



Reading

Our reading today, "An Open Letter from God" was read by Paul Harvey, American radio's premier commentator, on his Noon News, Saturday, May 16, 1998. His Chicago office was inundated by phone calls, faxes and mail afterwards. The original, "An Impatient Letter to All of Us from God" was first printed in 1989. Almost twenty years later, these words are as true as ever:

"My dear children, I'm a pretty patient guy. I have been patient through your fashions, your civilizations, wars and schemes, and the countless ways that you take Me for granted. But, I want to let you know about some things that started ticking Me off.

First of all, your religious rivalries are driving Me up a wall. Let's get one thing straight. These are your religions, not Mine. I'm beyond 'em all. Every one of your religions claims that there's only one of Me and that its bible was written personally by Me.

I hate to break it to you, but I don't write. My longhand is awful, and I've always been more of a doer anyway. So ALL of your books were written by men and women, and they made mistakes. I made sure of that, so that you would never trust a written word rather than your own living heart. Holy books and religious rites are sacred and powerful, but they were only meant to steer you in the right direction, not to keep you arguing with each other, and certainly not to keep you from trusting your own personal connection with Me.

You act like I need you and your religions to stick up for Me or win souls for My sake. Please, don't do Me any favors. I can stand quite well on My own. And another thing. I don't get all worked up over money or politics, so stop dragging My name into your dramas.

Stop thinking of religion as some sort of a loyalty pledge to Me. Believe Me, I already know what's in each of your hearts, and I love you anyway with no strings attached. So lighten up. What you seem to forget is how mysterious I am. Instead of trying to figure out My paradoxes and unfathomable nature -- which, by the way, you never will -- why not open your hearts to the simple, common threads of every religion? Play nice with each other. Love and respect everyone. Be kind. Even when life is scary or confusing, take courage and be of good cheer, for I'm always with you.

And learn how to be quiet, so that you can hear My still, small voice. Leave the world a better place by living your life with dignity and gracefulness. Hold back nothing from life, for the parts of you that can die surely will, and the parts that can't, won't. Why do you keep making it so complicated? It's like you're always looking for an excuse to be upset. And I am very tired of being your main excuse.

Do you think I care which of My Special Children you feel closest to -- Jesus, Mary, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed or any of the others? You can call us any names you choose, if only you will go about My business of loving one another as I love you. I am not telling you to abandon your religions. Enjoy your religions, honor them, learn from them. I don't mind that. And I don't want you to combine all of the great traditions into One big mess.



Each religion is unique for a reason, so that people can find the best path for themselves. Your religions all live in the same place in My heart, and they get along perfectly. You must stop creating a myth of sibling rivalry where there is none.

The world has grown too small for your bigotrys. The whole planet is connected so get with the program! If you really want to help me then commit yourselves to figuring out how to feed your hungry and clothe your naked, and protect your abused and shelter your poor. And just as important, make your own everyday life a shining example of kindness and good humor.

I've given you all the resources you need, if only you abandon your fear of each other and begin living, and loving and laughing together. I hate to see you suffer. But I gave you free will, so what can I do now other than try to influence you through reason, persuasion, and a little old-fashioned guilt and manipulation? After all, you know I am the original Jewish Mother.

I just want you to be happy. I really am with you, always.

Sermon

In 1917, the Russian Orthodox hierarchy was engaged in a crucial dialogue. Tonnes of energy and time was poured into this issue. Complex alliances were built and theologians were called upon to back up one argument over the other. And do you know what they were debating? Vestments. They were debating what priests could and could not wear. And you know what was going on in the streets while they argued about clothing? The Russian Revolution.

Sometime in the mid-1980s, a Unitarian Universalist congregation in everytown America had a raucous congregational meeting because they were about to make a big decision, and the stakes were very very high! They were deciding whether to put pews or chairs in the sanctuary of their newly built church. Oh the politics! The speeches! The ultimatums! One was reminded of that most important debate in the Dark Ages about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin! I wonder how this event served that larger picture – the feed the hungry, clothe the naked, protect the abused and shelter the poor. This kind of craziness is what the God of our reading is asking us to get over. Get beyond the small stuff and focus on what really matters – the releasing of unconditional love with its healing balm of truth and beauty into our wonderful and hurting world.

