

# *Preaching beyond toleration*

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**W**ebster's second definition of tolerance is "sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own." At first blush tolerance seems a good way to help build community and wholesome relationships. It means accepting people as faithful as well as faithless, flawed yet possessing much potential, weak and at the same time strong. Tolerance implies a state of equality, a state of agreement, or a state of truce and peace. Degrees of tolerance exist. Utter tolerance means anything goes, and when that happens everything goes. A catchy saying is, "If it feels good, do it." Mere tolerance means that individuals do not take their belief system very seriously and often leave their faith unattended. Their approach is that all of us are in different boats headed for the same shore. But are we?

Helen Keller believed that toler-

ance required the same effort as trying to ride a bike. Does tolerance mean to put up with people we find obnoxious and boisterous, or immigrants with strange customs, or not making judgments of others even in our hearts? As preachers we need to remind our listeners that they are called to a deeper unity and love than mere tolerance. If we are falsely accused or hurt we have a tendency to blame and complain about those who have done this to us. When we, however, hurt or blame others, God does not blame us or complain, but extends God's unconditional love to us. Few of us will deny that we are a culture of blame and revenge, especially toward Islamic people since the September tragedy. Rodney King expressed it well when he asked, "Can't we all get along?" But we have to go beyond just getting along or tolerating each other. Tolerance might be able to keep us in relationship with one another, but it does not

reconcile us with our sisters and brothers when necessary.

Tolerance, however, is better than intolerance, biases, prejudices, looking down on others, or other hate-filled language. We have to help our listeners become aware of their prejudices, biases, and discrimination (often a sign of insecurity) and then confront them in a humble way. How much influence do newspapers, magazines, television, advertising and movies have on our behavior? A trade journal of 1915 described motion pictures as “the world’s pulpit.” Is that true today? Tolerance has its limits and we need to point out that it is only a first step toward understanding and cooperation. As we struggle with sexism, racism, homophobia, different cultures and religions, tolerance is the first step to help transform and change our lives. We have to point out to our listeners our biases, prejudices, and our tendency to discriminate. Do we respect people of other religious faiths? Karl Barth considered people of other faiths as “lesser lights,” Paul Tillich as “Christians incognito,” and Karl Rahner as “anonymous Christians,” who could be saved. Do we try to find Scriptural passages that are exclusionary or discriminatory? Do we listen attentively to others who share a different faith or viewpoint, especially when these lead to much anger and harsh statements?

## Understanding religious traditions

We need to stretch people’s thinking to a better understanding of religious traditions that imply compassion, encouragement and comfort. Maybe we need to alert others how important it is to develop a new theology of religion because religions differ as much as cultures. One teacher of comparative religions takes her students to Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras and Islamic centers. Recently I read a book on the Islam religion and it gave me a whole different insight as far their beliefs are concerned. Pope Paul VI in *Eccelesiam Suam (1964)* suggested that religious freedom should be a theme for interreligious dialogue that might prevent major collisions between various religious groups. Since Vatican II we have recognized Protestants as graced communities, but are we as tolerant of our immigrants? Are we aware of the drastic changes that have taken place in our religious landscape? Diana L. Eck maintains in *A New Religious America* that we have become the most religious diverse nation on this earth. So the questions arise: how much diversity is too much? How much religious freedom do we allow with our religious differences? Do we kill those who speak a different language or proclaim a different religion? Much damage has been done by religious

leaders like Jerry Falwell (Religious Right spokesperson) who condemned Islam and called Mohammed a terrorist, or declared that homosexuals, liberals and feminists were responsible for the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. How often Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Muslims are killing each other all in the name of God or religion.

## Jesus’ challenge

Jesus challenges us to love our enemies. (Lk. 6:27) This requires a deeper commitment because our love will be met with hatred, our good works with bad ones. If we have a difficult time getting along with a family member or our next-door neighbor, how can we possibly love our enemies? Is our Christianity a pretense where we ignore the elephant in the room? A seminarian once asked a Bishop, “How can we love our enemies when most of the time we don’t even respond to love with love?” He replied, “My son, if you cannot love your enemy, hate him a little less each day.” We can disagree with someone and still offer the individual a handshake of peace. We fear relationships or getting to know others better because it might change both of us. Tolerance will always fall short of loving “with all one’s mind, heart and soul.”

