

Religion . . . and Faith

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Eagle River, Wisconsin

June 2, 2019

Dale L. Bishop

Text: John 17:20-26

One of the most extraordinary ecumenical moments I've experienced occurred in 1988, in Cyprus. I was a visitor at the Fourth General Assembly of the Middle East Council of Churches. To understand why it was such an extraordinary moment, I'll need to review, as briefly and as painlessly as I can, a little early church history. The general outline is as follows: the church universal was born in what we now call the Middle East (what people then thought of as the center of the world); and it was in the Middle East that the church discovered the peculiar pleasure of division. Now, lest we get to feeling all superior, I need to point out that although church division began in the Middle East, it was perfected here, in the West.

The first church fights, ironically, were about Jesus, the very Jesus whom John, in our scripture for the day, quotes as praying "that they all may be one." That prayer should ring a bell with us in the United Church of Christ, because it's the one that's on our denomination's official logo. The early church fought about the nature of Jesus: was he mostly divine or mostly human, and if he was both human and divine, how does that actually work? The early church, after it fought about these questions, formally divided over them in the fifth century. The next divisions were about authority; the churches fought over turf, about who should be in charge. Ring a bell? So the Orthodox church first divided into two groups that disagreed over the nature of Jesus, and then the eastern

and western, Roman and Greek, churches divided over what were basically issues of nationality and power politics that were dressed up as theological disputes. In the eleventh century, the Orthodox and Catholics called each other the worst names they could think of and then a long and bitter divorce began.

So, back to that meeting in Cyprus. In 1974, the Middle East Council of Churches had somehow miraculously brought together the two Orthodox families of churches, the ones who'd disagreed about the nature of Jesus, along with the most recent newcomers to the scene, the Protestants. Conspicuously missing, however, were the Catholics.

But at this Assembly in 1988, to everyone's amazement, the Catholic hierarchs made a dramatic entrance in their full regalia and announced their intention to become a part of the Council. It was the first time since the eleventh century that heads of the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the Middle East had even been together in the same room. For the sake of unity, and in the face of an overwhelmingly Muslim environment, everybody decided to set aside their contentious history and focus on what they had in common. So, during that one Assembly, we had morning worship led by Protestants singing, in Arabic, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," followed that evening by worship led by the ancient Syrian Orthodox Church, in the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke, followed the next morning by the Catholics, who dress up like the Orthodox but cross themselves differently from the way the Orthodox do it. And, at the center of it all, was a wonderfully appropriate icon depicting Jesus in a boat, and calling all of his disciples, in their separate boats, to him. The theme of the Assembly was, "Jesus Christ, the Living Hope."

What is it that makes Christian unity so difficult, particularly when we all know that Jesus, the head of the church, prayed that we all should be one? I think I told you the story, told to me by an Armenian, about an Armenian who was stranded on a desert island. Before he was discovered, he built a town on that island that included two churches. When he was asked why he built two churches since there was only one of him,

he answered, “That’s the church I go to,” and pointing to the other, “And that’s the church I *don’t* go to.”

We all seem to need a church that we *don’t* go to. Maybe we need to invalidate others in order to validate ourselves. But I think that at the root of our Christian disunity is something more primeval, more fundamental, than differences in doctrine and differences in the way we organize ourselves. I think that the fundamental cause of division in the church universal, just as it is in the church local, is fear: fear of difference and fear of God.

We know about fear of difference, of course. We fear people who look different, people whose skin color is different, people whose language is different, people whose sexuality is different. We may dress up those fears with other kinds of arguments: “they don’t fit into our culture; they don’t share our values; they steal our jobs; they don’t believe in the same God we believe in.” But basically we fear difference. I know that in this church and in our broader family in the United Church of Christ, we try to combat those fears with faith and love, and when we fail, we confess our sins and we try again. The fear is always there, however.

But what was that business about fear of God? Aren’t we supposed to fear God? Well, yes and no. If we understand fear as respect and awe, as a sense of our own unworthiness before God’s love and majesty, yes. But if we fear God as we might fear an abusive parent, or if we see God as a kind of cosmic bully who arbitrarily visits disaster on whomever he whimsically chooses, no. God is love, John tells us, and perfect love casts out all fear. The opposite of love isn’t hate; it’s fear.

So where does this fear of God, this negative constricting fear, come from? I think that you’ll be surprised by my next sentence. I think that such fear comes from religion—not just bad religion, but religion itself. Now I *know* that I’ll need to explain that.

If you comb the gospels, you’ll find no evidence to suggest that Jesus came to live among us in order to found a religion, or to set up a religious system. Yes, Jesus used a word that

we translate as “church” a couple of times, but that word means simply, “those who are called,” called to follow him. In a sense, Jesus’ disciples were the first church. They were the church long before there were bishops, ministers and priests, or doctrines.

In fact, far from establishing a religion, Jesus seemed always to be at odds with religion. He criticized religious leaders and he broke religious laws. He literally touched untouchables, like lepers. He treated women as equals when religious law said that they were potentially unclean and really inferior. He praised faithful people from other religious traditions, and even compared his own Jewish leaders unfavorably to Samaritans and Gentiles. Jesus, from all the evidence, was impatient with religion and with people who garbed themselves in religion.

He was impatient with religion because religion can too often get in the way of faith. Jesus never told anyone that they could be healed by being more religious. In fact, he never taught religion. Rather, he discovered, and then encouraged, faith—the faith of the hemorrhaging woman who touched his robe, the faith of the leper who called to him from the roadside. “Your faith has made you well,” he told them. He marveled at the faith of a centurion, a Roman army officer, who asked Jesus to heal his slave. “Even in Israel I have never seen such faith,” he said.

We tend to use the words “religion” and “faith” almost interchangeably—and I confess to doing this myself—but we shouldn’t. Religion is our human effort to systematize and define faith, which by its very nature defies boundaries and systems, because it has to do with the infinite, and can’t be defined. Religion has to do with belief, which is something you do with your head. Faith has to do with your whole being, with your heart and soul and mind and strength. Religion wants to pin us down and to label us. Faith leads us beyond ourselves; it tells us that we are more than a category, more than a sect or a denomination. Religion is a dead-end road, one that leads to a fixed destination. Faith is an ever-expanding highway, “the future’s broadening way” is the way the hymn puts it, a

highway on which we travel with the exhilaration and terror of no map and no G.P.S. Faith is a highway that leads us to places we never imagined existed.

Religion is about fear, fear of a God who is all judgment and no mercy; faith is about fear's opposite, love. Division in the church represents the triumph of narrow religion over expansive faith. Division in the church and within the broader community of faith makes something that should point to what is real and ultimate, ultimate in itself.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam all make the same fundamental assertion—that God is greater, greater than anything or anyone we can imagine. But all three of these religions have behaved as if they *really* believe that Christianity is greater, Judaism is greater, Islam is greater. We're all subject to the same idolatry of making our understanding of God greater than God.

“I and the Father are one,” Jesus said. May we, in turn, be one with Jesus, the Jesus who is the only head of the church, the Jesus who prayed that we all might be one in faith, one in Jesus and with each other. Amen.