

JOSHUA 22:1-7

Then Joshua summoned the Rubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and said to them, "You have observed all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, and have obeyed me in all that I have commanded you. You have not forsaken your kindred these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the Lord your God. And now the Lord your God has given rest to your kindred, as he promised them. Therefore, turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan. Take good care to observe the commandments and instruction that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to keep his commandments, and to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents.

JOHN 14:1-15

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has

seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?' Do you not believe that I am in the Father and Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you the one who believes in me will also do the words that I do and, in fact, will do greater words than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it. If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Joshua 22:1-7
John 14:1-15

If the former president and the current president have one thing in common—and you do have to search for it—it is that they both got into hot water for suggesting that Americans and Christians have been guilty of propagating violence against those of other religions and nations. Their political motives in speaking were very different. Obama was making a case for acceptance of Muslims and his policy of inclusion while Trump was soft peddling Putin's incursion into the Ukraine and involvement in Syria while making his case for a friendlier foreign policy toward Russia.

Trump said we were being hypocrites for our criticism of Mr. Putin since we have been *no angels* ourselves referencing our own incursion into Iraq. Obama, on the other hand, in reference to the brutality of ISIS said this: *Lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ and in our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ.* Both men were excoriated for their comments.

But political motives aside, they both made valid points.

And to me, since Iraq is a Muslim nation and ISIS is a Muslim aberration, I do not think it is a stretch to see beneath these comments a not so subtle argument over not just the superiority, but the very validity of one religion over the other. You could argue too that it is a debate over cultures, Middle Eastern and Western. And race is no doubt implicated as well.

It leads me to wonder how often we articulate to ourselves what role religion plays in our lives and what role it is meant to play. And I believe this is an important discussion to have because it is perfectly obvious that people who subscribe to different religions have a natural bias against those who worship in an unfamiliar way, or who call their God by a different name or who adhere to a different book of sacred writings. And I believe it would be valuable in this day and age when we are proposing travel bans on nationals, the great majority of whom do indeed practice a different religion than we do, to explore the nature of religion itself and to see whether we have a legitimate reason to fear or despise those who practice it differently than we do.

Let us begin by defining religion itself. The Latin root for the word is *religare* which means to tie, bind, unite, retie and rebind. You cannot find the word *religion* in the Bible. The ancients used different terms to describe the same thing—namely the *way*, the *path* or the *road* of God. Joshua says: *Take good care to observe the commandments and instruction that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to keep his commandments, and to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.* And John reports Jesus famously saying to Thomas, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* And remember that the early Christians were known as the “People of the Way” because they came together in small groups for the express purpose of practicing what Jesus preached.

So, by its very nature religion is at once an organizing principle around a specific set of teachings and commandments as well as a support system for both good works done by the

community of the faithful and to assist individuals in that community to give ever greater expression to their essential, genuine selves. So religion is both pragmatic in the sense that it promotes good works and mystical in that it provides the means to personal spiritual growth. Through practicing religion, we come to know the abiding, living presence of God that is an intrinsic part of us and we reach out to the world to work with God in acts of loving kindness. As the prophet Micah said, *and what does the Lord require of you but to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?*

That is religion in a nut shell. A true religion is meant to serve and aid us in our relationships and in sharing life together. The last thing it is intended to do is divide us. A religion that promotes the opposite of love, unity, harmony, compassion and understanding is not a true religion that “binds and unites” us.

It should, of course, be very simple. But we all know that it is anything but and never has been. Why is this? There are a multitude of reasons and perhaps the chief one is that whenever politics mixes into anything, trouble is sure to follow. From the very beginning when primitive people were forming the first religions, tribal leaders quickly discovered the benefits of co-opting religious beliefs to support their governments and themselves. If your rule is divinely ordained, then your authority cannot be questioned. It is the classical formula for demagoguery with the enforcement of your laws justified on religious grounds.

And then, of course, since many people from diverse backgrounds, races, cultures and nation states have claimed to have had a direct revelation from God giving rise to various movements whose organizing subsets of beliefs are incompatible with one another, more trouble follows. Now we must fight—sometimes to the death—over who has the authentic revelation and who has the only true testimony and who performs the correct rituals, and who possesses the genuine inspiration and prays to the real God.

If it were not frequently so tragic, it would all seem pretty silly. But we are human and while there is undoubtedly only one God, religious institutions are undeniably human, not divine.

And because they are human, they are always vulnerable to corruption and the distortion of messages to accomplish political ends. And how many times over history has it ended in murder, sometimes on a genocidal scale? None—not one! —of the major religions has ever been exempt.

To suppose that these issues are not very much alive and smoldering beneath today's political climate is naive. Evangelist Franklin Graham, Billy's Graham's son, who is a spokesman for a sizable evangelical population in this country recently remarked, "Jesus taught peace, love and forgiveness...Mohammed, on the contrary, was a warrior and killed many innocent people." That narrative completely ignores both large segments of the Koran which preach peace, love and forgiveness and large sections in the Bible which demand ethnic cleansing of non-believers. Has Graham not read the Bible?

And, you see, this is exactly the problem. We are back to the inevitable distortion of the message to promote our political agenda. I mean, Graham did get it half right, but in omitting the other half on both sides, he is encouraging hatred and discrimination. He is inviting the same behavior of which he accuses followers of Mohammed. I do not believe that was one of Jesus' commandments.

Personally, I refuse to get drawn into an argument of over which religion is the true religion. I do not believe that revelation is a one and done phenomenon. If it were so, then that would mean that God transcended the membrane between the divine and the human only one time and then disappeared. Rather, I believe that God is continually revealed by people of great faith who do great works. But I also believe that in Jesus we see the complete manifestation of the divine presence in the world. In Jesus, we do discover the way, the truth and the life. For it is in his life that was fully lived in the service of humanity without any corruption or compromise that we see the Father and understand what being fully human is all about.

And in the practice of our religion, it is imperative that we keep our eye on the ball. We

always have to be very careful to not confuse ideology with the practice of our faith. Love does not have an ideology. Love has only compassion and concern for the welfare of all people.

And what really matters anyway? Does it really matter if we worship differently from others or have doctrines that are strange to others or that we address God by a different name? What matters is what we *do*. Are our actions guided by Jesus? *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.*

Why complicate it more than that? The more complicated it becomes, the further we are likely to get from its truth. But at the same time, it is not meant to be easy either. What it is meant to be is simple. Loving God and your neighbor as yourself is not easy, but it is simple. And that is the only thing that makes it possible.

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