

With Gentleness and Reverence  
1 Peter 3:13-16a

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April 27, 2008

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

*1 Peter 3:13-16a*

Church on Sunday. Ginny's Passover Seder on Monday, The Philpot's Medium Night the following week. And *Siddhartha*, the story of the Buddha, by my bedside. Even as a teenager I was tasting it all. Curious about how other people were seeking God. Hungry to discover other's rituals, mysteries, and beliefs. I never realized 'til recently just how lucky I was as a child, to have parents who allowed me to embrace it all, unafraid. I spread my table with every taste of religion I could find and it has been wonderful!

Each encounter enriched my life and my faith, and created in me a deep appreciation and respect not just for my own faith tradition but for that of others I have never had any doubt that there are many paths up the same mountain, all valid, all acts of reverence and love, and all connected to one another. For no matter how our faith traditions may differ, we are all seeking the same God. And God loves the seeker. God loves the one longing to know him. Because it is in the seeking that we ourselves are found.

The world is getting smaller. Different traditions meet and mingle. What can we learn from one another? How do we get along?

My heart has been soaring these past weeks. I have been delighted beyond measure to engage with between 15-20 members of this congregation in "A Taste of Judaism" with Barbara Aharoni, whom we all agreed, was a fabulous teacher. Full of enthusiasm for her faith, but also deeply respectful of ours.

Entering the room like an unknown valley. I think most were not sure what to expect, but soon we found ourselves reading the Bible together, finding we share the same words and come from the same God and believe the same commandments.

As we heard how important love of neighbor was for the Jewish faith we could hear Jesus saying those same words to us. The connection between us deepened with each conversation. But I think one of the crowning moments was when Barbara explained why Jews do not believe Jesus is the Messiah. "Because, she said, "if he was the Messiah, there would be peace in the world. That is who the Messiah is for us. He is the Peace maker. That is how we will recognize him. When the Messiah comes, the world will know peace." Sandy D. said, "so maybe the Messiah you wait for and the one we believe will come again are the same. Maybe we are waiting for the same messiah." "Yes!" said Barbara, and great smiles filled the room.

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In Israel, Bethlehem is occupied territory. It is behind the Wall of Separation, named by the Israelis, the Wall of Degradation, named by the Palestinians. 40 feet high and 400 miles long. The wall is a symbol of anger and fear.

Here in the birth place of Jesus, a church commemorating his birth sits directly across the square from a mosque. As you walk out one door, you see the other.

As we listened to our guide, we were also conscious of the Muslim Call to prayer, a call we heard 5 times a day;

God is most great. God is most great.  
There is no god except God.  
There is no god except God.  
Muhammad is the messenger of God.  
Muhammad is the messenger of God.  
Come to prayer! Come to prayer!  
Come to prosperity! Come to prosperity!  
God is most great. God is most great.  
There is none worthy of worship except God.

Our guide, Sameer, a Palestinian Christian took us across to the mosque where we were invited to speak with the Imam, Ibrahim Dweib. Entering the doors, we were directed to remove our shoes, and women were asked to cover our heads. We were hushed as we climbed the stairs to his study.

Entering a small room we meet the Imam, who is quiet and reverent. And as our guide translates our many questions, we find to our surprise, many similarities; from training of ministers to teaching our children; even in the way our religious institutes are organized. We chuckle with one another over that. Muslim or Christian, we get stuck in administrative goop. But the crowning moment here came when a member of our group asked,

"What is the nature of the relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities," Sameer laughed, "You see, don't you, what our relationship is?" pointing to himself and the Imam. They're friends. Sameer continued, "I wish you could understand the ways of my brother. There are many in the world that do bad things in God's name. This does not make the religion bad." They look at one another and my eyes well up at such genuine respect between two seekers finding their own way to meet and serve God.

"Who sang the call to prayer", we asked, for we noted that it was one of the most beautiful we had heard. The Imam pointed to a very small, grisly older man. "Would you like him to sing it for you" "Yes!" we enthusiastically agree. And he honored us with his beautiful, haunting voice. We sat in awe. Sameer laughed, "I have those verses memorized," he said, with a smile that communicated love for his neighbor.