Jesus never used the word toler-

ance but often acted in apparently opposite ways. He accepted prostitutes, tax collectors and cured lepers. When the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15: 21-28) approached him the Apostles asked Jesus to get rid of her, but he said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The woman pleaded with him not for herself but for her daughter. “It is not right to take food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” Her humble response was, “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.” (Mt. 15:24-27) That made Jesus aware of her great faith that broadened his vision of culture and traditions and changed his attitude.

The Apostles wanted to call down destruction on a Samaritan town that did not accept Jesus. He said no. To Peter who had a difficult time accepting Jesus’ suffering and death he said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” (Mt. 16:23) Despite all this Jesus continued to love the Apostles for their inability to receive his message and mission.

Jesus invited Zaccheus to come down from his sycamore tree and dine with him. To dine with someone at that time meant there was a close, intimate relationship. No wonder the people grumbled saying, “He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner.” (Lk. 19:7) The effect this had on Zaccheus was his willingness to

pay back those he cheated fourfold. Jesus more than tolerated the Samaritan woman at the well who didn't want anything to do with him.

"How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (Jn 4:9) She ends up becoming a disciple bringing the good news to others. He also dined with Simon the Pharisee and pointed out to him his lack of good manners. He cured a Roman centurion's son who did not consider himself worthy to have him come under his roof. Jesus was tolerant of the woman caught in adultery. He saw the good in others not the bad. He was willing to tolerate the flaws in people's lives because he saw how their inner goodness reflected they were children of God. Did his tolerance reach its climax on the cross when he forgave the good thief and forgave those who nailed him to the cross by saying, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do?" (Lk. 23:34) We need to preach these messages.

His tolerance, however, had limits as is evident when he went into the temple area and found the money-changers there. He was intolerant of systemic injustice where the money-changers were overcharging people. He overturned their tables and cried out, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace." (Jn 2:16) He drove them out of the temple but not out of the country. He also made some of his most scathing remarks against the

Scribes and Pharisees calling them hypocrites because they burdened others with laws and regulations and forgot the most important law of love.

### **Tolerance-elusive**

Theodore Roosevelt as well as Woodrow Wilson encouraged Americans not to look upon themselves as Italian, Irish, German or Jewish Americans, but as Americans. They did not want a 50-50 or a hyphenated allegiance but a total commitment as Americans. They envisioned a melting pot based on a play by that title written by Israel Zangwell where all the rivalries and hatreds were set aside and a new nation would emerge. The only problem was, according to Michael Novak, there were Americans who were "unmeltable ethnics," like the Native Americans who endured broken treaties and unjust resettlement. It is difficult for us to imagine that the First Article of the United States Constitution read, "Indians were not to be counted," and African Americans were "three-fifths of a person." Where did the other two fifths disappear? For 240 years African Americans living here in the States were tolerated as slaves. Now they make up 13 percent of the population but 70% or 2 million are in prison. As preachers we need to abandon the image of a melting pot where

attempts are made to force people to be what they are not. Jesus never forced individuals to be what they were not, but invited them to follow him. Soon people of Anglo-Saxon ancestry will not be in the majority in the United States, so we need to focus on greater tolerance of other groups. Maybe preachers need to read and pray over the Pentecost event where Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Asians, Phrygians, and Romans heard the same message in their own native language. (Acts 2: 6-11) God spoke to them as they were, not what God wanted them to become. A possible image of our nation as well as others could be a salad bowl or a stew. Each item is different but also enriches the final product. The radishes don't say to the croutons, "I don't need you." The meat does not say to the carrots, "I don't need you." They all blend together to add flavor and zest to the finished product. The group which gathered on that first Pentecost acts as a model and reminder of what we strive to become. We need a new Pentecost where God will show us how to tolerate the differences between the various groups.

### **Intolerance**

We need to tear down the walls and fences of intolerance. Robert Frost wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." That might be

changed to "Someone there is that doesn't have a wall." A wall certainly existed between Germany and its Jewish community. Recently to mark the 58<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Auschwitz death camp's liberation an accord was signed putting the community on a legal par with main Christian churches. The hope is that this historic signing will alleviate anti-Semitism and racism in Germany.

