

The Honda and the Bar Mitzvah:

Christian Particularity in a Pluralistic World

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Can a church be a people of clear Christian identity and at the same time be open to truth found in other religions? Can we be a people of sure Christian conviction and at the same time have a generous respect for people of other faiths?

I think so. And both sides of the questions are important: The conviction side and the openness side. For some openness is easier than conviction; for others the conviction is easier than the openness. I want to argue for both this morning as I examine Christian particularity in our pluralistic world.

I

The philosopher George Santayana once remarked:

...every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and the bias which that revelation gives to life.

What is the marked idiosyncrasy of our Christian faith, its surprising message and the good bias which our revelation gives to life? What do we stand for, and what difference does it make in our lives?

Flannery O'Connor paraphrased Jesus' words from John this way: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you *odd*." We generally don't like being odd, but what if part of the power of our faith is its oddness?

When God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, God said, "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. You are my *peculiar treasure* among the nations."

And what was its peculiar, surprising idiosyncratic character? Two major things. First as a people freed from slavery they would be a people who wanted all people to be free. They would have a special passion for justice and the care for the widow, orphan and stranger (or immigrant) for once they were strangers themselves in a foreign land.

Secondly, they would be a people of the Book, centered around the commandments of God, first given to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

What is the peculiar, idiosyncratic character of *Christian* faith? First; we share Israel's story with its passion for justice and willingness to live by God's commands.

But most importantly we follow the revelation of God in a man named Jesus of Nazareth. We are followers of his particular way.

And this particular way was characterized by compassion and love. The greatest commandment, he said, was the love of God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and the love of our neighbor as ourselves. Then he intensified the command to love to include the love of our *enemy*. Moreover his way was the way of non-violence; he chose to die at the hands of violence rather than take up the sword himself. That's a start!

How do we then meet people of different faiths? The French existentialist, Camus, himself an atheist, said that if dialogue is to be real then people must "remain who they are and speak their minds." The world he says "needs Christians who remain Christians." As I have worked with my Jewish rabbi friends they have said they want me not only to be respectful to them, they want me to be truthfully, fully who I am as a Christian. True pluralism is the engagement of convictions and the honoring of the "dignity of difference" as England's chief rabbi put it.

II

When I was at Myers Park Baptist we called ourselves, “an ecumenical church in the Baptist tradition.”

Ecumenical means being committed to unity among all Christians and to friendship with all religions. Mother Teresa put it this way: “I love all religions; I am in love with my own.”

Over 100 years ago the Ecumenical Movement began. Facing the scandal of the dividedness of Christ’s church it sought unity among all Christians. Jesus, after all, prayed that we be *one*. It was an important movement and has had many successes. But we need a *deeper ecumenism* today that promotes respect and friendship among all religions. The future of our world is at stake. As the great Catholic theologian Hans Kung said: “The prerequisite of peace among the nations is peace among religions.”

I think Grace Baptist has such a ecumenical heart. One example is your annual interfaith Thanksgiving service that brings together Christians, Jews and Muslims. What a witness that is. Another example is how I have seen you as individuals offer friendship and respect to people of other faiths in the community.

In your pastor profile which is on your website you say you are looking for a pastor who teaches the “love of God as revealed by Jesus with an understanding and appreciation of God’s touch through other faith traditions.” A beautiful way of putting it. I think this reflects who you are, and yours is a witness of a way of being Christians which is badly needed in Statesville and in the world.

III

So I have argued for openness toward other religions. But openness alone is not enough. As the saying goes: Some people are so open minded their brains are falling out. Now let me argue for Christian conviction as part of who we are. One philosopher has said that openness is a good “second order virtue”. The first-order virtue is a set of convictions. To have an expansive circumference we need a solid nucleus.

An important question for progressive churches is: *how can we provide a core set of worship, educational and missional experiences which can help shape us as a Christian people of God in a pluralistic world.*

In some ways this sermon is a call to be more Jewish. That is, to take seriously the need for clear spiritual identity. As a spiritual minority in most cultures, Jewish people know if they do not do a good job shaping their spiritual identity as Jews, they may not survive to the next generation.

A key issue is “assimilation”. How much will they stand distinct from their culture and how much will they adapt to it, blend in with it? The three main branches of Judaism in America represent three different approaches to this question. The most strictly observant branch, the one remaining most distinct from culture, is *Orthodox Judaism*. You can identify them by how they dress, for example. The most liberal branch; the one most adaptive to culture is *Reform Judaism*. The moderate group in the middle is *Conservative Judaism*, which seeks to conserve Jewish tradition while making some adaptation to culture, but not as much as Reformed Judaism.

All of this sets the table for a joke a Reform rabbi told me, poking fun at his liberal tradition.

A Jewish boy in the Orthodox tradition was preparing for his bar mitzvah. His father asked him what he wanted as a gift for his bar mitzvah, and the boy replied that he wanted a Honda.

The father did not know what a Honda was, but did not want to admit this to his son. So he went to his Orthodox rabbi and said: My son is preparing for his bar mitzvah. When I asked what he wanted for a gift, he said, “A Honda.” What’s a Honda?”

The rabbi said, “I don’t know what a Honda is. Go ask the Conservative rabbi. He will know.”

So the man went to the Conservative Rabbi and said, “My son is preparing for his bar mitzvah. For a gift he wants a Honda. What’s a Honda?”

The Conservative rabbi said, “I don’t know. Go ask the Reform rabbi. He’ll be sure to know.”

The man went to the Reform rabbi and said, “My son’s having his bar mitzvah and wants a Honda as a gift. What’s a Honda?”

The Reform rabbi replied, “Oh, that’s easy. A Honda is a motorcycle, but bar mitzvah. What’s this bar mitzvah?”

We value openness here, but we don’t want a graduating senior to say, I know what *zazen* is, a sitting form of Buddhist meditation. But baptism, what’s this baptism you talk about?

IV

One of the great novels to come out of the Viet Nam war is Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. In it he describes what soldiers carried into battle—the most crucial emblems of who they were, so to sustain them in the horrific

conditions of war: a picture from home, a letter from a girl friend, a cross, a New Testament.

What do we give our children and youth to carry with them as they go into the world? What do we carry ourselves?

We do not want to send our young ones into the world with a smug sense of their superiority as Christians. Too many Christians have on all too sure sense of themselves as Christians, as separate and superior to other faith expressions.

But I hope we can cultivate in them and in us a clear sense of what it means to follow Jesus, some sense of the “special and surprising message” of Christ’s way, and of the “bias” the revelation of Jesus gives to life.

I think that bias is the bias of love, the passion for justice, the importance of compassion.

Can we be a people of conviction and openness? Sure of who we are as followers of Jesus and generous in our respect for those who are different? I think so.

Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and truth shall make you free!” Especially, free to love.