

Fourth Sunday of Easter (B) April 22, 2018 Trinity Church Hartford

Spoiler alert: at the end of this sermon, it will not be finished. The finish will be up to you.

There are two main sources for the sermon: One is the Scripture we have read this morning; and the other is a talk given this week by Dr. Heidi Hadsell, retiring President of Hartford Seminary, to the Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding.

First, let's take a closer look at this morning's Scripture appointed for what we informally call "Good Shepherd Sunday."

From the Gospel, Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²T. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Such Scripture as this is the foundation for the centrality of belief and accepted faith that Jesus is the Christ, given by God, through belief in his life, death and resurrection eternal life is granted for believers.

Our first lesson from the Book of Acts, from the days just after Jesus's resurrection: we read of the insistence of Peter as he and the other prisoners were hauled before the Council in Jerusalem:

¹This Jesus is

"the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone."

¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

Jesus is central to history, and the key for salvation.

The second source for the sermon is Heidi Hadsell, who talked informally with the Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding — a group I first heard of with the attacks of September 11, 2001 when they and the Christian Conference of Connecticut pulled together the massive service of prayer and witness that filled two floors of St. Joseph’s Cathedral next door two days after the twin towers came down — three thousand worshippers — Dr. Hadsell noted to the small group that today one in five young people are growing up in inter religious households, where members adhere to or practice different faiths. On college campuses, she said, students who belong to Hillel, the college Jewish community, don’t want to be harangued about Judaism but want to invite their non-Jewish friends to enjoy fellowship. Even for such groups as CCIU, with membership from nine religious faiths, she pointed out that there is one values-centered group that is left out, the secular humanists, who seek a place in world-values conversation.

Then Dr. Hadsell gently asked, can we look at our religious practices, see how focused we are within our own specific traditions — and look at them as part of the problem? That is to say, in our world and in this our country in which tribalism — is there perhaps a better word? — is so on the rise, are we also tribal, especially Christians, Jews, Muslims to name what she calls the “big three”, and in our isolation and inward-focus are we part of the pattern of separation which afflicts our cultures, and perhaps are we ourselves contributors to it? In other words, if we think other groups are tribal, look at our own selves!

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Can you see how easy it is for us to get to such a place?

These were provocative words in their day, and along with other Scripture, including some of the recorded teaching of Jesus, they have served to set Christians over and against all who are not Christian. In ages which have intervened, they became fighting words: Crusades were launched against Muslims, whole towns were slaughtered, the Christian conquerer of Jerusalem boasted that he entered the Holy City up to his armpits in blood. Such words led to the Inquisition and forced conversions and executions in Spain and the economic pigeonholing and expulsion of Jews from Britain, and I believe they undergirded support the Holocaust.

Extreme religious claims are alive and prevalent today. Fundamentalist Christian evangelicalism claims “we are going to heaven, and everyone not with us is bound for hell.” Certainly we have seen militant extremism in Islam. I have known extreme Judaism both in Jerusalem and in New York City.

Dr. Hadsell went on, to describe the real complexity of this time in which we all are connected immediately by the internet, and inter-living (a word I made up) regardless of past location, ethnic origin, custom and religion. And, further, hybrid identities are emerging — just as former “clear-cut” male-female roles and identities are hybridizing — her word — and the same is happening with race — no longer can there simply be black and white — so religion is moving into newer definitions. There are Jewish Christians and Christian Jews and Buddhist Christians and ... Notice the number of movies whose plots center on interfaith marriage and life among the young to the chagrin of the parents.

So the question she posed, and which I’m sharing here at Trinity this morning, is, how do we de-center from our particularism, and our exclusivism,— We have The Answer, which implies to others, You don’t — think of how a Buddhist or a Muslim reacts when Christians revel in self-congratulation, especially in some of our hymns and some of our worship— How do we let go of our Christian tribal attitudes — even those of our internal sub-tribes (I am a liberal Episcopalian; I am a conservative Anglican) — to grapple with the world’s suspicions, ignorances, fears, hatreds and isolation win which we are living and trying to make a go of it today?

Dr. Hadsell pushed us to think differently, but even more, to move, get outside of our clan, outside our enclosing buildings, and to engage with those we have not yet come to know. Go out. Get beyond the ancient religious comforts. And to do this, not as institutions, but as individuals, person to person.

Not to abandon or allow the disintegration of our beliefs or practices, no, but to stand firmly in our faith and exercise it out there in the context of a complex world which seeks to preserve its separations. To move beyond tolerance, beyond hospitality, to engagement.

What might this mean for us at Trinity Church? Some things different for each of us, I assume. For we all know God in Jesus, and we hold that in different ways, as on a continuum. There are some of us who believe that Jesus is the only way to God, “the way, the truth, the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me” as Scripture in places asserts. At another end of a continuum are those of us who believe that goodness is the criterion, that all faiths and no faith, both are OK for God. And all the places in between.

What’s been happening for me, thinking of all this stuff, is, how can we open the teachings of Scripture to apply actively for all people of every faith and none?

¹From the First Letter of John: ⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action..

²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.²

And, “By this the world will know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another.” Can that mean not one another in here, but one another out there too. “Outdo one another in showing genuine affection” not just in-house, but for all.

While we have time, let us do good to all people, (especially to those of the household of faith)

Remember “The Good Samaritan,” who was a one-person Jewish Committee of Interreligious Compassion.

It won't be done by the chief priests and bishops — they too often are consumed by the work of leading and serving within the Church. But by you. It's you. The question is, how will you as a Christian engage the wider world, in honest conversations, in common work and prayer, in compassion, in friendship. So that the religious communities as a whole can become a greater gift to our country, to the world.

So, this sermon is just a beginning, I hope. I do believe that Christ Jesus has opened the way to God for all people. Today: Raising some thoughts. Maybe pushing some buttons. Or a hybridized faith? No. Does that mean all must believe as we do? No. But it does ask, Can we together, Trinity Church Hartford, open an additional direction within our faith life? The question is in our hands. Jesus is the center of our lives. Now let's go out in love and find our brothers and sisters who believe differently to know one another and to serve together for the sake of the world.

Member faiths of the Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding: Baha'i Buddhism Christianity Jainism Hinduism Islam Judaism Sikhism Unitarianism