Silence and ignorance often breed intolerance. Some of the silent forms of intolerance are: the shrugged shoulder, the rolling of the eyes, the turning of one's back, the raised eyebrows. We need to drain the swamp of intolerance which leads to fear, frustration and futility. Our society might be characterized in fishing terms: "You fish on your side, I'll fish on my side, and nobody fishes in the middle." We continue racial profiling or say things about others as long as we don't say them too loudly. The conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, Irish Catholics and Protestants, gays and straights, Muslims and Christians, continues to boil. So many of our issues are put into a win/lose paradigm. Certainly our possible war with Iraq is an example, as well as the issue of homosexuality. Those opposed to homosexuality need to win. The win/lose paradigm prevents us from respecting the beliefs of Hindus, Muslims, Jews and many others. As Keith Russell has stated, "In evangelical Christian theology the cross is not a weapon but a symbol

of God's love and compassion for all creation. We do not need to go to war! The battle has already been fought and won. We, the church, simply need to live our lives and make our witness in the light of this already achieved eschatological reality of God's redemptive acts."<sup>1</sup> This is what we need to preach.

We are at the crossroads choosing greater destruction or evil, or greater compassion, love, understanding, peace toward people of another race, religion or ethnicity. Once the stranger has become our neighbor, love of God and ourselves makes more sense. Evil is more than an event, it is a process. Love and the way to eternity is also more than an event, it is a process. President George W. Bush's now famous (or infamous) "the axis of evil" has been quoted often. He believes that they need to be confronted or eliminated to safeguard our freedom (should we substitute freedom for our materialistic and consumer lifestyle?) The lines have been drawn in the sand between the good and bad guys. Saboteurs will always see war as inevitable. And would not a war be a solution to our ailing economy?

As preachers we need to protest against certain realities like animosities and divisions that should not be tolerated. Millions of Americans are born into poverty, women are not receiving equal rights, one out of six children grows up hungry in the richest country on earth, capital punish-

ment rarely reaches the rich, over a million abortions, the inroads euthanasia is making, the greed of CEO's putting thousands of people out of work and losing their life savings, snide remarks made about lesbians, gays, blacks, latinos. Immigrants are often looked upon as a burden to our economy and many are considered possible terrorists and some are kept in detention centers. Doesn't our Statue of Liberty proclaim, "Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free?" Our criminal justice system often violates basic rights because it is not impartial, fair or just to the poor and jobless. Why have we as a nation sneered at the Kyoto accords, the World Court, and arms control treaties? None of us is wholly innocent or without blame. In physics metal has a tolerance or breaking point. Too much stress and the metal will break. The same is true in relationships: too much stress can fracture a relationship or a community. But how much stress it takes is more difficult to measure. When is a woman battered by a spouse, or when does a community suffer from racism? At times one act of intolerance can act as a time bomb setting off riots and other serious consequences.

Preachers can take a prophetic stance in decrying these injustices. People like Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, Thomas Merton, Thea Bowman, and others, have certainly shaped us in our thinking and acting.

They were not afraid to speak the truth in love inviting us to go beyond tolerance, opening our minds and hearts to the poor, migrant workers, street people, African Americans, and all those who have taken a strong stand against war. Rumsfeld can say things that make excellent sound bites but amount to questionable diplomacy. Iraq has been compared to a black box, and we don't know what demons might fly out when the lid is removed.

Bishop Gunbleton of Detroit was deeply influenced by his own gay brother. He now has become a "prophet of tolerance" for the lesbian and gay community. He sees a dichotomy for they "are encouraged to accept and love themselves as they are... but on the other they must keep secret" the fact they are homosexual when engaged in their ministry. He maintains, "I believe our community would be enriched by the acknowledged presence of homosexual teachers in our schools."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus made it clear that he did not tolerate any harm done to "little ones." Our Catholic Bishops have endorsed a controversial zero tolerance stand against anyone who sexually abuses children. Such behavior ought to be abhorred and not tolerated. Betrayals and violations of sexually abused can only be understood by persons violated and betrayed or by their therapists. An inner rage is often present ready to explode. These acts must never be

condoned, but those who have done them ought to be forgiven as Jesus forgave. As preachers we need to offer solace, help, and consolation to victims and their families asking for their forgiveness in the name of the Church.

So our challenge is to preach tolerance when necessary as well as intolerance. A delicate balance exists between being tolerant of others and intolerant of social injustices. Both, as we have seen, have their limitations and need to move beyond them to loftier realities in our pluralistic society. When will back fences become places of conversation rather than signs of division? Maybe we could leave our tolerances on the shore, meet in the middle of the lake and catch enough fish to feed others. Like Jesus we need to emphasize compassion and forgiveness. God is accessible to people of all religions. Love is much broader than tolerance and love will never fail as St. Paul assures us. We need to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Jesus remains our model.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Keith A. Russell, "Why Does Someone Have to Win?" *Living Pulpit* (Jan-March, 2003) 17.
2. Brian J. Pierce, O.P., "Welcoming the Strange New Word" *Ibid* 41.

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