Beyond Tribalism (With God on Our Side)
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Ancient Witness: Matthew 25:31, 41, 46

In our congregation we esteem all religious tribes and traditions. And we are grateful and give thanks for them all. We celebrate and honor the many and varied religious traditions, and we challenge bigotry and generalizations toward sisters and brothers in different religious tribes. For example, the entire tradition of Islam is often unfairly portrayed as an inherently violent religion because of the words and actions of small groups. A small group’s abuse of a tradition is not the tradition itself.

As Christians we should know this very well. There are those who abuse their traditions, who use it to justify and prop up sick and unhealthy agendas. But we must not confuse those who abuse a tradition with the tradition itself. As Bill Coffin said, many people use the Bible the same way a drunk uses a lamppost—for support rather than illumination.

History is full of examples of my own spiritual tribe, Christianity, being used to justify and support the agenda of power and privilege with unspeakable cruelty and violent—the Crusades, the Inquisition, persecution of the Jewish people, the conquest of Native Americans, the enslavement of human beings, Apartheid. The list goes on and on. Even today, some use the name of Christianity to support a nationalist foreign policy, convince of our “manifest destiny” and meant to subjugate and dominate others. But all this is really an abuse and betrayal of the tradition and not a legitimate expression of it.

The question is not whether or not you are part of a tribe. The question is, how do you participate and relate to the tribe you are in? Can one celebrate and appreciate the unique beauty and truth of one’s tribe without falling into tribal-ism? I believe we can.

Jesus challenged tribalism and called for an awakening to the authentic spirit of his own tribe of Judaism. He constantly challenged the dualistic, us versus them thinking of tribalism. For him, being a faithful member of his own tribe continually led him to go beyond it, proclaiming God’s love for the hated Samaritan, foreigners, for outcasts, for enemies, pointing to an essential unity of all people and things. Jesus challenged the mindset that “God is on our side.”

I think it was Bertrand Russell who said, “In the beginning God created us in God’s image, and we’ve been returning the favor ever since.” To say “God is on our side” is a ridiculous statement. It makes sense only if we add something on the end for those who have been excluded: “God is on our side, too.” But without that important modifier the Sacred Presence is transformed simply into the projection of our particular desires, which are sometimes good, but sometimes not so good and anything but divine. And we create God in our own image.
The writer, Anne Lamott, who has a gift for making things simple and fresh, wrote, “You can tell you have created God in your own image when it turns out that he or she hates all the same people you do.”

Even in our sacred texts, we have created God in the image of violent and wrathful human being. For example in Psalm 137:

Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
    happy is the one who repays you
    according to what you have done to us.
Happy is the one who seizes your infants
    and dashes them against the rocks.

This creating God into the image of a violent, wrathful God who was for the “home team” is in the New Testament, as well. In today’s passage from a section of the gospel of Matthew often referred to as the “little apocalypse” it says,

When the Son of Man comes in his glory... he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left... Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed,
depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels... And they will go away into eternal punishment.

Now sometimes biblical scholars will say that these kinds of passages—especially the Psalms—are descriptive and not prescriptive. Walter Brueggeman referred to the Psalms as “shouts to God,” reflecting honest, raw human emotion. But there is no dispensing with how even the biblical writer could claim that “God is on my side.”

One could say that in the Bible we see all kinds of different levels of spiritual consciousness—just as we see with people of faith and religions today. The lower level turns prayer into a way of getting something. It asks, “How can I get God to do what I want God to do?” It’s a way of manipulating God. Richard Rohr said,

This is one reason religion is in such desperate straits today. It really isn’t transforming people, but leaving them in their separated and egocentric state. It pulls God inside my agenda instead of letting God pull me inside God’s agenda.

And when we read the Bible with this lower level of consciousness, from within our own agenda, we miss the authentic voice of God within it, and it can actually hide us from the reality of God.

And so what I am suggesting is that we challenge this claim that God is on our side—on the side of our nation alone or on the side of our religion alone or on the side of our political party alone. May we challenge the use and manipulation of God for our own desires. May we strive to follow a higher consciousness and allow God to pull us inside God’s agenda. And maybe, just maybe, we might come to a different conclusion.
Because here’s the thing. We have a responsibility. Our proclamations about God have effects. They have consequences. Even now. Even today.

May we, like Jesus, work to keep our tribe, our tradition on track. May we challenge tribalism. May we recover, celebrate and hold up what is authentic in every spiritual tradition.

Here’s a song written by Bob Dylan back in 1964 called “With God On Our Side.” It challenges the way in which religion and nationalism justify war and cruelty. “You don’t count the dead” and “you never ask questions when god’s on your side.”