

Sermon: “Those Who Were Seen Dancing”**Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: July 17th, 2016**

It did not seem to be the intention of Jesus, the Jew, to create a new religion called Christianity. He was offering and teaching a way of living. He was interested in the transformation of the fabric of human life. He wasn't looking to set up a competing religion along side Judaism and the Roman pagan cults. It could be argued even that Jesus found such religious formulations and structures more of a hindrance to his message than a benefit. Alignment of one's life to Truth and Love, to the heart to God, was his message not affiliation with a particular religion. If anything he made a point of associating himself with those outside of religious perimeters and his association with the devoutly religious was strained to say the least. Nothing better exemplifies this than the story he tells that has become one of the most well-known and enduring stories of all time - the Good Samaritan.

Love God and love your neighbor as yourself AND who is your neighbor? Take the person most excluded from your religion or your state, most sidelined by cultural definitions of honor and worth, and HE/SHE is your neighbor. NOT, mind you, your neighbor to fix up and convert to your religion. That's not in the story. NOT your pet project to change their minds and adjust their ways, but rather your neighbor for the bind up of wounds, the healing of hurts, the one you are to love. Or, as this parable indicates, they are the neighbor that we must allow to take care of us, to teach us, to bind up our wounds. The Samaritans were a most despicable people according to the status quo of the time – illegal, undocumented, radicalized in some cases – and Jesus uses one of them as an example par excellence of what exactly he means when he says we should love our neighbor. Jesus stung his listeners reminding them that they in no way cornered the market on goodness, holiness, and worthiness! And ever since then Christians have never been judgmental, prejudiced or dismissive of another group of people, right?! Ok, well that was Jesus' *idea* at least... but maybe he underestimated how deep-seated our human tendency is to blame, scapegoat and be in rivalry with people who are not like us.

Deep-seated in us is the desire to distinguish and separate the good ones and the bad ones, the worthy and unworthy, the saved and the unsaved, the blessed and the cursed, those acceptable and those unacceptable, the natural and the unnatural. But Jesus

believed, apparently, that even deeper within us was God's image and throughout the gospels he continually pointed his listeners to this deeper image within out of which comes not judgment and condemnation, fear and violence but love and acceptance, non-judgment and non-violence; that deep place that a Hindu might find through his ecstatic dance or a Muslim through her Ramadan fast or a Christian by taking communion with his community or a Buddhist through her meditation. Whether they are Christian or Hindu or Sufi matters little... and we know this because Jesus went out of his way to indicate that it mattered little whether one was a Samaritan, a Jew, a Roman Centurion, a peasant or emperor. God is the God of all. Such affiliations with human-formed strictures and structures are beside the point. God does not care.

Jesus is clear about this.

Jesus' followers, on the other hand, not so much.

You might remember a number of years ago a Hindu man was invited to open the senate with a prayer and three Christian protestors attended and yelled out during his prayer "no lord but Jesus Christ" and something about Hinduism being an abomination. An abomination: The same word actually that many of Jesus' fellow Jews of his time would use for the Samaritans. Those people who yelled out on the floor of the senate would have been scandalized by Jesus. He would have talked today about the Good Muslim or the Good Hindu or the good illegal immigrant as an example for us Christians to follow and many Christians would stand up and walk away from him. But this is not surprising for Jesus and Christianity are not one and the same thing. Jesus Christ cannot be contained in the narrow, limited and at times dangerous confines that we've built for him in this religion and we must ever be on guard lest we worship our religion and our own formulation of who God is instead of the true God.

One of the questions that surfaces understandably in these days of religious extremist activity is: does religion in fact create more problems than it solves? Is religion the source of our problems or another vehicle for them? As a commentator on NPR asked a few nights ago – is it Islam that breeds violent extremists or violent extremists who use Islam for their purposes. I am skeptical that eliminating religion out of the human equation would eliminate human sinfulness, violence and extremist behavior. We'd just find another excuse for our violence, wouldn't we? Nor did Jesus recommend we do away with religion altogether. Jesus only asked in so many words if our religious

devotion and commitment serves life and human flourishing, connecting us in love to our neighbors or does it set us at odds with them. If it sets us up as privileged over others, if it leads us towards disdain or disrespect, much less hatred, then it is a problem! The famous late Protestant minister and activist William Sloan Coffin said one time - “What I have found to be a common phenomenon in American Universities today is that professors judge poetry, novels, art and music by their very best works. Why then do so many of them judge religion by the worst examples of it?” There are also beautiful, transcendent and transformational things that happen in the name of religion. There are such ugly things too of course but we mustn’t let the horrible examples overshadow the beautiful.

Yossi Klein Halevi is an Israeli Jew who set out on a spiritual journey through the Holy Lands in pursuit of a common spiritual language and experience by which he could connect to his Muslim and Christian neighbors there. His guiding question for his spiritual journey was: “Could religion be a source of unity?” and that question set him, a Jew, on a 2-year long exploration of the devotional lives of Christianity and Islam. It’s a beautiful and at times heart-breaking account that he relates this book [At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jews Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land](#). I highly recommend it if you are looking for a summer read! I’d like to end my sermon this morning by reading to you a few pages from this book – seems like a good summer worship thing to do. I want to read this so that in the midst of the gruesome accounts of religious extremism on the news we can immerse ourselves if but for a few minutes in an account of devout religious expression that results not in death but in love.

In this section of the book Yossi and Eliyahu are two Jews who have been invited into a Muslim Sufi sacred dance called a Zikr by a Muslim holy man and mystic named Ibrahim, who himself is committed to healing the rift between Jews and Muslims. Together these three travel to Ramla in Israel, a town of both Jews and Palestinians to attend this dance and this is what they encounter... p.p 101-105