

## **RADICAL REASSESSMENT**

**PHILIPPIANS 3: 4b-14**

**OCTOBER 6, 2002**

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It is World Communion Sunday. Together with Christians around the planet – Zimbabwean Pentecostals, Romanian Orthodox, Chilean Catholics, and Swedish Lutherans – we break bread today at the Lord's Table.

World Communion Sunday was conceived in the last century as a way to unite, for one Sunday, the Christian family. But I suggest the wide angle lens of World Communion Sunday, now decades old, is not wide enough.

I say this because our city, not to mention our nation, is more diverse than ever before and second, because if we know anything after September 11<sup>th</sup> we know that religious faiths of *all kinds* are terribly important.

It is time to reassess who and where we are as Christians alongside other faith traditions and believers. The world is too complicated and dangerous for us not to.

The Chautauqua Institution has been widening its lens for the past several years. Religion Department chair Ross MacKenzie conceived and established something called the Abrahamic Initiative: a conversation in which the three major world religions claiming Abraham as their patriarch can meet and talk and get to know one another. Dr. MacKenzie's vision was ahead of its time.

Maybe you saw the cover of Time Magazine this week announcing a new book exploring the Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The author watched the Trade Centers burn and fall a year ago and said to himself there must now be a way to find what connects us, rather than letting what divides us further fragment the human family.<sup>1</sup>

It is time for a radical reassessment. The front page Buffalo News' article last week about religious affiliation was fascinating. 71% of Western New Yorkers, more than any other metropolitan area, are affiliated with some religious community. Christians one of many.

I ran into a member of one of our downtown sister congregations this week. He said that 71% religious affiliation is what makes our community great and will spell the demise of casino gambling. This is not a gambling town, he said. This is a city of strong families, good neighbors and solid values. I hope he is right.

Casino gambling aside what he is saying is that religious faith matters in the way we live, in our conduct, in how we spend our time and money. As one preacher says, religious faith of any kind is about turning toward God and one another in love. You can see the results in the way people live.

Yet, we have a long way to go. I also encountered two folks in my travels this week both of whom categorically condemned members of other faith traditions.

In one sweeping comment: "they just aren't like us," "they don't act or think or live like us. They are different. Outside the pale. Beyond all hope."

It was a disturbing comment. As I probed to see if I could find where the speaker was coming from the separatism and heat intensified.

Country Western singer Willie Nelson, says “if I can get the rhythm, if I can imagine the feeling, then I can sing it. It’s all one song.”<sup>ii</sup>

What I am asking us to do today this World Communion Sunday is to try to get the rhythm and imagine the feeling, if you will, that we are all of us members of one human family. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Native Americans, Unitarians....all of us singing one song.

Like the Koran says, “the world starts and ends as one...what happens to one of us happens to all of us.”<sup>iii</sup>

Shift with me to this morning’s lesson from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The church at Philippi endured severe religious persecution. Paul was in prison and expected to die for the Christian faith when he wrote those words we heard Cornelia read this morning.

In the verses immediately preceding today’s lesson Paul issues a warning against “the dogs” and “evil workers” who insisted on circumcision for Gentile Christians and boasted about their connections with Israel. Sounds all too familiar!

So Paul says, I can play that game too. The first part of his letter reads like a curriculum vitae. He lists aspects of his life decided by virtue of his birth. “Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin.” The equivalent of a First Family of Virginia.

Next, he covers matters over which he did have a choice: “as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under law, blameless....” He was a decorated soldier with Purple Hearts and Silver Crosses and Medals of Honor.

Then without offering so much as a drum roll or even hinting at a vision or his road to Damascus experience Paul says, “whatever gains I had, the Ivy League degree, the title before my name, the beach house, the place of honor at my clubs and community boards, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.”

Not only loss, he says, but rubbish, dung is the closer, more accurate translation.

In essence Paul is saying, “all of those things which I thought were the answers to life, the ingredients for success and happiness, the measure of good living and benchmark of a solid citizen I now know not only don’t matter, they cannot compare to the life I have in Christ.”

Do you see what Paul has done? He has taken the gospel and said rather than being the answer to all of my problems, the gospel has disturbed the answers I have found. The gospel has sent me in search of new solutions to what I now understand as the real problems of life.<sup>iv</sup>

Radical reassessment. Many of the things he held dear, namely his religious beliefs, turn out to be ill-conceived and detrimental to God’s purpose and plan for the human family.

