

Religious Freedom in a Divisive Culture

It feels as if the very title of today's sermon is filled with controversy. Is religion different than spirituality? Should we support everything someone wants to call a religion? What does freedom really mean? Do we truly have a divisive culture? And what, if anything, can we as individuals in a nation of millions, be expected to do?

I would be less than transparent if I did not begin today by saying my heart is heavy with the weight of humanity's ego driven quest to see only with the eyes of duality. I have lost interest in the opinions of what is right and what is wrong when thousands of people, including innocent children, are being held intentionally and consciously in conditions we outlaw for prisoners and animals. And leaders look to simply add more people to the dire conditions. I find it distressing that emergency responders have to learn how to treat the devastating wounds created by AR-15 rifles because the injuries are so common now and no one thinks it is appropriate to simply outlaw these weapons. These are weapons used, among other things, to limit the freedom of others to worship and gather. I feel confused when the leader of this country is most congenial with leaders of countries who are the most oppressive and who finds the most appropriate way to celebrate freedom is to have a parade of weapons and military might while in another corner of the national mall, wounded veterans and surviving families gather for a public concert.

When we speak of freedom we look to our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Perhaps we have become obsessed with the idea that we are a country of laws and we have forgotten that we are a country of consciousness also. Isn't that how Unity looks at our spiritual journey portrayed in the Bible? The evolutionary march from needing the structure of laws to the spiritual discernment of how love looks in every situation is the path from the Torah and Old Testament to the parables and examples of Jesus.

I found two very different definitions of freedom. Is it: *the power or right to act, speak, or think **as one wants** without hindrance or restraint.* Or is it simply: *the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved.* Perhaps it is a very liberal view of the first definition that is leading to some of our challenges. Do we understand freedom to be just not being in our defined jail system? Is that enough to qualify as freedom?

So is freedom doing as one wants without restraint? This is not meant to be a trick question but it requires us to take the thought trail in a direction we might not originally anticipate. The direction freedom might march off to is pointed to by the second half of the sermon title—"In A Divisive Culture". In the dualistic view of a divisive culture, there is me and then there is you. There is US and there is THEM. Since we are drawing lines, we might as well throw in US is right and THEM is wrong. The tendency once you get on this path is to require THEM to be like US, because we are right, or banish them from sight. We are just doing what we want. And herein lies the margins of freedom we forget about—I can do as I want so long as it does not interfere with others.

And here is the spot where some religion can tend to push us on the path of THEM and US, Wrong and Right. If my religion says it is the **Only Way** and Everyone must follow this path, we begin the process of denying freedom to others because they are a THEM and THEM is wrong. The more we rely on drawing lines between THEM and US, the more freedom is in danger.

So why is religious freedom so important? Do we need religion and/or spirituality? Pew Research Center has a solid reputation for doing research in the broad arena of religion. One of the most recent surveys was done in December of 2017. 29% of the people surveyed identified as non-religious. There were two subgroups: 12% were Religious Resisters, believing organized religion does more harm than good and 17% were Solidly Secular, reporting no religious beliefs and rejecting any New Age beliefs which I think related to crystals, angels and reincarnation. The characteristics of the Solidly Secular group was interesting in that it was mostly affluent, educated, white males. Now think for a moment about this group in this country. They have what they want from a material standpoint—power and money. Do they **need** to believe or fear any power other than themselves? Now that was a fascinating question that arose in me.

For 71% of us, whether it is formal, organized, defined or simply created on our own, we desire some sort of relationship to a higher power. The article about the report can be found online at pewresearch.org.

So why should religious freedom be important, other than it's mentioned in the very first Amendment to the Constitution? It has to do with the soul of the people. Not even just the soul of the people of this country. Religious freedom is in peril or banned around the globe. A divisive culture is being established, not just in this country but around the world.

Lines are drawn, borders are being tightened and defended, people are struggling to maintain a faith identity in a world preoccupied with the secular issues of economics, climate change, and power politics. I honestly don't pretend to have all the answers. I'm not even sure what the right questions are, much less the answers. So here are just a couple ideas I am committing to as I seek to support religious freedom and lessen the divisiveness of our culture.

