

John Docherty, November 4, 2018

Keep these words

(covering eyes with right hand)

Shema Yisrael : Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God; the Lord is one
(Deut. 6:4).

There is probably no other declaration that better states the foundational belief of the Abrahamic Faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam than this sentence taken from the passage we read from the book of Deuteronomy : the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.

The phrase itself is the beginning of the much longer daily prayer of observant Jews - the Shema.

It's a prayer that, according to the Deuteronomy passage, should be recited twice a day : when you get up in the morning, and when you lay down again at night.

It's to be taught diligently to your children, and you're to be so intentional about holding to its message that you will bind these words to your forearm, and place them on your forehead and on the doorpost of your house, and on the gates of your property.

The instructions from Deuteronomy are taken quite literally by orthodox Jews, and it's the reason they will carry a parchment with these words inscribed on it in a small container attached to their arms, and another strapped to their foreheads.

The same words will be found in the small receptacle, the Mezuzah, that they attach to their doorposts and which they will touch reverently when they enter their home.

It's a constant reminder to them, and to their neighbours, that they are Jews, followers of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Lord is our God; the Lord is one.

It's a prayer that Christians should be able to recite with integrity.

It's a prayer that Muslims should be able to recite with integrity.

It's a prayer that acknowledges our faith in the God who created the universe;

our faith in the one who created all men and women in God's image.

I expect it's a prayer that Jesus himself would have recited with the same devotion and quiet sense of belonging that Jews today must feel when they recite the words.

And it's a prayer that would have been recited last Saturday morning by many, if not all, of the Jews who prepared to head out to worship in the synagogue in Pittsburgh last week.

The Lord is our God; the Lord is one.

I think it's one of the great tragedies of human existence that a statement of such a basic truth has been used over the millennia to both unify people of faith, and to divide people of faith.

How is it possible that we can declare our allegiance to God, and in the same breath point an accusing finger at others who declare allegiance to that same God?

It's a bit of a rhetorical question, of course, because I know that at least part of the answer can be found in my own attitude toward others who profess faith in God and yet who choose to follow God in ways that I find incomprehensible, or in direct contradiction to how *I* understand faithfulness.

It's fairly easy, in fact, to take this Book and draw any number of conclusions regarding what constitutes true faithfulness.

One only has to look at the various streams of Judaism that each have their own take on proper living : from the Orthodox, to the Reformed, to the Hasidic.

Or to the multitude of Christian denominations : from the Orthodox, to the Roman Catholic, to the Lutheran, to the Anglican, to the Presbyterian, to the Baptist, to the Pentecostal, to the Mennonite.

Or should I say the Mennonites, plural : from the Mennonite Church, to the Mennonite Brethren, to the Church of God in Christ – Mennonite, to the Amish, to the Old Order.

We all claim the declaration of faith in God as the foundation of our lives, and yet we are almost incapable of worshipping together under the same roof.

It's not that Christians or Jews are unique in this regard. Other religions are every bit as fragmented as we are.

Islam has the main streams of Sunni and Shia, along with sub-groups of each.

Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism : they all have their off-shoots.

Somehow, in our desire to be faithful, we've decided that those who are faithful in ways that seem improper to us are the enemy.

They are, at best, an affront to our own handle on the Truth, and, at worst, a direct threat to all we hold dear.

And somehow, this difference of perspective on how to live a faithful life can morph into suspicion; and it can then develop into antagonism; and it can eventually result in a hate-filled rampage, taking multiple lives in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, or in a mosque in Québec city, or in a Coptic church in Egypt.

I suppose Mennonites, of all people in the Christian tradition, should be able to empathize with the Jewish community, or the Muslim community, or the Coptic community, or any other community of faith, when tragedies like this occur. Mennonites have had their own share of persecution over the centuries, and we've been chased from one country to another.

We should be sensitive to attitudes that paint entire communities with one brush and that demonize every member of the community because of the real or imagined faults of some members of that community.

