4th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

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*Leviticus 19:33-34*

*When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.  
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The smells of softening fruit, burning sandalwood, hot oil, and fresh flowers greeted the students as they entered the only Hindu temple for a hundred miles in any direction. Just south of Atlanta, the temple has been the largest Hindu place of worship for more than 30 years for followers from all over the Southeastern United States. Walking through the doors and welcomed by the sensual and sweet fragrances, most of the students in Barbara Brown Taylor’s World Religion class had never had an encounter with religions other than Christianity.

Some stood in awe of the sensory aspects of worship. Others were overwhelmed by the sheer number of deities. One student, who had been taught that followers of other religions are going to hell, left the temple in tears. Eventually, the students were welcomed to gather before the alcove that was dedicated to the god Vishnu. An offering of almonds had been dedicated to Vishnu and one of the Hindu priests wished to offer it to the students as a blessing on their studies. And so, one by one, the priest offered Vishnu’s Almonds to the students, a sacramental offering of hospitality from a practitioner of one religion to another.

In her book, *Holy Envy*, in which Barbara Brown Taylor recalls teaching this class, she wrestles with the following: in an increasingly pluralistic society, can we practice “holy envy” for our siblings of other faith traditions without diminishing our fidelity to our own? She goes on to ask other questions.

* Is it better to read about a religion in a textbook than to risk actual contact with it?
* Can anyone who visits a sacred space remain an observer, or does one become a participant simply by entering in?
* Does taking part in the ritual of another faith automatically make you a traitor to your own?[[1]](#footnote-2)

All of these questions are understandable ones in an increasingly pluralistic society. And they’re questions worthy of our curiosity. I, for one, believe we have much, much more to gain by learning about other religious traditions than we have to worry about God’s wrath upon us by exploring that curiosity. In fact, as we learned last week in our first installment of “Theology on Tap,” one of the hallmarks of the Reformed traditions is that we believe that we can never fully grasp the totality of the truth of God.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro says the following: “The God of your understanding is just that: the God of your understanding. What you need is the God just beyond your understanding.”

That’s how we grow, neighbors; we grow by seeking the “God just beyond our understanding.” And our neighbors of other faith traditions can assist us in that search. Yes, the Bible is quite clear that we are not to worship idols. But I, for one, believe God is *far* more worried about us worshiping at the altars of gun violence, rampant individualism, and white Christian Nationalism than accepting some almonds from Vishnu.

Ultimately, our relationship with our neighbors of other religions is, or should be, built upon a biblical foundation of hospitality to the stranger.

“You shall love the alien as yourself,” God tells the Israelites, “for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” Though God instructs the Israelites to be firmly rooted in their identity as God’s people, God is crystal clear that that fidelity must *never* be practiced in a way that mistreats, or cheats, the immigrant, the stranger, the foreigner. Because when we become inhospitable to our neighbor (of any faith tradition), we’ve lost sight of what it means to be God’s people.

And, in God’s eyes, as far as I can tell, hospitality towards the stranger means having an openness that that person could help reveal to us more of the character of God and, consequently, what it means to live our lives as compassionate human beings caring for Creation and one another. And I was reminded this week at the Montreat Music and Worship Conference that there’s actual strong precedent in our faith of learning from other cultures.

In a Bible study class taught by my former Old Testament Professor Bill Brown, Bill Allred and I were reminded of an ancient scroll of wisdom literature called the Instructions of Amenemopet. A product of Ancient Egyptian scribes circa 1300 BCE, it includes general advice on qualities, behaviors, and attitudes that are required for a successful, upright life. The authors of the text implore their readers to defend the cause of the oppressed, and to care for the elderly, widowed, and impoverished. The document uplifts the characteristics of “modesty, self-control, generosity, and scrupulous honesty.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Never heard of the Instructions of Amenemopet? No worries, I hadn’t heard of them until last week. However, my guess is that you are familiar with a piece of literature heavily influence by this document: the Book of Proverbs. Specifically, chapters 22 & 23 of Proverbs. In fact, one might say that “heavily influenced” is perhaps a soft description of what others would call flat-out plagiarism.

* The Instruction of Amenemopet states “Give thine ear, and hear what I say, And apply thine heart to apprehend; It is good for thee to place them in thine heart, let them rest in the casket of thy belly; That they may act as a peg upon thy tongue”
* Proverbs 22:17-18 says “Incline thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, And apply thine heart to my doctrine; For it is pleasant if thou keep them in thy belly, that they may be established together upon thy lips.
* The Instruction of Amenemopet states “Beware of robbing the poor, and oppressing the afflicted.”
* Proverbs 22:22 says “Rob not the poor… neither oppress the lowly…”
* The Instruction of Amenemopet states “Give thine ears, hear the words that are said, give thine heart to interpret them.”
* Proverbs 23:12 says “Apply thine heart unto instruction and thine ears to the words of knowledge.”

Since the book of Proverbs was written several centuries *after* the Instruction of Amenemopet, it’s clear that the authors of the Hebrew Wisdom literature didn’t understand their religious tradition to have a monopoly on truth or wisdom. And my invitation is for us to do the same. The religion of Judaism didn’t form in a vacuum. Neither did Christianity, whose roots are shared with that great tradition. Jesus and his disciples lived in a pluralistic context and Jesus, I think, modeled a kind of neighborliness that encourages dialogues between those of different cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts.

