**5 Easter**

**May 18, 2014**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

A year ago I was invited to another church in the area to make a presentation. They had asked that I speak about an aspect of the Church’s liturgical calendar, and in the weeks before I spoke they had Rabbi Mark Goldman … then the rabbi at Temple Bet Yam … speak one week, and a leader in the Muslim community speak on another week. I was invited to speak as a “Progressive Christian” … almost as if my faith were as different from the faith beliefs of the host church as it was from Judaism and Islam. In the end, they may have been right.

I gave my talk on the subject assigned to me, however I did not say anything directly about Progressive Christianity. Then we came to the Q & A, and the first question was rhetorical. “You say you are Christian, but didn’t Jesus say, ‘No one comes to the father except through me?’ How can you call yourself Christian and still believe other faiths are valid?”

Now, one of the tenets of Progressive Christianity, at least the way the Center for Progressive Christianity defines it, is that although our path is through a faith centered in Jesus, we recognize and respect that other people may have other paths, and that we might learn something about our faith by considering their path. Obviously, the questioner had done his research about progressive Christianity and was challenging my faith … did it pass the test of orthodoxy?

I’ve told this story before, and people have asked me, “How did you respond?” I can honestly say that I resisted the temptation to debate the issue. What I did do was respond with “I” statements … “I believe …” “The way I see it …” I also said that I know that not everyone agrees with me, and I respect their position. But my remarks did not stop other questions along similar lines from being asked.

So, is it true that the only way “to the Father” ... to God … is by being a Christian? Does that mean that other people in the world around us who happen to worship God in a different way, and call God by a different name … or maybe don’t even believe in God … are denied access to a divine presence? In our Gospel reading from John this morning we hear those well known words: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." But we also hear “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

These words not only provoke confusion, but they also raise honest questions. In his World Christian Encyclopedia, David Barrett identifies 10,000 distinct religions, 150 of which have a million or more followers. Is it reasonable to believe that Jesus is the only way and that the other 9,999 religions are false? What are we, as Christian, to think?

Many people today favor some version of "religious pluralism" … the belief that no one religion can or should be normative for all people. Religious pluralism insists on a radically egalitarian perspective that grants parity and equal validity to all religions. A traditional Japanese saying suggests that despite their outward differences, all religions connect with the same divine reality … "Although the paths to the summit may differ, from the top one sees the same moon." However, a friend of mine once said, in an admonishment that we must ultimately make a choice about which path to follow, “If you keep changing paths you’ll never get to the top.”

I think it is fair to say that I am one of those who happen to believe in religious pluralism … that although my faith is Christian, I respect and honor those of different faiths. Life in my home would be very difficult if that wasn’t the case. Yet I also believe that some religious views and practices are clearly false, harmful, and even despicable. The world obviously has not ended, in spite of repeated predictions by people of deep faith that it would. I don't think that ancient Aztec human sacrifice was a viable means of approaching the God who gave us life. And I think the abduction of 300 young girls attending a Christian school in Nigeria because of a fanatical understanding of the Koran by a group called Boko Haram is not about the proper expression of devotion to the God who created this world. Some religious interpretations are clearly false … and some are harmful and even despicable.

If all expressions of faith were the same there wouldn’t be 10,000 distinct religions. The mere fact that we can count the number of distinct religions means that we have focused on what makes them different from each other. And for many people it is a matter of either/or, that is,, if my religion is the “right” religion, and you don’t believe the same things I do, than you must be wrong. So we end up in separate little boxes arguing about who is right and who is wrong; which is the better path to holiness; and which faith path is going to lead us to the divine presence of God. But what if we were to ask another question … not about what makes these religions different, but what might these religions hold in common?

Many of you have shared the journey of the St. Augustine Initiative for Compassion over the past three years. Affiliated with the Charter for Compassion International we had a dream that St. Augustine would be designated a Compassionate City by 2015 when the Nation’s Oldest City celebrates its 450th anniversary. Well, we passed that benchmark last September, and just two weeks ago Mayor Joe Boles, on a visit to our Sister City of Aviles, Spain, invited their mayor and city council to take similar action to become a Compassionate City … we will be the first Sister Cities in the world that are both Compassionate Cities. And this past Wednesday, at an event called Pecha Kucha (Pa cha cha ku) at the Amphitheater Conference Room, over two hundred young people … most were less than half my age … listened to nine presentations about Compassion in the world around us. And my guess is that many of those young people have no affiliation with any of the 10,000 different religions in David Barrett’s Encyclopedia.

I mention this in the context of my sermon because although there may be many things that divide the religions of the world, there are also some very basic principles that unite us. The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always … and in every way … to treat all others in this world as we wish to be treated ourselves. Not all religions have a version of the Golden Rule as part of their belief system, but most of them do … and certainly all of the major world religions. We Christians often quote Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” But five centuries before Jesus Confucius is quoted with a similar saying.

So, just what is compassion? What does it mean to be compassionate? What might it cost me, that is, what might I have to give up to live more compassionately? Aren’t we Christians, by definition, a compassionate people? Why would someone have to declare themselves, or their church, or their organization “compassionate?”

First of all, compassion is not just feeling sorry for the other who is facing some kind of trouble. Pity and compassion are not synonymous. The word “compassion” is derived from the Latin and Greek words meaning “to suffer, undergo, or experience.” So “compassion” means “to endure [something] with another person, to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to feel his or her pain as if it were our own, and to enter generously into their point of view. That is why compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstances whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else.

The premise is simple … treat all others as you would want to be treated … NOT as you have been treated, BUT the way you would like to be treated. So, if someone ignores you isn’t a reason to ignore them. Indeed, it is a call to acknowledge them. If someone insults you, instead of returning an insult, offer a compliment. The execution is not always simple or easy. In our homes and marketplaces, in the halls of justice and politics, in the use of our personal bank accounts and in the global economy we must look at how we treat others and set aside our competitive ways and look to our shared responsibilities. We must treat others as we want to be treated ourselves. We must move beyond mere toleration of the other and begin to appreciate them as sisters and brothers of the same God, regardless of the name they call this divine presence.

I return to the Gospel of John. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Those who want to define themselves against others will use this as a way to say that Christianity is the exclusive … the one and only … way to salvation. However, I for one, also hear the verse “In my father’s house there are many dwelling places” and understand that to mean others are included also. I also try to use our scriptures in ways that unite us, not separate us. If I take seriously what Jesus took seriously then I find his way of living in relationship to God as a means to truth and fullness of life. I can offer that understanding to others … if they are curious … without denying that they may have a way by another name that also leads to truth in their life and a fullness of being which contributes to seeing the other as one would see oneself.

It is in this light that I invite you to look at your life and see where compassion fits as a means to coming closer to a divine presence. I invite you to do to others what you would like done to you. I invite you to seek a Truth which binds the children of God together … to seek a way that is compassionate … and to seek life in all its fullness. Look at those who are living in those other “dwelling places” in the house of the divine presence of God and recognize them as fellow travelers on a spiritual journey … regardless of how different they may seem from us. For some, the verse “No one comes to the Father except through me” grounds their faith. Although it sounds paradoxical, I do not want to deny that to them … I just ask that they open a room for me. I invite you to see those who see sometimes see as “different” … for whatever reason … as a fellow child of God. Treat them as you would like to be treated.

Amen.