

One God, One Nation, One World
Thanksgiving Interfaith Service
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Temple Israel
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At some point, in the avalanche of punditry and commentary leading up to the recent presidential election, I heard an anthropologist talking about the presidential race and, well, race.. To be honest, at first I wasn't paying much attention—it was one of those times when I had CNN on mainly as background noise. But then I heard this guy say that racism might have anthropological roots, dating back millennia to the days when our ancestors were starting to organize themselves into primitive tribal societies. The anthropologist postulated that racism developed as a way of instantly being able to tell whether or not someone was a part of your tribe, or was an outsider and possible threat.

Now I have no idea whether this guy actually knew what he was talking about, or whether he was full of bunk. But I was saddened by the idea that racism and tribalism and exclusivity are somehow written into our DNA—that we are genetically coded to divide ourselves into “Us” and “Them.”

The anthropologist's words came back to me on election night, as I watched the expressions of both disbelief and joy that were on so many faces—black and white—at the election of an African-American to be President of the United States. I was both moved and stunned by the almost giddy joy with which Barack Obama's election was greeted in so many countries all around the world.

It seems to me that the emotion with which so many have welcomed the election of a black man to the most powerful position on the planet has to do with more than politics.

Whether we are Republican or Democrat, whether we voted for McCain or Obama or didn't vote at all, there is something in the election of this man, and what it represents, that has touched something very deep in the human soul. I think, at least in part, that the incredulous joy we saw the night of November 4 and in the days following is rooted in something very primitive—that it expresses a hope that lurks within the human heart, a hope that what binds us together really *is* more powerful than what separates us; the hope that perhaps we are *not* genetically destined to be forever divided into tribes and factions and sectarian groups.

As I've been thinking and meditating on our theme for tonight--One God, One Nation, One World—I've been reflecting on this push/pull that exists in us and that has been played out so dramatically on the political stage. On the one hand there is our smallness of heart and mind, our suspicion and hostility of the "Other," our distrust of the one who is different, alien, unknown. But on the other hand, there is also deep within us a profound yearning to believe we can transcend our differences and become one community—even one global family.

I have wondered if this tug of war between factionalism and community, between exclusivity and inclusiveness, isn't another of the endless examples of the tug of war between human sin and God's will. Between the sinful need to make God in our image, so that God hates all the people we hate; and God's enduring vision of the oneness of humanity that constantly overturns those walls of division that we keep building.

Tonight, in this place, the three great faiths of Abraham are gathered together. Within each of our faiths, we see this push/pull, this tug of war between exclusivity and inclusiveness. Within each of our faiths there are those who claim to have exclusive title to God and who insist they have insider information about who God loves best—or loves only.

I want to speak for a moment confessionally, about how this sin of exclusivity has been expressed in my own faith. Sadly it goes back almost to the very beginnings of Christianity. After three centuries of persecution, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and almost immediately the persecuted became the persecutor as Christians turned on their Jewish brothers and sisters. In the Middle Ages, Christian crusaders exterminated whole Jewish communities before marching off to kill Muslims in the Holy Land. In the seventeenth century, Christians fell to killing one another in the bloody Thirty Years War, as Protestants and Catholics slaughtered hundreds of thousands over arcane and trivial theological differences.

And today, of course, there are many Christians who insist they alone hold have exclusive right to God's love, grace, and salvation. As those great theologians the Austin Lounge Lizards put it:

I know you smoke, I know you drink that brew
 I just can't abide a sinner like you
 God can't either, that's why I know it to be true that
 Jesus loves me--but he can't stand you
 I'm going to heaven, boys, when I die
 'Cause I've crossed every "t" and I've dotted every "i"
 My preacher tells me that I'm God's kind of guy; that's why
 Jesus loves me--but you're gonna fry
 God loves all his children, by gum
 That don't mean he won't incinerate some.

This is the worst we can be as people of faith. Small. Bigoted. Self-righteous. And most tragically of all, using this utter certainty of God's favor as a pretense for marginalizing, rejecting, and even killing other children of God.

But while this sin is a part of our heritage and a part of our larger faith communities, it does not have to determine who we are. For within all our faiths we also hear God's clarion cry to oneness and community.

I love the words of the prophet Isaiah whose vision of unity looks like an enormous party, “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” (Isaiah 25:6) In the Christian scriptures, one of Jesus’ last prayers before his crucifixion was a fervent plea “that they all may be one.” The fundamental assertion of Islam is that there is only one God.

Certainly there are differences, and profound differences, among us. To work toward unity does not mean that we must or should relinquish our diversity. To strive for community does not mean we must give up our differences. But it does mean embracing that which binds us together. We are all children of Abraham. Even more importantly, we are all children of God. That which binds us together is so much more important, and ultimately so much more powerful and enduring, than that which would separate us. And in a world that is getting smaller and smaller, that is becoming more and more connected, more and more interdependent, where we are becoming more and more reliant upon each other, it is time for the Abraham’s children to proclaim and live out the oneness of God, and the oneness of the human family.

Sufi poet Hafiz put it this way:

Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That.

Out of a great need—and out of God’s great love for us all—let us hold hands, because the terrain around here is far too dangerous to let go.