

**A Gentle, Committed, and Universal
Christian Faith**

Isaiah 42:1-9 *He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

Acts 10:34-43 *Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*

Confession of an Uneasy Christian

I confess a long-standing discomfort about being a Christian. Many of my most significant spiritual experiences and relationships have been outside of the church and formal religion. I have seen as much of God in the lives of the so-called "unchurched," in non-Christians, and in the world of nature as I have within the circles of organized religion. I have often found a deeper commitment to humane and just causes outside the church than inside it. I have found a deep and real spirituality in many who are not part of the Christian tradition or any religious tradition at all. In other words, I've never had the sense from experience or my studies of scripture that Christianity "has it all."

This can be confusing. What, then, is the use of being committed to a particular spiritual tradition? Can we not be exclusively committed to Jesus Christ and the revelation of God in him while at the same time being open to the truth others bring? Does being exclusively committed to Christ mean that we have to become zealots? Are we doomed to perpetuate and suffer the conflicts between religious traditions—my religion is better than your religion?

In his novel Life of Pi, Yann Martel tells the story of a young Hindu boy who also becomes a Christian and a Muslim simply because he finds them ways to love God. This draws the hostility of the local spiritual leaders of each religion and of the local people. After such an encounter, Pi says this: "There are always those who take it upon themselves to defend God, as if Ultimate Reality, as if the sustaining frame of existence, were something weak and helpless. These people walk by a widow deformed by leprosy begging for a few paise, walk by children dressed in rags living in the street, and they think, 'Business as usual.' But if they perceive a slight against God, it is a different story. Their faces go red, their chests heave mightily, they sputter angry words...They should direct their anger at themselves. For evil in the open is but evil from within that has been let out. The main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart. Meanwhile, the lot of widows and homeless children is very hard, and it is to their defence, not God's that the self-righteous should rush...To me, religion is about our dignity, not our depravity." (pp. 70-71)

We see today what how dogmatic fundamentalism—which is found in every religious tradition—contains the seeds of extremism. I'm not talking only

about Islamic terrorists but also Christian terrorists who claim that their understanding of God is the only option and become violent in language, spirit, and action. When an uncritical and arrogant form of Christianity is welded to nationalism, the result is the enforcement of one particular view that has no sense of its own relativism. Then a militant and aggressive stance is taken toward all who disagree.

Is there hope for a recovery of integrity in Christian faith? Is there any reason to keep being Christian when the track record of Christianity includes so much violence, bloodshed, and arrogance? Is there a way of being Christians who don't identify with the kind of muscular, dominating Christianity that is being touted today from mega churches to the White House itself?

Yes, there is hope. And it is found if we are doing our work with scripture. I mean, really engaging the whole of scripture, not the kind of selective proof-texting that feeds religious extremism. The readings for today from Isaiah and the Acts of the Apostles are excellent examples of what is at the heart of scripture. They express what is central to the spirit of God, of Jesus Christ, and of the Christian community when it is faithfully following Christ.

A Spirituality of Gentleness and Commitment

Isaiah speaks of the gentle, encouraging, and justice-oriented spirit of the servant of God, whether it is a particular messiah or the community of Israel, whether it is Jesus himself or Jesus' community, the church. This servant who comes in God's spirit does not "cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street." It is not the public display of power that serves God. Nor is it the loud, pretentious boasting of those who claim to have the truth. The true servant or servant community does not proclaim itself. How did Jann Martel put it in his novel: "The main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart." The servant who is full of God's spirit lives with a humility that comes from always wrestling with God's living word speaking in his or her own heart.

The servant's faithfulness to God is shown by a deep, ongoing commitment to doing what is right. Nurturing those who are weak, not taking advantage of them. Fanning the sparks of good in people, not extinguishing what is faintly burning. Again, as Pi says it in the novel: "To me, religion is about our dignity, not our depravity." The servant isn't about bashing people and proving his own rightness, defending her own position. The servant touches the bruised reed healingly, calling it to health and strength. The servant doesn't blow out the faint spark of good or hope or faith, but gently breathes upon it so that it grows brighter and stronger.

The servant is devoted to justice and learns how to be undaunted when circumstances are discouraging. God's justice, we remember, is not the popular idea of justice—people getting what they deserve, punishment meted out. God's justice is the uplifting of those who are poor, oppressed, left out, overlooked, and condemned by society and religion.