In 2007, two women appeared on the doorstep of the Central Reform Congregation, a Jewish Synagogue in Central West End St. Louis. Perhaps you have heard the story. Rose Marie Hudson and Elsie McGrath asked Rabbi Susan Talve if they could hold their ordination at the synagogue. This was no ordinary ordination. They were planning to fly in Bishop Patricia Fresen to preside over the ordination. Fresen had been secretly ordained by three male Catholic Bishops and was part of an organization called Womenpriest which has ordained more than 60 women worldwide. Rabbi Talve took the request to her board which unanimously supported hosting the ordination. Four weeks ago, Rose Marie and Elsie were ordained before a standing room only congregation. Based on the outpouring of support these women are receiving from rank and file Catholics, it's clear there is a growing momentum for change.



They are also on the receiving end of a lot more than that. Conservative Catholics lampooned their decision. This was a reprehensive affront to Catholic tradition. The Catholic powers that be agreed. When Rose Marie and Elsie informed Archbishop Raymond Burke of their plans, he threatened them with ex-communication. I wonder what the God of our reading would say to that. Is this small stuff, or big stuff?

Rabbi Susan Talve and her congregation also came under attack. Unless they cancelled the ordination, Bishop Burke said he would be hard pressed to engage in any interfaith projects in which she or her congregation took part because they had fundamentally disrespected the Catholic church.

The Jewish community responded quickly. Fearing an outbreak of anti-Semitism and the reality that minorities are often defined by the actions of individual members, the Jewish Community Relations Council released a statement expressing regret for any pain caused by the ordination, and emphasized that this was an isolated act by a single congregation and would not disrupt the long tradition of multifaith dialogue with the Catholic community. There was much criticism for Rabbi Talve of having overstepped her bounds. She did not belong in this Catholic inhouse debate.

What’s going on here? What’s at stake? Everyone involved in this situation has certain understandings about how different religions are supposed to get along with each other. Some say you should have a hands off policy. I stay on my side of the fence, you stay on your side of the fence. This is basically what the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the Jewish Community Relations Council were saying. “You walked over the fence. Get back on your side.”

But others say it’s not that simple. There are higher values at stake here, and sometimes you have to take a stand for what is important to you, even if it means paying a price. This is what Rabbi Talve shared with the media when they asked her why the congregation was hosting the ordination. To deny the two women the use of their space would have meant sacrificing the core value of hospitality. They were called to offer sanctuary to those requesting it. So they said yes, even if it meant threatening their relationship with the St. Louis Archdiocese.

How we act ethically and morally in the face of difference and diversity is, I think, one of the most important questions of our day. We are seeing religious factionalism kill thousands in the middle east. The ethnic cleansing of the Balkans, with its sharp religious overtones, was chilling. The treatment of women under certain forms of Islam is deeply troubling. And the so called family values agenda of the religious right is threatening religious freedom and the family itself. When are we called to accept our differences and when are we called to engage them? How do we ensure that we keep hold of that bigger picture of our reading – which is simply, to love one another?

One of the things I liked about our reading this morning is that, in an upbeat way, this irreverent God is telling us to get over ourselves, to deeply enjoy our various religious traditions and to always stay focused on the bigger picture – which is – to feed our hungry, clothe our naked, protect our abused and shelter our poor, and to make our everyday life an example of kindness and good humor. Anything else is really small potatoes. These issues may feel important in the moment, but in the long term, they are irrelevant. What you are doing to make this a better world?

It might be tempting for us to think that the God of our reading is not talking about us. In fact, I imagine that as you listened it was pretty easy to think about other churches who do the whacky stuff God mentions in that letter. After all, we are a church that stands for openness and diversity. And it’s true.



We are a very open-minded people. Our faith calls us to be this. But there is something in this letter for us. We are comfortable with certain kinds of diversity and we have no explicit laws about what that is, but it happens implicitly. We exclude implicitly by what we say and what we don't say. It's easy to be accepting of diversity when it doesn't cost us anything or ask us to grow. It's easy to be tolerant when it doesn't touch on things we think are absolutely true.

I have seen in my own heart and in the hearts of others that is very hard to be tolerant and accepting when surrounded by churches who claim to have the exclusive truth, especially when that truth feels cruel and judgmental. Sometimes I see us get so worked up about it that we become like those we criticize. This can easily transform into a smugness and a self-righteous arrogance that you can sometimes smell in Unitarian Universalist circles. We're so tolerant, not like the church down the street. We welcome everyone, not like the church my friend goes to. We are the church of the question, not, heaven forbid, the church of the answer. We are so open minded, not like my neighbors. We can get so caught up in our judgments that we are distracted from the bigger picture. Our higher purpose is not to feel superior to those who differ from us. We are called to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, protect the abused and shelter the poor. Everything else is secondary.

