

LOVE GOES TO HARD PLACES

GENESIS 21:8-21; MATTHEW 5:38-48

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Last week, we began our summer series called “Bind Us Together.”

We started off by talking about being bound together as Canadians and how our primary allegiance must always be to Christ and his kingdom rather than to any nation state.

Today, we’re talking about living with people of different religions. How do we live with, relate to, understand and become good neighbours with people who believe differently than us?

Throughout this sermon, we’re going to be using Islam as a kind of case study, but the approach I’ll be commending applies to all religious traditions.

Religious pluralism is fact of life in a globalized world of instant communication and cross-continental travel and mass migration; there was a time when you could more or less exist in a bubble where most people believed what you did, had similar assumptions and values and practices.

I probably don’t have to tell you that those days are long gone.

Lethbridge, like most places in the postmodern, post-Christian, post-everything West, is populated by Christians of all kinds and Muslims and Buddhists and Sikhs and those who

embrace indigenous beliefs and practices and atheists and many more.

This weekend, for example, I heard Arabic being spoken by a father and his sons at Henderson Pool. I saw women wearing hijabs in the mall yesterday. I hear Japanese being spoken at Buddhist memorial services for Naomi's grandparents. And of course I regularly encounter people who struggle to believe anything at all, whether in face-to-face conversation or online.

People often remark that this kind of religious pluralism has a destabilizing effect upon us.

Our religious beliefs are among the most important beliefs we have. They touch on the deepest things we believe about the nature of God, the meaning of life, the destiny of the world, how we ought to live, and what will happen when we die.

This is not like saying, "I like rock and roll and you prefer jazz." This is big stuff!

When people don't agree with us about these things, it can be threatening and unsettling. Can we trust them? Can we trust *ourselves*? How do we know that we're even on the right path? More importantly, how do we live together in peace?

There is fear of difference, particularly in the twenty-first century since September 11, 2001 and the rise of Islamic terrorism. The news over the last few years has seemed saturated with suicide bombings and trucks driving through crowded European marketplaces and crazed shooters.

There is a strong sense of fear and anger out there toward the people who do these things and the religious beliefs that are used to justify their behaviour.

I'm sure you've noticed this. I certainly have.

A few years ago I wrote a piece about the Christian duty to welcome Syrian refugees and to guard our speech when it comes to Muslims. In the over ten years I have spent blogging, I have never written anything that, a) generated so much traffic; and, b) produced an astonishing level of hostility and misunderstanding.

So how *do* we live with, think about, relate to those who do not share our religious convictions as followers of Jesus?

Particularly, in these politically charged times, with Muslims?

To begin with, there are three errors that I think we must avoid.

The first error is to simply assert our rightness or superiority as Christians and imagine that our only task is to convert our Muslim neighbours not to relate to them or try to understand them or become friends with them (remember, we're just using Muslims as the test case here; the same applies to people of any faith).

This is equivalent of sticking our fingers in our ears and yelling the same answer louder and louder. The only response to other religions is to insist that others are wrong and we are right.

This is a well-traveled road that has leads to violence (physical, relational, spiritual). This is what we see in the rise of Islamophobia today—often incredibly hateful speech and demonization of ordinary Muslims who have no connection to terrorism.

The second error is to retreat into a kind of fuzzy “pluralism as ideology.” Here, we move from the observation of different religions to the assertion that they're all basically saying the same thing and that there are no meaningful difference between them.

This, also, is a well-traveled road, particularly in the post-Christian secular western world. We want peace and can't really be bothered to learn about what this or that religious traditions actually teaches, so we just assume they're all versions of the same thing.

The problem here is obvious, but probably requires stating. They're not.

The Christian claim that Jesus is God incarnate is not shared by Muslims. The Muslim belief that the Quran is the final revelation of God and that Muhammad is his prophet is not shared by Christians.

It requires a good deal of ignorance about *actual* religions to say that they're basically saying the same thing (ignorance about religion, alas, abounds in the West).

The final error is similar to the second one but it basically cloisters off religious beliefs into the world of private psychology. Here, religious convictions are fine and it's even ok if they're different, as long as you keep them to yourself and they mostly only affect your private spiritual experience.

The theologian David Bentley Hart has referred to this as "religion as interior decorating." Our beliefs become harmless expressions of our culture or our personal tastes.

This is common in our context. This one, like option 2, fails to actually take different religions seriously and end up presenting faith as something that few actual adherents would recognize or agree to.

Ironically, the Muslims that I talk to find options 2 & 3 above incoherent. They know very well that Islam and Christianity make different claims about God and what God requires. There is overlap, for sure, but Islam is not Christianity.

The "religion as interior decorating" approach is even less comprehensible to the Muslims I have talked to. Islam is a way of life, encompassing everything from dietary restrictions to set prayer times to political beliefs. It's not just an expression of private taste or boutique spirituality and they would be alarmed and probably feel insulted to hear it described as such.

I have had Muslims say to me, "Don't pretend we're the same. We're not. Just be the best Christians you can be and we'll be the best Muslims we can be."

So if these three options are dead ends, what should we do?

