

Pulpit Exchange – Temple B’rith Kodesh and Third Presbyterian Church April 21 and 23, 2017

The Interfaith Imperative of Reconciliation

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Temple B’rith Kodesh

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Let me say what I hope you already know – how pleased and grateful I am to be here this evening, to mark another year in our historic and significant relationship, to express my appreciation for the leadership and friendship of Rabbi Stein and Rabbi Levy. I also hope to say over the coming few minutes why all of this matters, perhaps as it ever has, and to encourage us not only to keep at it, but to go deeper in this relationship. But please know, at the outset, how grateful I am to be here.

If you look in the phone book – if you remember what a phone book is! – or if you do an online search, you will discover many American denominations that use the word “Presbyterian.” The word itself means “elder,” in Greek, and is a way to signify how Presbyterians govern themselves.

Our congregation, Third Presbyterian Church, is a member of the largest American Presbyterian denomination, called the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Since Presbyterians came to this land well before the country was born, ours has been a history of schism and union, schism and reunion, and so forth. Even now, new Presbyterian denominations are forming and congregations within our denomination are departing to join others, largely around matters of human sexuality.

In 1958, two denominations united to form a new denomination, the precursor of our current Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As fascinating as they are, I will spare you the details tonight! What I do want you to know is that when the new denomination was formed, it also launched the process of writing a new creed. Ours is a credal tradition, that is, we write down what we

believe. Some of our creeds are ancient; some are contemporary. All have fairly high authority, including the creed that came out of this union, called the *Confession of 1967*.

The Confession of 1967 was, and remains, controversial to some Presbyterians. Some argued that we didn't need a new creed. Some argued that we didn't need *this* creed. Groups even took out full page ads in the *Times* in protest – can you imagine that!?

Nevertheless, the Confession of 1967 was adopted. It included updated affirmations about Jesus and the role of the Bible. The confession also included a very clear and strong ethical section, my point this evening.

Creeds often have themes. The overarching theme of the Confession of 1967 is “reconciliation.” The drafting committee anchored this theme on a passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthian Church, 2 Corinthians 5:19: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

I quote Paul only as a reference tonight. The point is that word – “**reconciliation**,” which serves as a tent pole understanding not only of Christian theology, but our understanding of God's ongoing project. We understand the world to be broken, and more so, we understand God's project to be reconciliation, the healing of that brokenness. And we Christians understand that Jesus has something to do with how that happens.

So in adopting the Confession of 1967, Presbyterians placed reconciliation at our doctrinal core. My ordination vows pledged myself to that vision.

And there's more. There was an ethical component – this is not just about God and us, which can be a stereotypical understanding of Christianity. No, the text of the Confession of 1967 includes four issues about which the church is called to apply its reconciling ethic. Any thoughts? Race and racism. Poverty. Gender and sexuality. Militarism and warfare and violence. The confession draws a straight line connection between what we believe and how we are to act in the world. That shouldn't be earth-shattering news, but for us to codify this in our core beliefs was news-worthy.

Ethical commitments from 50 years ago: race, poverty, sexuality and gender, violence and warfare. What would I change in 2017? I might add an equally convicting section on ecology and the environment. How do we reconcile our treatment of creation with God's hopes for creation?

And I would want to say something about reconciliation and interfaith relationships. I'd have to, I think. We'd have to. Something substantive. What would I say?

First, let's look at what the Confessions of 1967 actually says. The confession broke some new ground. Some is helpful. Some not so much. Some is awkward and tentative. But mostly silence.

The confession acknowledges the Jewish context of Jesus' life – that was new – and our connection to the covenant God established with the Israelites. The confession views Jesus as the “fulfillment of God's promise to Israel.” What that affirmation means is, of course, at the theological core of our ongoing reflection. The confession is reflective of our Presbyterian tradition in that it underscores our commonalities with the Hebrew tradition rather than our differences. It is also consistent in that our tradition has taken the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, not as a junior partner in biblical authority, but as an “indispensable” partner to the New Testament.

The confession is very mindful of the cultural contexts from which Judaism and Christianity arose, Semitic and Hellenistic cultures, as well as the very human character of any religion.

Finally, the confession affirms this, and let me quote: “Christians find parallels between other religions and their own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians (we need a more helpful term here) to challenge the church to renewal. But the reconciling word of the gospel is God's judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian. The gift of God in Christ is for all. The church, therefore, is commissioned to carry the gospel to all whatever their religion may be and even when they profess none.”