1. We are one humanity sharing one planet and we need to get on board with **maintaining the fabric of oneness** we are each intricately woven into. I really hope no one honestly believes that what one person, one company, one country does is in isolation. Everything impacts others. What I choose to have for dinner impacts not only the people who share my refrigerator but the farmers and grocery industry. If we all choose to stop buying something, without a demand the supply dwindles. On the other hand, if I choose to hoard something or deny access to essential items to others, I create a crisis of scarcity. One choice at a time, my thoughts, words and actions impact others.

2. To build and maintain our oneness, we need to **look for common ground**. We can begin as basic as you want. Instead of looking at how we are different or the illusions of separation, find the places of commonality. On a planetary basis we can start with the very bottom level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If we all need clean water, clean air, sustainable food and shelter, isn't it in our common best interests to work together to maintain these resources? Can't we work together to innovate and problem solve?

In faith, we look for what is sacred and for what connects us to each other. No matter what name or no name we have for the divine, we honor the sacred nature in life and in each one of us. Whether we have words or silence, we pray and meditate. We find ways to respect and interact with one another. We care for one another.

I find airports and travel create interesting situations of common ground. Whether we are all trying to find the restroom, or our gate, or how to get through the wait time, people with tickets form little communities. You may not know their names but you recognize their luggage after changing gates a couple times. You find yourself helping to entertain a little one or supporting a mother finding a private nursing area. Someone offers to get you something as they trek to an area with food. Why can't we be more like this more of the time?

3. While we find common ground, rather than trying to force others to join US, **we value the gifts of diversity**. Myers-Briggs is a system of personality classifications often used in organizational teambuilding and interpersonal dynamic skill building. I had the opportunity to be in two different groups with the same results and very different outcomes while working in the corporate environment. In both groups my typing was significantly different than others and there was some commonality among others. In the first group, one person said, “See, we knew you weren’t like us. You’re just weird.” In the second group, one person said, “That is so cool. You can do stuff we can’t do and we see things in a way that is helpful to you.” Which group do you think was more functional?

I was thinking about the gifts of other faiths that we can value.

Perhaps we could benefit from a prayer practice that continues throughout the day, as the Muslim tradition teaches. The 5 prayer times each day are basically calculated based on the position of the sun. In areas where this is the prevailing faith, sounds call everyone to worship. In modern times, there’s an app for that!

Kabbalah is the mystic tradition of Judaism. It is an interpretation of the Bible with commentaries collected in the Zohar. At the Reformed Judaism site, I found this about their beliefs: “Within the soul of every individual is a hidden part of God that is waiting to be revealed. Even mystics who refuse to describe such a fusion of God and man so boldly, still find the whole of Creation suffused in divinity, breaking down distinctions between God and the universe.” So perhaps having a tradition based on the mystical interpretation of Charles and Myrtle isn’t so different after all.

Indigenous people generally share both a practice of ritual and a belief in “Panentheism”. Pantheism is God everywhere present. Panentheism is God present everywhere **in** everything. Rituals of drumming connect with the heartbeat of the Divine, present in all life. I might know a couple people who connect through drumming. Fire and cleansing rituals might not be too different than our annual burning bowl.

4. Lastly, if we recognize our oneness, connect through common ground and value the gifts our diversity bring, then **we will stand together** so that nothing is lost. We understand that worshiping differently than I do should not mean either than you cannot worship or that I cannot worship.

We stand together so that those with no faith are allowed the same rights and benefits we enjoy. We stand together so that by our numbers we create a new culture that is inclusive and accepting.

When we see attacks on places of worship that specifically target the faith tradition, I am touched by displays by other faiths in the coming weeks that seek to model unity. Muslims and Christians encircle a Jewish synagogue. Christians and Jews stand together as Muslims pray. Jews and Muslims protect a Sunday service. In a world where faith practice is unsafe, the fabric of our soul is at stake. It is the consciousness of humanity put in peril as the practices that inspire and restore us are taken away. Our freedom must not depend on denying freedom to others. No faith tradition should lay claim to any superiority on this earthly plane. I would be just as happy if we closed the post office on winter solstice and left it up to individuals how they celebrated Christmas and Hannakuh. Muslims should be able to dress as their tradition dictates without fearing retribution from employers and school administrators. The idea that we are exclusively a Christian nation is as false as the idea that we are a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, English speaking nation. It just happens that if you are **not** those things, we—as a collective culture and consciousness—struggle to treat one another with respect, dignity and equality. Let us heal our divisive culture into one of belonging and let us free our spirituality to unfold without the endorsement or requirements of government.