bearing the Qur’an; Buddhists with their Dharma wheel; Native peoples beating their drums; and so on, each group cheering its own flag. But then, the reign of God shows itself, as promised in these ancient words from the prophet Isaiah:

*In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it...They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/05/10/president-obama-fixing-our-broken-immigration-system-e-pluribus-unum>.

<sup>2</sup> Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. 2012. p 243.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 2:2-4.

And everyone applauds wildly. Everybody sheers. This is the new spiritual awakening. We proudly carry our own flag across the stage, and we shout for our team. But when the time comes, we will all be one in communion with God, in harmony with the cosmos, loving each other.<sup>4</sup>

I don't about you, but this image gets me every time. It's the kind of mental picture that makes Desmond Tutu's phrase "God's dream" such an apt synonym for the kingdom of God in my book. So moving was this image and the idea of an interfaith spiritual awakening to me that it was partially responsible for me choosing Brian McLaren's new book entitled *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* for the current pastor's book study.

But it wasn't the only motivation. The relationship of followers of Jesus to people of other faith traditions has been a critical question with which I, along with countless others, have wrestled for many years. My first pediatrician growing up was a Jewish man, a fact that I don't remember learning explicitly, but somehow always knew. I remember wondering what would happen to him and his family, along with all the people in China and India and everywhere else where they didn't believe in Jesus, since it didn't seem very good to me for God to send good people to hell just because of what they believed or where they were born. But I had learned in Sunday School that believing in Jesus was the only way to get to heaven, and that anyone who didn't believe in Jesus went to "the other place." When I asked questions about such things, I usually got very unsatisfying answers. They ranged from "Well, that's just the way it is" to "We like to think that God just takes care of that stuff." A few wise sages went Socratic on me and returned the questions, "What do you think about that?" I never remember anyone saying something like "Yeah, I've wondered that too", or "You know, that doesn't seem very good to me either." Perhaps some did share such sentiments with me, but if they did, their voices were certainly not the dominant ones that I heard.

As a pastor, such questions and issues are among some of the most frequent I have heard from youth, young adults, and others working through questions and wrestling with their faith and Christian identity. And while it is tempting to say that this is a new feature of life and faith in our pluralistic, globalized, and increasingly interconnected world, the truth is that such questions have been a part of our faith tradition for millennia. From the commandment for Israel to have no other god before YHWH to the deuteronomistic history with its account of the cycles of the faithfulness and rebellion of Israel and Judah, from the crusades to the missionary impulse of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in which the Brethren participated, the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition is replete with interactions with those of other faith traditions, and with the theological assumptions and convictions that lay behind them.

Three of today's scripture readings, taken directly from the revised common lectionary for this Sunday, offer a few examples of ways in which people of faith have responded to the challenge of relating to persons of other faith traditions. Let's start with the story recounted in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings about the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. While there are a number of different trajectories we could follow in looking at this story, I want to stick to the basic issue in this story of what is to be done in the face of these competing faith traditions. As one commentator put it, "In a time when it is imperative that people of different faiths respect each other rather than denigrate each other...how is [one] to handle this text in which the themes 'our prophet is better than your prophet,' 'our faith is better than your faith,' and 'our God is better than your God' seem to be the points of the story?"<sup>5</sup> In addition to wasting untold amounts of water during a several year drought in order to prove the supremacy of Elijah's God, the question becomes even more problematic when you read just one verse farther than the lectionary takes us. Verse 40, just after the people of Israel fell on their faces saying "YHWH indeed is God" and

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<sup>4</sup> Bass. pp. 268-269

<sup>5</sup> H. James Hopkins in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year C, Volume 3. p. 75.

after witnessing Elijah call down fire from heaven: Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.”<sup>6</sup>

I think most of us here this morning can probably agree that such an approach is not God’s way – then or now. But this stream of thought and action does exist in our history and continues to exist today on the margins. And a less extreme and outward form – the one that believes the world would be better off without “them” – plagues our world more than most of us would like to admit.

Next, let’s consider the text from Galatians, read just before the sermon. After a minimal of the obligatory greetings and salutations, Paul begins his letter with a strongly worded warning to the Galatians to not desert his original teachings about Christ. He asserts that the truth he proclaims is directly from God and can never be changed. He even goes so far as to say to his readers that if even an angel from heaven proclaims something different to them, they should be cursed. To me, Paul comes off here as just a bit defensive, and whatever the truth of his message, the posture of defensiveness, arrogance and hostility that he exhibits in these verses is all too familiar in the history of Christianity, especially in relation to other faith traditions. Claiming divine authority for dismissing and denigrating the beliefs of others, Christians can often assert a message that, even *if* true, becomes hard to hear and impossible to accept by those outside the tradition.