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Around the world, on the daily news, we see a different answer than the one I've been living. From Bosnia — Herzegovina, where Muslims have been oppressed and slaughtered by Christians, to the Middle East where Jew and Muslim clash and Christians are caught in the crossfire, to Iraq where Sunni and Shi'a exchange gunfire, to the United States where hooded Protestant Caucasian men terrorize Catholic and Jewish neighbors of all races, to Ireland, to Darfur, to Kashmir, to Chechnya. In this smaller world of ours we see different religious traditions meet and mingle to a disastrous effect.

We need another way.

Perhaps the Apostle Peter's way. He too lived in a time of violence, of suffering, of persecutions. But we heard in our scripture this morning that He called upon his community not to bludgeon, not to make war, not even to crusade or convert, but to give a defense, to give an explanation, to make a witness for the hope that is within you and to do it with gentleness and with respect.

I recently was directed to a radio station called *Speaking of Faith*, specifically to a program called No More Taking Sides. It is the story of an Israeli- Palestinian friendship. Robi Damelin and Ali Abu Awwad are part of a gathering network of Israelis and Palestinians who have lost loved ones in the crisis between their peoples. The story was about their unlikely friendship and how their common losses have brought them together. Robi lost her son to a Palestinian sniper; Ali lost his brother to an Israeli soldier. Through a citizen led movement called the Parent's Circle- Bereaved Families Forum they are turning their pain into hope. In the podcast interview Ali talked about his grief and anger. He talked about the impulse to seek revenge and his realization that killing would not release him from his pain. So instead of living just for himself, he decided to live for his people and nonviolent resolutions.

Mr Awaad said "When I heard about the Bereaved Families – Israeli Bereaved Families, and that religious guy, Yitzhak Frankenthal, whose son had been kidnapped and killed, when I heard that they wanted to come to us and talk to us, I was surprised. I was shocked, you know. How can somebody who lost somebody in the conflict sit with their enemy? Also, my mother and my brother, they want to know. We invite them. They came to our home and it was the first time I saw an Israeli crying. I used to see soldiers. I used to see settlers. I used to have very bad relations because they treated me very badly. But I never saw the tears of the other side. I never saw the pain of the other side."

"We cannot lose our humanity", Robi and Ali say. We must find another way.

The world is getting smaller. We need another way; a way of education, a way of meeting, a way of hearing one another's stories, a way to overcome our ignorance and our fear.

Standing at the Jordan River, I was aware of Luke. Just the night before he told the group, "I have a confession to make. I am not here seeking Jesus. I came to see Jerusalem to see the land, to meet the people, I came seeking a way. And I think my way will be Buddhism because I so admire the Dali Llama and his way of Compassion. I think a heart of compassion is the way."

Standing at the Jordan as we spoke about reaffirming our baptism, I was aware of how excluded Luke might feel. He had just said he was not sure Jesus was his way. I turned to him and said "Luke, this does not have to be about baptism, it can be about blessing, and if you would like to be blessed in your seeking, I would be honored"

Standing in the water with the others suddenly there was a hand on my shoulder and a 6 foot, 27 year old young man said "Judy will you bless me?" Taking water in my hand I poured it over his head saying, "May the eternal God of love, bless you in your seeking. May you find the heart of compassion for which you so long, and may you be the heart of compassion in this world of great need."

The world is getting smaller. I hope, I pray, that the way our lives mingle and meet is one of reverence, of respect, of listening to each other's story, of mixing our tears and sharing our laughter, so that a new community may be created, even a household built on the firm ground of mutual respect, of gentleness and reverence.

Discovering how to pray with others we do not know who are different from us or who suffer in ways beyond our comprehension is an essential and profound spiritual task. To love our neighbor as our self. This is the compassionate heart of all religious traditions.

And I believe with all my heart, and all my mind, and with all my soul, that this is The Way.  
Amen.

Watkins, Sharon, "With Gentleness and Reverence", 30GoodMinutes.org, Program #5002, Broadcast October 8, 2006, [http://www.csec/sermon/watkins\\_5002.htm](http://www.csec/sermon/watkins_5002.htm)

Speaking of Faith, "No More Taking Sides, An Israeli-Palestinian Story", <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/nomore/transcript.shtml>