

Beyond Tolerance

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*We don't simply tolerate each other;
We ask and tell; we don't just look away.
We give attention to every bud and blossom.
Let every face come grace the grand bouquet.*

—from “A Dazzling Bouquet,” by Bret Hesla

The quickest way to lose your humanity is to tolerate the intolerable.

—William Sloane Coffin

Ancient Witness: Philippians 2:1-4, 14-15

Twenty three years ago, after his brutal beating at the hands of the Los Angeles police and the following riots, Rodney King’s now famous words reverberated around the country: “Can’t we just get along?”

Today, I want to talk about this virtue we call “tolerance.” God only knows how we could use a little more respect, a little more tolerance in our world so that we can get along together.

Each generation struggles with its own prejudice, bigotry and intolerance. Native Americans, who survived the horrors of the 19th century with its broken treaties, forced resettlements, and widespread genocide, find themselves marginalized on the remote reservations with the nation’s highest rates of depression, alcoholism and suicide. The intolerance that was to be exhibited toward Native Americans was written into the language of the First Article of the United States Constitution, which declared that “Indians were not to be counted.”

In the same constitutional clause it was stated that African Americans were to be counted as “three-fifths of a person.” For more than 240 years Africans in North America were tolerated only as slaves. Whites did not tolerate their culture, their humanity or their aspirations for freedom.

The voices of every religious tradition cry out and challenge each generation to respect the differences of others and to work for the human dignity of all.

Someone has pointed out to me that the Qur’an teaches us that the world started out as one and will end as one, with *one single soul called humanity*. And in the Qur’an it is written:

Do you not know, O People, that I have made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other?

Can’t we all just get along? From a religious perspective, this would seem that this is the least we could do: not to fear but to *know* each other.

There is a story of a Greek Orthodox bishop who was asked by an inquiring seminarian, “How can we love our *enemies* when most of the time we don’t even respond to *love* with love?” The bishop responded, “My son, if you cannot love your enemy, hate him a little less every day.”

It would seem like the least we can do. If we cannot love the other, at least do not hate. This is probably a good definition of tolerance: *not hating the other*. It is not so much a positive as it is the *absence of a negative*.

Tolerance is good, of course. This seems plainly obvious to liberals, like me. But you know, tolerance also has its limitations. It’s unfortunate that something so basic needs to be held up as a high virtue.

Look, tolerance is a step in the right direction. But let’s not mistake the first step on a long journey for the entire journey.

Tolerance is great, but it will never produce community. No, this only happens when persons *take each other seriously*, when there is truly a give and take, when people actually know each other. It is only through mutual understanding and appreciation that we arrive at community.

The best image of tolerance I know is that of the nursery. Have you ever watched a group of one and two year-olds playing? Sometimes they run into each other or take away each others’ toys, but for the most part at this stage of their development they usually just play independently—side by side. They tolerate each other. Their code is: “If you don’t bother me, I won’t bother you.” Obviously, this is not the ultimate goal for a community. Such a model is a mere collection of parts that is able to accomplish very little, if anything at all, as a whole.

Someone once said that tolerance is certainly preferable to people killing each other, but it is not a way of life that leads to mutual enrichment and appreciation. Tolerance keeps the world from exploding, but it does not transfigure the world. Tolerance keeps us related as occupants of the same planet, but it does not reconcile us as brothers and sister of the human race.

Now, when we look to that spiritual master, Jesus, what do we see? Well, there is a mixture of both tolerance and intolerance, isn’t there? Jesus displayed an openness to women, to outsiders, aliens and Samaritans, to tax collectors, to lepers, to the poor, and sinners” that provocatively challenged the bigotry and intolerance of his society. Yes, Jesus was tolerant, but first and foremost, he was passionate and zealous for compassion and justice.

Tolerance, you see, is not always a virtue. Sometimes it is an excuse for inaction and an avoidance of conflict. The path of Jesus does not tolerate hatred and bigotry. It does not tolerate meanness and destructive behavior. It does not tolerate intolerance!

Earlier this week, the entire nation witnessed a senseless, brutal and horrific event. A young white man went into a prayer meeting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina—a gathering like we are gathered this morning—and he pulled out a handgun, shot and murdered nine defenseless people.

There is no doubt that this was not an attack on religion or Christianity; it was racially motivated. It was an attack on an entire race. “You are raping and killing us,” the man said as he fired his gun.

And so these gentle, beautiful people were gunned down in their house of worship because they were associated with a bigoted, misguided view of an entire group of people.

It was 193 years ago that this very church, “Mother Emanuel,” helped lead a slave rebellion. Dozens of men, including Emanuel’s leader, Denmark Vesey, were executed—lynched—and the church was burned to the ground.

Fifty two years ago, after a similar event, Martin Luther King Jr., at the funeral of the little girls who were killed by a bomb as they attended the Sunday school of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, had some important words:

These children unoffending, innocent, and beautiful were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity... And so this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death... They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.