I must confess that I want more. Much more. And different, especially in terms of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Where are we clear...or not? Where are we humble...or not? Where are we culpable? I appreciate that this confession is *not* a call to evangelism and proselytization. To talk about openness and respect 50 years ago, let alone now, seems spot-on. And to allow interfaith dialogue to serve as a lens for internal authenticity seems helpful as well. And I would hope that Judaism – or Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism, for that matter – would be compelled by the invitation to explore what reconciliation looks like – ethically and morally if not theologically – from an interfaith perspective.

Therefore, allow me to suggest what an interfaith conversation about reconciliation might look like in 2017, and allow the suggestions to serve as a kind of invitation for us – not just rabbi and minister, but congregation to congregation and member to member. God knows we need it in the broken and fearful world in which we find ourselves.

Openness and respect. This must mean much more than tolerance, though that matters. That means we move beyond politeness and niceness. My hunch is that we think we know some of each other's tradition, but not as much as we should, and not as much as would be helpful to cultivate deeper openness and respect.

This takes work. How often do I hear that all religions are simply different paths to the same God? I believe that to be true for Judaism and Christianity in that we share common roots. But that thinking also feels kind of lazy to me. How is that the case?

I also hear that all religions are committed to peace. That may be as well. I am not a world religionist by any means. I can barely speak for myself sometimes, let alone Presbyterianism or Protestantism or Christianity. I can tell you, though, that along with long-standing articulations about peace, Christian values and practices have been used to rationalize and justify violence on a macro and macro scale, from the Crusades to the Third Reich to Apartheid South Africa to executions in Arkansas even last night.

I believe that Christianity is committed to peace, and love, and justice, and reconciliation, but our track record does not always reflect those commitments. It will take work, hard and honest work – similar to the work that is unpacking white privilege in our culture right now – to unpack those understandings.

For Christians, or at least for Third Presbyterian Church, that means we continue to show up. We show up here, with our partners at Temple B'rith Kodesh in special ways because of our relationships, and we re-commit and re-affirm that this relationship matters. When the JCC receives bomb threats and Jewish cemeteries are vandalized, we pray in solidarity and we show up. And we keep showing up.

I believe that we are called to deepen our connections, to move to a new place in terms of friendship building and relationship building. Your rabbi and I have ongoing wonderful conversations. There need to be more of us around those tables. Help us figure out how. I believe we will discover more profoundly what we have in common and explore more sensitively what we don't – whether those are matters of faith or matters of ethics. That's what openness and respect look like.

But I also believe that we will find common ground on matters of ethics and morals – race, gender, poverty, violence. We are now collaborating with RAIHN (Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network). What would it look like for us to join our voices and our hearts and hands on other things? God knows the city is hungry for what we have to offer.

Reconciliation may be a particular word in Christian vocabulary. But it is not an exclusively Christian commitment. When we've discussed reconciliation at Third Church over the past year, we've often turned to this passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah. I read it here with all humility, not to appropriate it, but to raise it up as an aspiration that resonates with us, showing us what reconciliation looks like:

“Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.”

May it be so.

Rabbi Peter W. Stein

Temple B'rith Kodesh-Third Presbyterian Church Exchange 2017

April 23, 2017

I feel blessed each year to visit this beautiful church...beautiful not only because of this grand sanctuary, but because of the people that assemble here and the relationships that are forged through the activities here.

And, the truth is that this is not a once a year visit. I enjoy meaningful and supportive dialogue with Rev. Wilkinson and with other leaders and members of Third Church throughout the year.

Because of the ongoing nature of our relationship, I want to take a different approach to my remarks this morning. Rather than offer a reflection on a biblical passage and a charge to consider, I would like to take a less formal approach this morning. As John and I have discussed on numerous occasions over the past months, there is an urgent need for us to nurture sustained and deeply personal relationships between all segments of our communities. There is an urgency for us to connect in ways that will enable us to make meaningful and effective responses to the challenges we face in 2017 and beyond.

Dr. Ron Wolfson wrote a beautiful piece several years ago entitled *The Sacred Fountain of Relationships*. (*Relational Judaism* by Dr. Ron Wolfson, 2013 Jewish Lights Publishing, page 46) He writes, "A number of years ago, I was celebrating Shabbat dinner with good friends who had just returned from Israel with the most wonderful souvenir. It was a "Kiddush fountain." The Hebrew word *Kiddush* – from the root word *kadosh* – literally means "sacred".