So, Isaiah gives us a first example of a different kind of spirituality, a different kind of religious person and community. One that is humble. One that is encouraging to those who are discouraged and uplifting to those who are downtrodden. One that is committed to a life devoted to the well being of others,

of those who do not share in the world's wealth, power, and prestige. This can raise for us questions of how we are or are not reflecting this kind of servant spirit and work. How am I being and becoming a person who does not break the bruised reed or quench the dimly flickering wick? In my inward journey work, am I dealing with those things in me that lead me to treat people harshly and angrily, those things that cause me to withdraw encouragement and acceptance of others? In what ways am I using my gifts and the gift of my life to touch those who are suffering either the things that beset us all as human beings or the things that are caused by other people and institutions?

In Christ, God gives us the spirit of gentleness and encouragement to treat each person with dignity. That same Christ-spirit makes us able to sustain commitment to what is good and right over the long haul and through the most discouraging of circumstances. This is the servant spirit of Christ.

God's Impartiality and a Universal Christian Spirituality

In the passage from Acts, we hear of God's impartiality and universality. God has led Peter to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile and even worse a Roman centurion. Cornelius has sent for Peter because God told him in a dream to do so. God is setting something up! Cornelius wants to hear what Peter has to say. Cornelius is a man of prayer, a reminder that there are many people of prayer throughout the world who are not Christian! God doesn't speak only to Christians. Peter is astounded that God's spirit is already present with Gentiles. This story is more about Peter than Cornelius. Peter has an awakening. He now understands that God shows no partiality. Anyone anywhere who is doing what is right is acceptable to God.

Peter is devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For him God has fully revealed in Christ divine love and purpose, with forgiveness for all. But now Peter understands that this Jesus is not the possession of one sect or group or even religion. He is the expression of God's universal affirmation of and love for all persons. We see this in the gospels themselves, in passages that are not often noticed much less lifted up. We hear a lot about Jesus as the only way to God, about salvation through Jesus alone. But that's not the whole story. We need to hear of the Jesus who was in someone's home one day when his family came looking for him. When told that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, he asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He looked around the room and said, "Here is my family. Everyone who does what God wants is my family." [Mk. 3:31-35] That's universalism. Then there is Jesus' teaching that shows his frustration with those who go on and on about his being "their Lord" but do not do what he tells them to do, do not embody his teachings. [Lk. 6:46] And what about the famous parable of the Good Samaritan? [Lk. 10:25-37] Who did what he was supposed to do in God's sight? Who found the way of eternal life as he cared for his beaten and abandoned neighbor? Not the professional religious types. Not the ones who saw themselves as holy. Not the adherents of the dominant religion. No. It was the Samaritan, the one seen as irreligious and spiritually impure.

So, to be exclusively devoted to Jesus Christ means being devoted to him who was open to and embracing of all anywhere who sought to do God's will. Our exclusive commitment to Christ will manifest itself in an inclusive attitude

toward others. In other words, to be a dogmatic fundamentalist or a religious zealot is contradictory to who Jesus is.

God is far more expansive than we can ever imagine, is always moving outward to include others, is always beyond us. We are to be a community that is specifically committed to Christ. Yet that very commitment will cause to grow in us an openness to others, a universality of spirit, an ability to be Christians in a pluralistic world. We are called, because of the very nature of Jesus as the servant of God, to be the kind of Christians who can be and join with those whose faith, race, or condition in life is different from our own. We can bring what we have to share and receive what others have to share. This, too, is the servant spirit of Christ.

In the chapel of the Festival Center now hangs a stained glass piece created by Jack Glenn, local stained glass artist. The Festival Center Mission Group commissioned Jack to create this piece in memory of Bev Cosby. When we first looked at what Jack had done, I was a bit disappointed. We did not want any explicit and obvious Christian or religious symbols, for the chapel and the Center itself are to be places for all people of all faiths or no faith at all. I didn't even see it at first, but Jack pointed out a cross hidden in the piece. I wasn't sure about this. Since it was hung in the chapel, I've had many opportunities to sit and contemplate it. It is a beautiful creation that receives the light coming in the Fifth Street window through a multitude of pieces of stained glass of all sizes, shapes, colors, and patterns. Within all of this can be seen a light green cross, embedded within all the color and diversity, its lower stem broken.

Jack's creation has done for me what all good works of art do—it makes me think deeply, gives me much to ponder. And I have come to appreciate Jack's vision in what he has made. It is for me an expression not only of the kind of Christian faith that Bev Cosby held and lived by, but the kind of Christian faith needed today. One that is humble, gentle, nurturing of the good in people, and open to what others have to bring, what they can share with us about God, just as we share with them what we have. It is the hidden motivation behind all that we do, not because we are ashamed of our faith or reluctant to share it, but because we know that our faith must first of all be lived out in our own hearts, minds, and lives. It is the life of the servant who is full of God's spirit.