For a lot of us, perhaps even most of us, neither of these scriptures offer a positive word in how we consider and relate to persons of other faiths. In fact, they present the opposite – examples of simply unacceptable ways of relating to others. And herein lies a problem that Brian McLaren names as “conflicted religious identity syndrome” – the tension inherent in not being able to accept the hostile, exclusionary aspects of our religious tradition while also not wanting to lose the strong sense of identity, purpose, and meaning we have found in it. His book, which I mentioned we are reading in the Pastor’s book study, is an exploration of his journey through this tension as a Christian leader and a person of faith. As he says, “How do we disassociate from the hostility without abandoning the identity? How do we remain loyal to what is good and real in our faith without giving tacit support to what is wrong and dangerous? How do we, as Christians, faithfully affirm the uniqueness and universality of Christ without turning that belief into an insult or a weapon?”<sup>7</sup>

Our third text, from Luke, offers an example of a way forward for those wishing to follow Jesus faithfully in a multi-faith world. McLaren calls it a “strong-benevolent Christian identity” and simply put, it invites us to imitate the way of Jesus in relating to our neighbors, whether they be people that share our faith, practice another faith, or profess no faith. Consider what Jesus says and does in today’s gospel reading. A Roman centurion – a Gentile who was certainly an outsider to the Jewish faith of Jesus and his disciples – had heard about Jesus and sent a request via the Jewish elders of the town that he come and heal a highly valued slave in his household who was on his deathbed. The messengers tell Jesus that the centurion is a good and worthy man, so Jesus goes with them, apparently intending to answer his plea. He didn’t ask questions about the centurion’s theology. He didn’t hesitate to approach the home of a gentile. Given the larger tradition, we can probably safely assert that Jesus wouldn’t have hesitated to go even if it was the Sabbath. But when Jesus is almost to the centurion’s home, he sends out his friends to meet him and tell him he need not bother to come under his roof, knowing that all he needed to do was say the word and his servant would be healed. Jesus was amazed by the centurion, and he told the crowd that had followed him, “Not even in Israel have I found such faith.” And the slave was healed.

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<sup>6</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 18:40.

<sup>7</sup> Brian McLaren. *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-faith World*. 2012. p. 20.

When he was asked by a missionary what he would suggest Christians could do in order to see the Christian faith take root in India and contribute its power to the uplift and redemption of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most famous Hindu admirer of Jesus, replied, "I would suggest, first of all, that all of you Christians, missionaries and all, begin to live more like Jesus Christ"<sup>8</sup>

With word and deed, I think Jesus demonstrated how we are to live – not just with people of our own religious persuasion, but with all our neighbors. The two greatest commandments to which he pointed and which I think we could say he modeled were to love God whole heartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>9</sup> And when asked who is my neighbor, Jesus told a story about a Samaritan who showed kindness to a person of another religion who was in need.<sup>10</sup> In this context, how we as Christians are to relate to persons of other faiths doesn't seem very complicated.

Brain McLaren writes:

[The] term *common good* and its cousins, *commonweal* and *commonwealth*, are, I am increasingly convinced, excellent synonyms for Jesus' term *kingdom of God*. Similarly, Jesus' word for [the] radical turn from selfish and groupish interest toward the common good was *repent*. And here Christians face a special challenge, because Christ's good news calls *us* to repentance before it calls anyone else. It calls us to repent of the many ways our Christianity has become an oppositional clan or hostile caste or supreme civilization that demands loyalty due only the commonwealth or kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup>

McLaren credits one of his mentors with sharing with him the idea that "in a pluralistic world, a religion is judged by the benefits it brings to its nonmembers."<sup>12</sup> From that perspective, our collective faith tradition has plenty for which we need to repent in both our past and our present. But we also have much good to offer to our neighbors of all faiths and of no faith. And I am grateful to be a part of a congregation and a denomination that has often shown a willingness to enter our multi-faith world with a strong and benevolent witness – serving and working for the good of all of our global neighbors, deeply rooted in a desire to live and love more like Jesus. And it is my hope that as we continue to seek and live into all that that means, we might join that metaphorical progression of faith traditions, proudly waving our Brethren flag and respectfully cheering on our Jewish and Muslim and Hindu sisters and brothers, but saving our loudest and wildest cheers for the one banner that unites us all – the love of God for all the world – which binds us all together as one family – and which makes the many, one.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 268.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28

<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:25-37

<sup>11</sup> McLaren. p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 40.