The silver device stood about ten inches high and featured two tiers. The top tier was a single large Kiddush cup. On the bottom tier, eight small Kiddush cups sat in a circle, each one positioned below a spout. When it came time to recite the Kiddush prayer, the host filled the large Kiddush cup with wine and, with quite the flourish, poured it into a hole at the top of the fountain. Within seconds, the wine was distributed simultaneously to the eight small Kiddush cups on the bottom tier, much to the delight of everyone at the table. When the wine finished its journey through the fountain, the host handed each of the guests a cup, over which we, together, sang the prayer praising God and sanctifying the Sabbath day. It was both a communal and an individual experience, filled with surprise and joy, creating a memorable moment of Jewish celebration, not just of Shabbat, but of the relationships around the table.

I happen to have one of these Kiddush fountains, and Dr. Wolfson is right: it is always a special way to prepare to recite the blessing. It brings us together in a wonderful and meaningful way. Today, together, I want to use different images from this ritual object to ask questions that we can consider together.

First, the large cup at the top...what do we fill it with to nourish ourselves? Where do we find spiritual sustenance? What are the special gifts that we have to give? What are the ways that we can study and worship together, Temple B'rith Kodesh and Third Presbyterian Church, so that we are prepared to respond to the urgent needs in our city.

Of course, on the Sabbath, the cup is filled with sweet wine. There is a sweetness to our historic relationship. I hope, though, that we create opportunities for more than just celebration...that we challenge ourselves to identify the unique gifts that we as women and men of faith can bring to the greater community.

Second, the channels that distribute the wine to the waiting cups...let us, in the coming months, create the avenues that will allow us to spread out from these pews and the pews on Elmwood Avenue and find our way to the overlooked corners of our community. I am so pleased that TBK has entered into the RAIHN program as a partner and support to the extraordinary team that serves here at the church. It is one example of what we can do together. We can impact on the lives of our neighbors in countless ways, if we figure out the most effective ways to get from here to there—to share what is in our “cup” with those whose cups are empty or exposed.

The third piece may be the most perplexing...in the Kiddush fountain, the small cups are all assembled, waiting to receive the wine. For us, and I know almost universally throughout religious communities, we face the challenge of how to draw people in....how to entice people to come and engage with us.

I don't have the answer, other than to remember the old advice: God created us with two ears and one mouth, so that we will listen twice as much as we speak! We need to listen carefully to those who are not engaged. What are their needs? What are their desires? What will attract them and what will turn them away?

This isn't just about the elusive next generation: it is about every prospective person who might be an asset in achieving our lofty goals. At the temple, in the three years since I began my tenure, I have tried to focus repeatedly on three things: we need to create an atmosphere that is joyful, inclusive, and accessible. When we do so, we will draw in those of all generations, of different backgrounds and identities, and prepare to do the hard work of building a community that makes a difference.

In our Jewish calendar, we are in a special season...the weeks between the two spring festivals, Passover and Shavuot. These weeks are known as the Omer, and we make a blessing and count each passing day. It marks the passage of the Israelites from Egypt to Mt. Sinai.

Today is the twelfth day in this fifty day period. In a book of meditations I use to elevate my spirit as I make the daily count, I found this beautiful reflection for today. We studied it together earlier this morning and I share it with all of you as I conclude my remarks, and I thank you for the opportunity to build community together.

“There is a quiet, delicate whisper that flutters in the center of our being. It is not the voice of reason or the voice of our parents telling us what to do. It is not the voice of the intellect or the voice of emotion. It is a gentle whisper, an intuitive push, a yearning, a vision. Sometimes we pretend not to hear, sometimes we try to listen but it is hard to discern from the other chatter, and sometimes we simply try to silence it. But it will not be silenced. It is the voice of your spirit that whispers messages of divine guidance. It is trying to lead you to a life that has meaning and purpose that is joyful. And the reason it is hard to hear and easy to ignore is because we have been taught our entire life, indeed for centuries now, not to heed that which is not rational, not conventional, not sane, not ordinary, not profitable. But if ignored or muzzled, God simply gets louder and louder until we must pay attention. We don’t want God yelling a divine plan. (*Omer A Counting* by Rabbi Karyn Kedar, 2014 CCAR Press, Page 44)

Together, may we be blessed to understand the divine plan that will lead us to a world of justice, equality, and peace.