Did you ever experience radical reassessment? So often religion entertains more easy answers than it does difficult but good questions. I am even bold to say such religion is behind the swelling of a good many pews in North America and the separate and superior attitude among a good many Christians.

No wonder Paul was blinded for three days on the road to Damascus when he encountered Christ and was converted. You could make a case that life didn't get any easier for Paul as a result of that conversion, it got more difficult.

Andrew Greeley, the Roman Catholic priest and writer says, "if one wishes to eliminate uncertainty, confusion, and disorder from one's life, there is no point in getting mixed up either with Yahweh or Jesus of Nazareth."

Scott Peck says essentially the same thing in his Road Less Traveled. A book that spent more time on the New York Times best-seller list than any book in history. I would wager the success of Peck's book is hinted at in his very first line, "Life is difficult." This thoughtful essay is offered against the how-to, problem solving books that normally occupy such lists...especially the Christian best-seller lists.<sup>v</sup>

What we learn from St. Paul today is the ancient truth that life is difficult for individuals and churches. And sometimes, as a result, we have to radically reassess things.

Phillip Yancey, says "I used to believe that Christianity solved problems and made life easier. Increasingly, I believe that my faith complicates life, in ways *it should* be complicated. As Christians we cannot *not care* about the environment, poverty, homelessness, racism and religious persecution. God does not give us that option.

Throughout church history, Christian leaders have had an impulse to pin everything down, to reduce behavior and doctrine to absolutes that could be answered on a true/false test. We tend to tilt in one direction or the other, usually with disastrous results. But this tendency is not to be found in the Bible. Instead the mystery and uncertainty of life are all there.<sup>vi</sup>

You see there is a great secret at the heart of Christianity. A secret G.K. Chesterton saw and understood and made the cornerstone of his theology.

"Truth," he said if I may paraphrase, "is not in the middle, nor on one extreme. It is in both extremes. Christianity keeps both furious opposites."

Back to World Communion Sunday 2002. What are the furious opposites of our faith today? That on the one hand Christ is my Lord and Savior but on the other hand for Jews or Muslims or Hindus he is not.

That on the one hand I discover my purpose in life in Christ but on the other hand others find theirs in Torah or Mohammed or Buddha.

That on the one hand Christ is the way, the truth and the life for me but on the other hand for my Muslim, Jewish and Unitarian neighbors he is not.

When St. Paul was pressed to draw a line on religious allegiance where did he draw it? Not with circumcision, or the Ten Commandments, or some simple Jesus formula.

He drew the line with Abraham in his brilliant fourth chapter of his letter to the Romans. Father of all of us, some of us literally, some of us spiritually. What we have in common with Abraham is our trust that by surrendering our lives to God we will find direction and guidance. And not just direction and guidance but God's purpose for each one of us and for all of us together.

Paul reached back to Abraham before Abraham was a Jew, before anyone heard of Christ or Mohammed or Buddha. And Paul said what matters is our trust in God not our differences in ritual and language.

It is what the Koran means when it says, “we believe in that which was bestowed from on high upon us and we believe in that which was bestowed from on high upon you. And we surrender our lives to this One, Great God.

What does this mean for us today? It means a wider lens as we look out on this very community and our global village. It means participation in our second annual “Understanding Islam” series this fall.

It means signing yourself and our children up with our friends from Temple Beth Zion and Numan Mosque for our Mitzvah Day of the month and annual Mitzvah outreach.

It means joining us next summer as we read and talk about Thomas Friedman’s book From Beirut to Jerusalem.

It means we will keep looking for ways as a family of faith that we can, as Willie Nelson says, “get the rhythm and imagine the feeling” of that one song God sang to us at the beginning of time – that we are, all of us, members of one human family.

World peace depends upon it. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> TIME Magazine, September 30, 2002

<sup>ii</sup> Adam Gopnik, “The In-Law: Willie Nelson has a song for everyone,” The New Yorker, October 7, 2002, 56.

<sup>iii</sup> The two quotes from the Koran in this sermon are taken from a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor at The Chautauqua Institution July 19, 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary based commentary on the NRSV Year A (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 511.

<sup>v</sup> Philip Yancey, “Living with Furious Opposites,” from The Best Christian Writing 2001, John Wilson Editor (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001) 315.

<sup>vi</sup> Yancey.