

With All Your Heart

sermon digest

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Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 32:44-47

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Is religion a problem—or more specifically, as asked by Charles Kimball in *When Religion Becomes Evil*, is religion *the* problem underlying the spasms of hatred and violence that often grip our world? In a world that has increasingly become a global neighborhood where the fanaticism of any one religious group can send not just rippling affects but crashing waves of devastation upon the beaches of countries half way around the world, religion can be and often is a problem. “Nothing,” Marquette University ethics professor Daniel Maguire suggests, “so enlivens the will as the tincture of the sacred” [*Violence against Women*, p. 1]. Religious prejudice, supposedly grounded in the will of God, is the most lethal of all prejudice. The poet Alexander Pope claimed that the worst madman is a saint gone mad. Cardinal Newman wrote that people will die for a dogma who will hardly stir for a conclusion; and William Temple, the widely respected Archbishop of Canterbury of the last century, is reported to have said, “If you have a false idea of God, the more religious you are, the worse it is for you. It were better for you to be an atheist” [*Interpretation* (Apr, 2006) p. 194].

Is that the way it is with religion? In a world that is increasingly growing smaller and more crowded, would we be better off without religion? Now you would hardly expect a Cardinal of the Catholic church or the Archbishop of Canterbury or a pastor of Grace Covenant Church to answer, “yes,” would you? But for so many in our society, many of whom who have been burned or in some way victimized by religion’s censure, the answer is increasingly becoming the affirmative. And for many who have had very little initiation into religion, the answer is becoming affirmative as well. Alarmed by the brutalities, the genocides, the suppression of information and alternative viewpoints that inflict themselves upon the world in the name of religion and incensed at home by the arrogant grab for power in the political arena of those who consider their religious views the only ones that count, many in our society have determined they will have little or nothing to do with religion.

A neighbor confided in me several years ago her sense of horror on reading an essay her son had written for school in which he had argued that the world would be a safer, more hospitable place if it could be freed of all religion. Due to her husband’s unpleasant memories of having, he felt, been forced to go to church as a child, they had opted to provide their children with minimal contact with religion, leaving their son with little to base his judgment on other than the conflicted situations he saw flashing across his TV screen.

Is that the way it is with religion? Would we be better off without it? Or if we maintain it, would we be better off minimizing its importance to the level of being kind to granny and the cat? Or perhaps we can maintain it, but keep it private. We can restrict it to the admirable purpose of helping to shape our children’s character but make sure that it does so in the privacy of our homes and churches, not out in public where it might collide with other people’s opinions and impact public policies that might be divisive. Is that the road religion must travel in the 21st century? Would we be just as well off without it?

It all depends on how any religion or any individual within a religion defines God. It depends on whether the God we choose to serve conveniently despises the same people we despise and blesses our hatreds and prejudices. It depends on whether we see God as one who blesses us and our kind while torturing those who are less favored. It depends on whether we commit to a God who asks nothing of us or challenges us or to a God who distinctly calls upon us to be a blessing in the midst of the earth for all of God’s children.

Who is our God? It was a time of crisis. Actually, it was a time of a two-fold crisis, only one of which may be apparent to the reader. The people of Israel were about to cross into the long hoped for, long sought after land of Canaan; but they were going to have to do so without Moses, the esteemed leader who had brought them through their years of wilderness wandering, the one who had served among them as the mouthpiece of God. What would becoming a settled people mean to them? How would the anticipated security and affluence reshape their very identity and impact their faith in God? What kind of God or gods, in other words, is a people willing to put up with when their very prosperity is at stake?

Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible and the last book of the Pentateuch or Torah, literally means “second law.” Cast as the farewell address of Moses, it is a revisiting, a recapitulation, a reinterpretation of the covenant between God and Israel. At this critical juncture in Israel’s history, it seeks to bring the covenant home to the hearts and lives of every single person of the covenant community.

Leap forward five or six hundred years to another time of crisis. The year is around 612 B.C.E. The northern kingdom, called Israel, has languished for more than a century under the control of the Assyrians. Now Judah, the southern kingdom, is teetering on the brink of disaster. The Book of the Covenant, probably a significant portion of our current Deuteronomy, is discovered in the temple. It becomes again a critical, timely reminder in the midst of crisis of what it means to be a people devoted to the service of Yahweh. At center is the definition of just who Yahweh is.

The *Shema Yisrael*, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, resides at the book’s center and at the center of the Jewish faith. Its “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” is, in the words of Patrick Miller, the “mirror image” of the opening words of the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, which state, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). The demands of covenant are rooted in the nature of the God who comes in delivering love. Again and again, Deuteronomy rehearses the mighty acts of God in history—acts which

first constituted the Israelites as a people and which have kept them through all of the vicissitudes of time. The covenant responsibilities of the people of Israel and the people of Grace Covenant Church are determined in light of the faithful acts of the God of history—a God whose integrity, whose oneness has manifested itself in consistent love. Covenant obedience—whether we are speaking of Israel’s obedience or our own—is the *therefore*—the profound response to the God we would serve. Remember, remember, remember, Deuteronomy says. Remember the faithful, saving grace of the God who has called your very lives into being, and give your lives back in grateful response.

Religion is a matter of the heart. Therefore, the *Shema* continues: in response to a God like that, you shall “love the LORD your God with all your heart” (Dt. 6:5). Heart, soul, mind and strength have distinctive meanings in Hebrew scripture, but the intention was to dramatize the dimensions of the whole person. Our devotion to God must be total. No part is reserved as “secular,” to be lived outside of the love and will of God. All that we are must be committed in love to the God of our salvation.

In the Bible, the heart in particular is more than an organ of the human anatomy. It is the center of the self, the seat of emotion and understanding, the hub of moral decision-making, the point of contact with God. Far from romantic sentimentality, loving God with our whole heart incorporates all of life. It is not about wishful naivete or an ivory towered, cloistered existence. Loving God with our whole heart moves us to engage the unlovely, the difficult, the seemingly unsolvable problems of our time. It challenges family loyalties, job loyalties and national loyalties. It submits everything we are and everything we do to the test of its fidelity to the God of love and righteousness.

In other words, loving and serving God from the heart is about a quiet core of meaning at the very center of who we are. It is not the polite tipping of the hat to religion just in case it has some validity. It is not just about *what* we believe; it is also about *how* we believe, for, in the words of a preacher I know and love, “a half-hearted, superficial faith is no faith at all.” With Moses, it recognizes that covenant obedience “is no trifling matter . . . but rather your very life” (Dt. 32:47). With Jesus, it is about building our lives upon a rock rather than shifting sand (Lk. 6:48) and seeking first the kingdom of God and its righteousness (Mt. 6:33). Loving and serving God with our whole hearts is about a covenant relationship that interprets and directs our whole lives.

A story is told about the beloved Rabbi Akiba, who lived the last half of the first century into the second century. A great authority in the Jewish tradition and one of the central contributors to the Mishna, he was one of the founders of rabbinical Judaism. Reportedly martyred by the Roman government for his refusal to stop teaching the Torah during a Jewish uprising, Akiba recited his prayers calmly, even as he was being tortured. Asked by his students how he could yet offer prayers to God at such a time as that, he responded that all of his life he had worried about how to love God with all of his heart, soul and mind. “And I said to myself, when will I ever be able to fulfill this command? And now that I am finally able to fulfill it, I should not?” Then he mouthed the word *Echad* (“One”) as his final breath escaped his body.

Loving God with our whole heart is about a covenant relationship that involves all that we are and all that we do. It is about a centered life that finds its purpose and its meaning in faithful response to the God who has come to us in delivering love.