And when embarking upon dialogue with those of different traditions, I submit a few “rules of the road” for navigating those waters. These “Marks of Genuine Dialogue” were offered to me last week in that same Bible Study by Dr. Bill Brown.[[3]](#footnote-4) And though his suggestions were intended for helping us in various forms of dialogue across all different kinds of differences, they apply equally to the arena of interfaith relations.

* **Attentive/deep listening** - practice listening - intentional listening - in all aspects of your life. You know that feeling when your hearing the words of the person you’re talking to but you’re actually forming your response rather than actually listening? I know I’m guilty of that. Practice active listening. Don’t be afraid of allowing silence to follow the other person’s comment to allow yourself the time to process and come up with a faithful, pastoral, and respectful response.
* **Respect for the other (even in disagreement)** - Respect means affirming the mutual humanity of the person with which you are dialoging. Respecting the other means assuming that they are coming from a place of mutual curiosity, compassion, and desire to better themselves and their neighborhood.
* **Openness to learn** - Respectful interfaith dialogue means coming to the table with a critical mind and a compassionate heart. It means entering the conversation with the wisdom to know that you have much to learn from the other person.
* **Differences are not deficient** - I learned of a new hymn writer and colleague of mine named David Bjorlin and we sang the following hymn of his this week that I believe highlights this truth.

*But when diff’rence is excluded - age, ability, or race -  
our mosaics turn to mirrors that reflect a single face.   
So we widen deep divisions we were called to bridge and heal,  
and we miss the truth and wisdom only diff’rence can reveal.[[4]](#footnote-5)*

* **Cultivating curiosity and wonder** - I’ll never forget the first time I stepped foot in a Islamic Mosque. It was when I traveled to Istanbul, Turkey in college in the 2000’s when there was - as there still is today - much anti-Islamic sentiment in our country as a result of 9/11. I remember stepping into the Blue Mosque and marveling at the enormity and grandiosity of the space. More than anything else, I marveled at how literally every square inch of that space was a piece of art. When you walk into a space like that, you can’t help but arch your neck up to admire the spacious, cavernous interior upwards toward the dorm. Even though there are many differences between Christianity and Islam, I understood for the first time that we hold a shared wonder at the “big-ness” and wonder of a God beyond all our comprehension.
* **There’s no shame in changing one’s mind** - This is perhaps the most countercultural of these guidelines. Because we live in a culture where we often default to a posture of “digging in our heels” when confronted with conflict and differences of opinion. We, then, are taught that if we “lose” the argument or come around to a new way of understanding, that that makes us “weak.” We must resist this sentiment and push it aside to make room for growth and understanding.
* **The goal is mutual understanding, not necessarily common consensus** - I remember on that same trip to Istanbul coming across a street vendor who was selling intricate tapestries of his own making. It’s difficult to adequately describe the ornate-ness of these works of art. Vivid colors, complicated designs, symmetrical to a fault. One could stand before a single tapestry for a hour and still not be able to fully soak in all of its wonder. I stood in front of such a tapestry and a Muslim gentleman came to me as he noticed my fascination. I asked him if he was the artist who created such a masterpiece and he nodded in affirmation. Searching for words to describe my wonder, I simply said in astonishment, “It’s perfect!” The man chuckled and said, “No. No, it’s not.” I almost detected a note of pride in his confession. And I said, “what do you mean?” Without saying a word, he motioned to a corner of the tapestry and drew my attention to a single stitch that was clearly out of place; and otherwise unnoticeable trace of interruption in the pattern of the tapestry. I think he sensed my confusion and he said to me, “It’s an imperfection, yes; but it’s no mistake.” I asked what he leaned by that and he said a statement I’ll never forget. He said, with a hint of a smile, “I did that on purpose to remind me that only God is perfect.”

Friends, I don’t want to live my faith in such a way that I’m so territorial over its doctrines that I close myself to the wisdom found in others who are seeking the Divine in their own unique ways. When “Vishnu’s Almonds” are offered to me as an act of hospitality and mutual understanding, I want to be the gracious practitioner of Christianity who understands that God does not condemn our efforts to understand the stranger and learn from them. A god who discourages such acts of human connection is, frankly, a petty god unworthy of our worship. But, fortunately, to my understanding at least, that’s not the God we meet in scripture. That’s not the God who is made known to us in the body and being of Jesus Christ, whom you and I faithfully proclaim as our Lord and Savior.

So let us be practitioners of holy envy. Let us accept the offerings of “Vishnu’s Almonds” without fear of condemnation or heresy. Let us enter into interfaith dialogue as a means by which we are neighborly towards one another, for that, more than anything else, is the essence of Christianity.

In the name of the God of All the Nations, we pray. **Amen.**

1. Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Holy Envy* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instruction\_of\_Amenemope [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. From Dr. Bill Brown’s Bible Study at the 2023 PAM Worship and Music Conference in Montreat, North Carolina (June 18-24). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Bjorlin, David. *We We Part of Christ’s Own Body* (2021) GIA Publications [↑](#footnote-ref-5)