

## **“If God is for us, who is against us?”**

### **Romans 8: 31-39**

Sometimes I suspect that the main reason why we go to church on a Sunday morning is not only to worship God in Spirit and in truth or to have a social time with dear friends and family members, but more so to check out the preacher. Most of us I'm sure wants to know if the preacher is delivering the sort of message or the sort of sermon you want to hear. What you overhear over coffee time, in the parking lot or small gathering is usually enough to determine if the preacher had been a fundamentalist, a feminist, a Bible literalist, or a Marcus Borg, John Spong or a Greta Vosper type liberal? You may even go further and try to decide if the message was boring or if you are lucky even a bit inspirational. This morning I want to suggest there might be a more important question. Is the preacher an interfaith proponent?

A preacher opened his sermon with these words from Jacob Trapp, a pillar of the Universal Unitarian movement.

“Each of the great religions has a distinctive note, to be likened to the strings of a harp. In Hinduism it is the note of the spirit: a universe throbbing with divine energy and meaning. In Buddhism it is the wisdom of self-discipline: quenching the fires of desire in the cool water of meditation.

In Confucianism it is reciprocity: mutual consideration is the basis of society. In Taoism it is to conquer by inaction: be lowly and serviceable, like a brook; become rich by sharing.

In Judaism it is exodus from bondage: the covenant of responsibility in freedom. In Islam it is the note of submission: “Our God and your God is one, to whom we are self-surrendered.”

In Christianity it is that all may become one: “This is my body broken for you.” “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these.”

Last night was a historical moment here at BCUC as we have gathered for an interfaith meal with our sisters and brothers from the Jami Omar Mosque. Oddly enough, we did not talk much about religion. But we have talked about who we are on a human level. Hello! How are you!

Welcome to BCUC. Is this your first time coming here? Tell me about a funny moment in your life. Tell me about your family, your home? Isn't this a wonderful experience? These are questions and topics that we all can relate to no matter what faith we believe in or the colour of our skin. These are themes of humanity and I'm glad I was there last night.

The term interfaith dialogue according to my favourite source, the Wikipedia, refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels. It must not be interchanged with the word ecumenism which refers to efforts by Christians of different church traditions to develop closer relationships and better understandings. Our service today might portray both interfaith and ecumenical flavours. Some of you here might be under the category of spiritual but not religious. Some of you might be an atheist by heart or a practicing Buddhist. And that is OK. We are interfaith family in that way. Others might not be a true blooded United Church. You might be an Anglican or a Methodist or a Roman Catholic or baptized in the Presbyterian church. And that is OK. We embrace you as our ecumenical family.

Paul who wrote the letter to the Romans lived an interfaith life. He was supporting a movement who is following the teachings of this man from Nazareth named Jesus. This movement called The Way is so different from his Jewish upbringing. Paul and the rest of the Jesus' followers were living in a colonized country in which the state religion is polytheism – the belief of many gods and goddesses. In that era, Paul depended on the Spirit to give voice to what his words could not “the Spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Paul struggled to find words for what his heart felt. He trusted the Spirit to give voice to his longings. In the midst of hardships, persecutions and discrimination, Paul declared that no matter what happened God was working through it all for God's purpose. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.” We can hear these declarations as simplistic but in his circumstances they were incredibly courageous.

We call God in many different ways and names. Our Jewish brothers and sisters call God, Yahweh, Jehovah or Adonai. Quakers refer to God as The Light. Some of us call God Mother or Father, Jesus Christ or Holy Spirit. But we refer to God in many names and symbols – love, Creator, Maker of us all, the Way. Hindus call God the ultimate oneness or Brahman. Muslims call their God Allah the Almighty. Buddhists aim for the spiritual enlightenment modeled by Gautama Buddha. Paul is implicit in his teaching that all things work together for those who love God – no matter what name we call God. If God stands for all goodness and all the virtues and values we aim in life, be it compassion, justice, love, forgiveness, hope, then we are on the right track no matter what beliefs or religion we possess or even the lack of it.

But Paul also knows that certain things can separate us from God's love. He made a list that I'm sure were his and the community's lived experience. I like how Eugene Peterson in the Message paraphrased them: trouble, hard times, hatred, hunger, violence, homelessness, bullying threats, backstabbing, even the worst sins listed in Scripture. Through God's love, according to Paul, the powers of this world are debunked ~ even Death. He named the rulers of this world, whether political or religious, their influence in the present, their threats about the future. He knew that God's love can overcome them. Powers and principalities ~ those in high places, those with the power to bring us down, and anything else in all creation will NOT be able to separate us from the love of God and with Paul's own conviction - in Christ Jesus our Lord. And when he called Jesus as Christ and Lord he was dismissing the power of Caesar, the Emperor in his days as Lord. This conviction have gotten him killed in the end. Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome in hopes of helping them to overcome their differences and find common cause with the strengthening of people of faith everywhere. Paul's courage may sound over the top, but without his kind of faith, that "all things are possible, that nothing can separate us from the Love of God" we remain too comfortable and the church is in danger of being irrelevant!

The world we know now is still imperfect. There have been unjust wars and the further loss of uncounted lives with faces and names and stories we will never hear. People everywhere mistrust each other on account of their politics and religious convictions and much has happened to drive us apart from each other. Our airports remind us that we are never safe anywhere in the world and our security system has tripled in size, influence and cost, putting us

on alert and demanding our vigilance. But there have been quiet and good things that have come out of this time. A new hope that people everywhere will recognize the humanity of another whether the other is a Muslim or a Christian or a Buddhist or a Jew. We have experienced this at last night's shared meal. Our faith in the God of love taught us not to judge another person as good or bad based on their religion or where they have grown up. Our faith is a call to the integrity of each human soul and the strength of the Divine that shines in each human face we call our neighbour.

Today, in the celebration of the sacrament of baptism, we give our support to these children not to teach them that the Christian way is the only way to God but it is one of the many paths that lead to knowing God. The river of Jordan is but one body of water that flows into the big ocean of God's grace. Baptism is a beautiful welcoming moment in which the full potential of LOVE is glimpsed. When the waters of baptism touch the head of a child, they are anointed with possibility, the possibility of love, the possibility of peace, the possibility of joy, and yes the possibility of pain and suffering as well.

Today, we affirm once again that we are ordinary people who are called to live ordinary lives of daily peace and compassion. We affirm that there is incredible hope and a purposeful life in declaring a lifelong journey of pursuing justice and love. We affirm the sacred gift of life and breath and the privilege of being here in a pluralistic world and living on this beautiful earth. This day is a day not only to remember, but a day that calls us forward with faith and hope, staying the course in our actions of hope for justice, shouldering the burden of peace and compassion, working together in community, speaking truth to each other and to power, and by daily refusing to join forces with evil, hatred and violence.

Paul reminds us that we are never separated from God's love. And because we love God and God loves us, we are not separated from each other. Muslims and Christians, Jews and Hindus, the entire human family is united as God's own. Let me close with a quote from the famous Rumi: "Through Love all that is bitter will be sweet, Through Love all that is copper will be gold, Through Love all dregs will become wine, through Love all pain will turn to medicine." If God who is Love is for us, nothing can separate us from that love. Amen.