

At the wonderful luncheon here on July 5th, Rabbi Jonathan Cohen offered the blessing. In the preceding weeks there had been great concern among the organizers. There would be ham at the luncheon. Ham is extremely **not** Kosher. Would the presence of ham be offensive to the rabbi? Could a rabbi bless food that included ham? Perhaps the ham could be kept in the kitchen out of sight until after the blessing.

As it turned out, the concern was completely unnecessary. Jonathan was perfectly at ease pronouncing a blessing on ham. Long ago rabbis reasoned that eating non-kosher foods was a sin **and** failing to offer a blessing on food was a sin. It was better to commit one sin rather than two. Jonathan didn't eat any ham and offered a blessing, thereby avoiding both sins.

It was only after the fact that I learned church members had been so worried about the sensitivities of the rabbi. I was delighted. It speaks volumes about this congregation. Most churches would never consider inviting a rabbi to such an occasion in the first place. Of the few that would, even fewer would offer the rabbi the honor of pronouncing a blessing. Of that small minority, only a tiny fraction would fret over Jewish dietary restrictions. You are part of that tiny fraction. Praise the Lord!

It took me a long time to realize how very strange you and I are—make that **unusual**—when it comes to our relations with people of other faiths. It happened a few years ago. I'd participated in an event at the synagogue as I do from time to time. At the end of the evening, a member of that congregation took me aside and expressed rather excessive gratitude for the small part I played in the proceedings. It really seemed over the top. I must have tried to brush it off. "Dan, you don't understand. You come to the synagogue. You participate. You treat us with respect. That's not what we've come to expect from Christian ministers who usually are out to convert us and still blame us for killing Jesus."

You invited Rabbi Cohen to the church to participate in a celebration. You treated him with respect, even worrying about what to do with the ham. As he was leaving, Jonathan told me how very touched and grateful and honored he was to be included; to be allowed to offer a blessing in a Christian church. He knows, better than we do, how rare such occasions are. I've heard similar expressions of gratitude from Muslims whenever we've invited them into our midst and appreciated some of their customs and traditions. I couldn't be prouder of this congregation for being so strange—unusual.

Of course, being so unusual can raise questions. Does being respectful and appreciative of other faiths mean we're insufficiently devoted to our own Christian faith? Are we compromising the gospel in order to get along with neighbors of other faiths? If ham is alright with us are Jews and Muslims wrong to prohibit it? I say an emphatic "NO"! to all of the above.

In today's reading from Ephesians, we are reminded of the great gulf that existed between Jews and Gentiles in the early days of Christianity. Each regarded the other with contempt.

Each regarded the other as barbaric, uncivilized. There was a dividing wall of hostility between them. Yet both Jews and Gentiles met in the church where that dividing wall of hostility was broken down by Christ. The early church struggled to work that out in practice, but it was clear from the very beginning that God did not intend the church to be split along socioeconomic, ethnic, or gender lines.

Paul puzzled over fellow Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah. He concluded Jewish disbelief opened the way for non-Jews, but God's love for Israel did not end when the church came into being. Ephesians provides a sharp reminder to Gentile converts that they owe their knowledge of God to the Jewish people. There is a special bond between Christians and Jews because of this common inheritance. Jesus was the Son of God who called Abraham, who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, who made a covenant with David, and who inspired the prophets. Christians recognize we owe the Jewish community an enormous debt for our faith in God. We go into dialogue with our Jewish friends as grateful learners, not as people who have all the answers.

There are to be no divisions within the church. There's a special bond between Christians and Jews. Anything less fails the gospel. But what about people of other faiths; Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and so on? Ephesians puts a challenge to both Jews and Christians by insisting that cultural and religious divisions are contrary to God's vision for humanity.

There are and will always be differences. Hostility and division are contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ. **Because** we are faithful to the gospel of Christ, we seek to understand and appreciate other faiths. In so doing, we allow Christ to make peace between those who are far off and those who are near.

But isn't Christianity the only true religion? There is that verse in the Gospel of John in which Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father, but by me." That sounds rather exclusive. All other religions are dead ends. Many Christians believe that. I don't.

The entire verse reads, Jesus said to him [Thomas], "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." The "me" of Jesus is equated with "the way". What is the way to God that Jesus embodied? It is the way of life abounding with justice and mercy, filled with compassion, overflowing with love. That is the way of life that leads to God.

That same way of life is at the core of all the world's enduring religions. A life extravagant with justice, mercy, compassion, and love is the way that leads to Nirvana, Enlightenment, Paradise, and Allah in all the great world religions. The stories, doctrines, and rituals that point to the way vary greatly from one religion to another. Different religions have produced vastly different literature, art, and music. But the core, the way of life they point to, is the same.

Some people find it threatening that the heart of the enduring religions is the same. I find it comforting. God is God of all creation, and all people are God's children. It doesn't make sense that God would choose to be revealed in only one religion. To find the same way of life at the core of all the great religions only strengthens my faith in God who is God of all.

I am a Christian. I will always be a Christian. Christianity is absolutely the right religion for me. Nowhere is the nature and intention of God revealed more clearly to me than in the person of Jesus. Nowhere is Jesus revealed more clearly to me than in the Bible, traditions, rituals, music, symbols, and art of the church. No other religion speaks to my heart like the Christian faith. No doubt believers of other faiths feel the same way about their faith. I'm content with that.

Because I am a Christian, I believe Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. Christ has made peace with those who are far off and those who are near. We can cherish our Christian faith and welcome dialogue with people of other faiths. We can learn from and appreciate the wisdom of other faiths. We cannot be true to the gospel of Jesus Christ if we do any less.

We live in a time of increasing religious intolerance. Members of the Baha'i faith are persecuted in Iran. Christians suffer discrimination and worse in Iraq. Anti-Semitism led to murder in our nation's capital. We remain a community that refuses to be hemmed in by walls of hostility, that welcomes interfaith dialogue, that is secure enough in our own faith to be open to people of other faiths. Can we make a difference? Can we contribute to understanding and peace? Can a rabbi bless ham? Amen.

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