But we're as human as anyone else, and we carry with us our own insecurities and our own fear of the other; our own suspicions with regard to the intentions of those who may seem like a threat on some level.

We're also part of the broader Christian church that I think can arguably be held responsible for the anti-semitism that is so prevalent in Western culture. This is a body of faith that has historically been largely antagonistic towards Judaism; referring to Jews as “Christ-killers”, for example, though that kind of inflammatory rhetoric has thankfully been largely relegated to the trash heap of history.

But ... I know that I've sometimes caught myself tempted to refer to someone as “Jewish” rather than simply as “a Jew”, as if somehow calling him Jewish is more polite; or as if calling someone a Jew has a hint of insult about it.

I think there's a not-so-subtle anti-semitism about that, even if I don't think I'm anti-semitic in my actions or beliefs.

Some of my best friends are homeless intellectually challenged transgender indigenous Jewish people of colour.

Do I protest too much my virtuous nature ??

And this, in spite of the fact that Jesus was a Jew and every one of his earliest followers were Jews. By most any measure, Christianity should really be considered a sect of Judaism, though, of course, Christianity in most of its forms would never be acceptable within Judaism.

And the early disciples of Jesus seem not to have been particularly welcome in the synagogue.

But, that said, our faith is profoundly rooted in Judaism.

The largest bulk of this Book of scripture – the Old Testament – is entirely Jewish or Hebrew, and with the possible exception of Luke's writings, the entire Book was exclusively written by Jews.

When asked about the most important commandment, Jesus basically recites the *second* line of the Shema : “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”, and he adds to it the commandment to love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.

This episode echoes a story told of Rabbi Hillel who lived about a hundred years before Jesus. Hillel is reputed to have been approached by a gentile who would convert to Judaism on condition that someone could explain the Torah to him while he stood on one foot. Hillel told him :

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this – go and study it.”

This “golden rule” is at the heart of both Jewish and Christian thought. “Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t have them do to you.” It’s an approach that was clearly embraced by Jesus, and promoted in his teachings as a good Torah-abiding Jew.

As I've been working through this meditation over the last week, I've been heavily influenced by my own feelings following the attack on the synagogue in Pittsburgh, and by the strongly Jewish flavour to both the Old Testament and New Testament readings that were suggested for today.

In terms of our Jewish roots, and our on-going desire to follow God faithfully, I can't help but think of James' words of encouragement : “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”

So, as we seek to draw near to God this morning, I'd like to encourage us to reflect on how many other people around the globe seek to draw near to God in settings that are very different from ours;

People of faith who are honestly, and with integrity, trying to find that right way to live their lives as they gather in churches, in synagogues, in mosques, in temples, in gurdwaras, or in homes;

I'd like us to reflect on what it is that draws us together as we draw near to God, rather than what it is that separates us as we seek to draw near to God.

And I'm frankly not sure how appropriate it is, but when we pray together following our sharing time, I'm going to pass around copies of the Jewish mourner's Kaddish, the prayer that is used during Jewish funerals, as a way of drawing near to our Jewish sisters and brothers as they grieve over the massacre in Pittsburgh last week, and as they grieve over the larger implications of that violence, and I'm going to invite you to pray it with me.

I wonder whether, in this very building, it may have been recited from time to time when this was a Jewish Peretz school during, and immediately after, the Second World War.

Although it is a funeral prayer, it doesn't speak of death, or mourning *per se* – it's rather a declaration of trust in God in the face of deeply painful loss, and a prayer for peace at a time when our hearts are troubled.

It's also a prayer that is not to be recited alone, but only with a minimum of ten persons. It's an expression of the interconnectedness of life and loss, and of our need of each other in our relationship to God.

And as we pray together later, let me remind you :

(covering eyes with right hand)

Shema Yisrael: Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

The Lord is our God; the Lord is one.