And I imagine that this leaves many of us uncomfortable. It does for most pre-dominantly white, predominantly middle class congregations. We like our world to be neat and orderly, kind of like our strip malls, good signage, good parking, and ready to serve us. Taking care of the neediest and protecting the abused is anything but neat and easy and self-serving. It is not easy for most of us to put aside our sense of entitlement and focus on the big picture. I wonder if this is why it is so tempting to distance ourselves through arrogance and judgment. The alternative is to actually get involved in our messy world. (pause)

One of the reasons the larger Jewish community was so concerned about the ordination is that we have a strong interfaith community in this city, and there is a large Catholic population in our region. Losing the friendship of that community would indeed be a very large loss. The St. Louis Interfaith Partnership holds things together by carefully choosing not to engage issues that could divide or alienate. So there's no talk about things like homosexuality or reproductive justice, or any social and religious issues that would divide us. There is an intentional culture of silence about difficult social issues. What allows the Partnership to unite on issues where they find common ground, and that is economic justice. This is true of much interfaith work. Across the country interfaith groups do some amazing anti-poverty work even though they might deeply disagree about other issues.

Some partners of the St. Louis Interfaith find the culture of silence around social issues frustrating and spiritually messy. Some will say they feel their hands are tied, that they are accommodating too much. There are often questions about how authentic we are being by staying silent on these fronts. And yet, the culture of silence has held. And truth be told, there is good reason for it. Many Interfaith organizations have dissolved when different religious groups allowed the full force of their differences to be made known.

When the Central Reform Congregation agreed to host the ordination, it broke ranks with this culture of silence. Instead of turning away from the differences, it turned towards them, and suddenly the messy business of women's ordination was pulled out of Catholic circles and into an interfaith context. I do not know if CRC intended to do this. I think they were focused more on being hospitable than breaking rules.



But regardless, this is why their decision was such a big deal. It broke one of the cardinal rules of the St. Louis interfaith community – you stay your side of the fence, I stay on mine. This is one reason the Catholic Archdiocese was so angry. And it is the reason why the Jewish Community Relations Council was so quick to distance itself from the ordination. There was the legitimate fear that this could threaten the often fragile bonds that hold our different religious communities in relationship to one another.

These cultures of silence don't just happen in interfaith relations. They happen in our churches, in our places of work, in our families, in our marriages. I bet every one of you can think of a time when you chose to be silent in order to protect something. Whether it's at a family holiday dinner table or at a church committee meeting, or a neighborhood block party. And sometimes it's worth it. I know, for instance, that if I told my maternal grandmother I was gay, I would lose her. I stay silent so we get to have a relationship. And I know she's silent too, because she stopped asking me several years ago when I was going to bring home a nice Mennonite boy. We get to enjoy what we have because of an unspoken agreement to keep silent. Not that it's optimal. There is a price to pay for that silence, but sometimes, you make these compromises because it is the best way to stay in relationship in a given time or place.

But there are times when the price is too high. When you have to compromise too much for the silence. Your integrity, your self-worth, your values. How could Central Reform Congregation have really faced those women and said, no, you can't be ordained here because we don't want to anger the church hierarchy that is keeping you from your ministry. I had the privilege, yesterday, of meeting with two sisters who attended the ordination. They were fairly glowing. The sense of deep validation and spiritual peace, the utter delight that two women had followed their calling and were paving the way for others. Their joy was one of the most beautiful things I have seen in a long time. These are the times to speak up. And it's not easy.

We live in a culture of secrets and silences and that is not easily challenged. When you speak truth into silence, there will be resistance from within you and from those who are convinced that speaking what has been silent will threaten everything. There is a price to pay for being true to who you are, although in the end, the price is often far less than what it was costing you to stay silent.

There is no mystery to interfaith relations. It's just a bigger example of what we do in our every day lives over and over and over. You take the big picture – to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, protect the abused and shelter the poor – and then you begin to make choices about how you are going to engage the world.

When the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis asked itself these questions, it made the decision to open its doors to Rose Marie Hudson and Elsie McGrath as well. First Unitarian is now the official home of their new congregation, Therese of Divine Peace Inclusive Community. May we give them our love and support.

What does it take to live in a world of difference and diversity? Be humble and kind. Know that there are truths far bigger than anything you can comprehend. Respect the silences you and others need to keep, have the courage to break them when it is time. Get beyond the small stuff and focus on what really matters – the releasing of unconditional love with its healing balm of truth and beauty into our wonderful and hurting world.



“Living in a Religiously Plural World”

Rev. Krista Taves

December 9, 2007

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Amen and blessed be.