I think that as Christians our duty is to hold our beliefs and practices with a conviction that doesn't shrink away from the conclusion that we really do think that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life for everyone, *but* to do so with a grace and a humility that acknowledges that we don't know everything or see everything or understand everything about why our neighbours believe as they do.

And, even more importantly, that our first task when it comes to those who believe differently than us, is to love them.

This is not an easy balance to strike, but I think it is imperative that we do so.

1 Peter 3:15 points us in the right direction:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

It's also vitally important for us to remember that God is at work beyond the borders of our group.

This brings us to our first story from Genesis 21, the story of Hagar and Ishmael. A bit of back-story is perhaps required. Abraham and Sarah have received the divine promise that God will bless them with descendants as numerous as the stars.

But Abraham and Sarah remain childless. So they take matters into their own hands, using the Egyptian servant Hagar to produce a child (Ishmael).

Years later, when Sarah conceives in her old age and gives birth to Isaac, Sarah grows resentful of Hagar and her child. It will be Isaac, not Ishmael that is the inheritor of the promise and blessing of God!

So, she sends Hagar and Ishmael away, out into the wilderness where we encounter this heartbreaking scene where Hagar cannot even bear to be present when her precious son dies of heat and thirst and hunger in the desert.

But then something happens. In verse 17, we read:

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? **Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.** 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.

Hagar sees a well of water and God spares their lives.

As you may know, it is Ishmael that Muslims see as their patriarch. The boy who was "not chosen" was still the recipient of God's grace and care and even promise.

Can we accept that God is always active, always encountering people “where they are,” just like Ishmael? Can we accept that God is always speaking, even through other religious traditions, even through those who aren’t “chosen?”

I came across an example of this last week in an email that Fred Unruh sent to me. It contained a newsletter from his former church in Winnipeg where a man names Shahid Khan shared his testimony before baptism.

In it, he talks about growing up being exposed to the Islamic culture of his birth, elements of the Christian tradition and a love of philosophy and literature. He didn’t find God persuasive or compelling in either the Quran or the Bible.

But God was always meeting him where he was. Later in his life, he began to study the gospels (due to the influence of CMU, incidentally). Gradually, Jesus began to seem increasingly beautiful to him. In the closing words of his testimony, he said these words:

I don’t think a human being can truly not love Jesus if they open their hearts to him. Seen from any perspective there is absolutely nothing to dislike about him. He does not go away and, in a mysterious way, transforms into that missing image, the resolution, the Master.

He does not go away.

What a beautiful statement of the stubbornness of the God who always meets us where we are and invites us closer and closer to Jesus!

But what about when the stories aren’t so inspirational? What about when there’s no happy ending like this? What about when Muslims (or any other religious group) continue to reject Jesus?

What is our response then? Our second passage from Matthew 5 gives us our marching orders here:

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax

collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Anyone can love those who think and act like them, Jesus says. Anyone can love those who are part of their group.

But love goes to hard places, whether it's to encounter Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, or to reach across religious boundaries here in twenty-first century Canada.

Love goes where it's difficult. Love refuses easy narratives of good guys and bad guys. Love refuses to insult and demean and misrepresent our neighbours.

Love refuses to avoid the hard truth of genuine difference but reaches across it.

And so, as Christians, we should be the last people trading in caricatures and stereotypes of our Muslim neighbours! We should be the last people stoking the flames of division that we see all around us.

We should be the ones who are most determined to actually get to know our Muslim neighbours. To find out what we have in common with them. To work together with them, as we have done in our efforts in welcoming Syrian refugees over these last two years.

There were many rewarding things about this project, including working with Christians from other denominations and perspectives. But it was also wonderful to get to know some of our Muslim neighbours and to be part of helping a family be reunited. It was remarkable to hear things like, "I can't believe that Christians are the ones who are helping bring my family here."

If we only love our fellow Christians or those who are in our socioeconomic bracket or those who we have coffee with at Tim Hortons or those who have the same passport as us or those who share our political views or those who have a similar history to us, Jesus doesn't have much admiration for us.

Anyone can do that, he says. Those are easy places to love. I am calling you to a love that goes to hard places. Places of difference.

I am calling you to imitate me in *refusing to go away*, in tramping out into the wilderness to show love and concern even to those that are so eagerly cast aside.

When you do this, Jesus says, you are acting like our Heavenly Father whose sun shines and whose rain falls on all.

This is a high and a holy calling. It's also a hard one.

One of the best things about following Jesus—I truly believe this—is that we are set free to simply love people. We don't have to be afraid of them, we don't have to "fix" them, we don't have to change them, and we certainly don't have to try to make them look more like us.

Rather, we are simply set free to love our neighbours as Jesus loves us and to invite them to participate in this love.

Perhaps because we don't really believe it could be true. We don't really believe that life could be that simple.

We seem to think that the point of life is to solve the puzzle, to draw the boundaries, to unlock the mystery of existence, to figure out which is the right worldview, the right ideology, the right religion, as if that was the point of life.

As if the point of life was for our tiny little finite brains to attain enough "rightness" about enough important "issues" and questions to merit eternal life.

But the point of life isn't to solve the puzzle; the point of life is to learn how to love. Especially in hard places.

May God help us to be faithful to this call.

Amen.