Focusing simply upon the murderers is too easy; we need to focus on the system. I read an article this week by Robin DiAngelo:

*The two most effective beliefs that prevent us (whites) from seeing racism as a system are:
that racists are bad people and
that racism is conscious dislike;
if we are well-intended and do not consciously dislike people of color, we cannot be racist. This is why it is so common for white people to cite their friends and family members as evidence of their lack of racism. However, when you understand racism as a system of structured relations into which we are all socialized, you understand that intentions are irrelevant. And when you understand how socialization works, you understand that much of racial bias is unconscious.*

Not only is this pervasive racism destructive and violent, it also provides the fertile ground from which these conscious, deliberate, evil actions can grow and emerge. We cannot tolerate systemic racism. We need to see it and dismantle it. We cannot tolerate white supremacy and the philosophy of white superiority. We need to challenge this and eliminate it. We cannot tolerate racial inequality—a criminal justice system of mass incarceration, mass disenfranchisement, mass stigmatization, mass unemployment of African American men.

This system, this philosophy, this way of life is not only evil, it is not only destructive and violent, but it produces murderers. And so this system, this philosophy, this way of life cannot be tolerated. It must be challenged at every turn—from the flagpole at the South Carolina statehouse, to racial profiling by police, to state budgets that take money from schools and the most vulnerable neighborhoods—we must challenge this at every turn.

There are some things we cannot tolerate, we cannot abide.

As William Sloane Coffin once said, “The quickest way to lose you humanity is to tolerate the intolerable.”

And Jesus, the Human One, was completely intolerant of systemic injustice as well as those who perpetuated it. His battle with the money changers is a good example. Anybody who has ever change currencies at an airport understands the basic principles behind money changing. The money changer makes money whether buying or selling. The person changing the money loses whether buying or selling. At the Temple in Jerusalem it was totally unnecessary—it was an artificially created transaction that took money away from those making the pilgrimage to the Temple. That was the kind of systemic injustice that made Jesus lose his temper and throw the tables over.

In the same way, many of the rules and regulations created by the scribes and Pharisees created systemic injustices, artificially and unnecessarily burdening the people. Jesus launched into harsh diatribes against them according to Matthew, each on beginning with the phrase, “Woe to you, hypocrites...” *Jesus refused to tolerate the intolerable.* He would not let the misuse of religion go unchallenged.

And so tolerance as a virtue at once *allows too much and does not go far enough.* We must at the same time never tolerate systemic injustice and evil, but we also must move beyond tolerance with positive action. For Jesus called for followers to love their enemies, and as King said, “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

And it starts here! It starts in our families and our own communities of practice. The biblical image for the church has always been something that went beyond mere tolerance, beyond just a collection of individuals each doing their own thing, to a body that is greater than the sum of its parts, the genuine appreciation of those who are different.

You know, I have not been able to find one positive reference to “tolerance” in all of the Christian scriptures. Instead, the word that keeps cropping up is “forbearance.” This word literally means, “to hold one up.” Forbearance has a positive sense to it; it is more than just putting up with each other. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling... forbearing one another in love (holding each other up in love).” Paul continues, “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up into Christ.” This is how the church operates. It is a place where people grow by holding each other up, by speaking the truth to each other in love.

Paul elaborates on this: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away (we cannot tolerate these things)... be kind to one another, forgiving one another...”

In addition to being kind and forgiving another mark of forbearance is to look for common ground and to the good of the whole. In our reading today, Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, “being of the same mind... being in full accord. Let each of you look to ... the interests of each other.”

So being of one mind often means that we *submit* ourselves to others and *do things we don't want to do.* It also means that we “do all things without grumbling, questions (complaining, quarreling or arguing).” (Phil. 2:14)

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul laid out one simple rule for them: “Let all things be done for edification.” (v.26) In other words, *anything* we do in the church must first of all be for the *building up* of the whole. Paul said that the measuring stick is *that which edifies the community,* that which encourages people and builds others up. We must, he said, be oriented to the good of the community, to our brothers and sisters.

God knows that the world needs more building up and less tearing down of others. And the church, when it embodies this message and models this, according to Paul, “shines like stars in the universe.”

It’s not easy, mind you. Living in a spiritual community is downright exasperating at times. Sometimes we can barely tolerate each other. But at other times, when we remember to appreciate and support each other, to hold each other in the highest regard, it can be a beautiful sight to behold.

I end with a legend about what heaven and hell might be like. People in hell, it is said, are much as they are here except for two things—they cannot die and their elbows won’t bend. When they try to eat, they cannot get the food into their mouths. As a result they are constantly starving, though there is much food to be eaten. They fall into conflict with each other, blaming each other for their starvation. Their hunger never ends, and it worsens as they fight each other. In heaven, the people have the same situation, but they handle it differently. Instead of blaming each other and fighting because their elbows won’t bend, each feeds another with her outstretched arms and in turn receives food from another in the same way. Each is free of hunger, and they dwell considerately and faithfully with each other. Spiritual community strives to reflect this heavenly vision, where we don’t just tolerate but love, sustain and support each other.

So you see, God wants for us more than toleration of one another—in our personal relationships, in the church and in the world. God wants us to *treasure*, not *tolerate* each other.

And we will “shine like stars in the night” as we offer the message of life.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: Martin Luther King, Jr.

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate...Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: Only love can do that.