

"Hope in a Multi-Faith World"  
October 19, 2014  
First Church of East Hartford  
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We are beginning an intentional seasons of blessings here at First Church.  
For the next five weeks we will be acknowledging the many blessings around us.  
As part of this seasons of blessings, I'll be doing a sermon series:

"What lifts you up?"

where we explore where God might be in the midst of troubled situations  
and what it is that lifts you up and keeps you going.

As the flyer in your bulletins say, "what gives you joy and life?"

This morning we look at what lifts us up in the wake of wars,  
religious conflicts,  
or any conflict for that matter.

[PRAYER]

In the Spring of 2010 I had the worst nightmare of my life.  
During the day I had visited the birth place of God incarnate.  
I had gone through the prison walls that surrounded Bethlehem  
and seen some of the struggles the current inhabitants of Bethlehem deal with -  
limited access to water, limited access to their farmland, and the like.  
But I had also seen the beautiful chapel built to honor the birth of Jesus.  
and I saw sheep and a shepherd herding them.  
And at the end of the day I was happy to curl up at my friend's house in Jerusalem.  
That night we were woken up by the shouts and goading of soldiers in the streets.  
As I peered out the window I saw lines of tired looking people being pushed into a line.  
And I knew the line wasn't going to a good place,  
men with big guns flanked the line of people in their pj.s  
Then I heard the front door slam in,  
so I scurried around the house, looking for my friend and trying to find a way out.  
somehow we made it out of the house, but soldiers lined the streets  
and I couldn't figure out the way to safety, search as I might.  
Then I realized there was no way to safety,  
I was trapped,  
and we were all on our way to be slaughtered.  
It was at that moment that I woke up.  
Terrified, I woke up my friend and told her the dream.  
She said, "oh, that was a Holocaust dream. Most Jews have them every month."

[pause]

They say that if you visit the Holy Land for a week, you go home and write a book.  
If you visit for a couple months, you go home and write a page.  
If you visit for years, you leave,  
but you can't write a thing because you know the complexities too well.  
The conflicts in the holy land are extremely complex,  
and I am not going to tell you what to think about it,

but I do invite you to explore the issues plaguing the land in which our Savior was born.

The CT Conference of the United Church of Christ has decided to look deeper into this issue and has invited congregations to look deeper.

Anyone see the front page of the Hartford Courant yesterday or Friday?

We are on it.

The article claims the UCC is rebuking Israel,  
which does not capture what the resolution actually says.

Copies of the resolution are downstairs at coffee hour.

The resolution calls for the CT Conference Funds to not invest in a handful of specific companies which are instrumental in creating surveillance and prison-like conditions for Palestinians.

The second big piece of the resolution calls for individuals to boycott products that are being created in settlements in Palestine, at the expense of the Palestinians living there.

We have been asked to examine this complicated issue  
and decide if these actions make sense for us.

In particular, the question we want to ask is,

"how do we, as Christians, engage with this issue,  
an issue primarily between two different religions across the world?"

Such a question is not purely about economics or a tally of human rights abuses,  
it is also about faith and the history of religious traditions.

One way to explore the question of

"how do we, as Christians, engage with the conflict in the Holy Land?"

is to attend a free dinner next Sunday night at a sister congregation in Glastonbury.

This event of music and food, will feature three different religious leaders discussing the situation

Their perspectives certainly don't speak for all, but it is a good starting point.

Flyers are at coffee hour and I will be attending

- if you would like to go and need a ride or would like to carpool, I'll be happy to take you.

There is another response I offer to you to the question,

"How do we, as Christians, engage with the conflicts in the Holy Land?".

It has to do with our baptism.

In baptism a person or a family decides to delve deeply into the Christian tradition.

In the wake of religious conflicts,

- you could try to avoid participating in any religion,  
but we all rely on a moral code

and I can guarantee that every moral code is rooted in some tradition.

- you could dig your heels in, insist you have all the answers, and hate the other.  
This is what fuels wars

- you could decide to not commit to a tradition and dabble in many,

picking and choosing what you like the best from each.

I've certainly done this -

I do yoga, but I don't worship the Hindu gods.

I'll say a Jewish grace, but leave out the line I don't like.

Some people are happy to do this forever - and it looks interfaith on the surface -

and honestly, I don't think there is anything particularly wrong about it,

but it does not address the root of the conflict -

because when you are picking and choosing,

you never get deep enough to reach the roots.

- The third option is to delve deeply into one tradition.

That is what happened here this morning in the baptisms -

a commitment to plunge into Christianity.

When you delve into one tradition, you take the good and the bad

- much like marriage or raising children-

and when you take the good and bad, you end up having to grapple with hard questions

like the crusades and contradicting stories in the Bible.

In grappling with these hard questions we become stronger in our faith,

and better able to withstand the storms of life.

Delving into one tradition is also vital for our pilgrimage towards peace in this multi-faith world.

In the midst of religious conflict I believe a key ingredient to creating peace is true friendship.

On one level, it is harder to shoot a friend.

But more than that, it is in deep friendships that understanding happens.

When I think about the situation in the Holy Land,

while economics and history play a huge role in the conflict,

religion is also present.

If we are to address the question of

"How do we, as Christians, respond to the conflict in the Holy Land?"

We need to acknowledge the religious traditions present

and the why those traditions are important to the people involved

and how those traditions play a role in their lives.

We can come to understand this only if we have true heart to heart conversations.

You know - the types of conversations that happen late at night when you are just sitting back and relaxing

the types of conversations where you can share your vulnerabilities and fears

the types of conversations you only have with close friends.

I have much to learn about the different religious traditions in the world,

I have taken numerous academic courses on the historical development of various traditions, their leaders, their precepts and creeds.

I have visited services and explored prayers.

But the best understandings came when I was hanging out with friends,

after chatting about our families, our work, and the latest tv show,

and someone could say,

"Kelly Jane, know how you get all excited about the freedom Jesus brings on Easter Morning,

well, freedom in my tradition looks like this and this is why it's important to me." or  
"Kelly Jane, this holiday is about repentance - what does your tradition say about repentance?  
You can probably understand why this holiday is important if you understand something about  
repentance"

Being grounded in a particular tradition provides us with the foundation for deep friendships  
across religious tradition

Ever try to go out for dinner and no one has an opinion about where to go?

If no one has clarity about who they are or what they want,  
you just wander around in circles, hungry.

Without being grounded in a particular tradition,  
interfaith friendships are too shallow to truly help bridge peace.

When we are grounded in the complexity of our own tradition,  
we can better appreciate and understand the beauty and complexity of other traditions.

So...

What gives me hope in this multi-faith world is exactly what we did this morning.

This morning we celebrate the commitment of two families to delve deep.  
I asked their parents what the church can do to support them and their children in their faith  
journeys,  
one thing they lifted up was how to be faithful in a multi-faith world.

Plunging into one tradition is a great first step.

May they and all of us grow up with a foundation from which to jump, explore, and grow.  
May they and all of us build deep friendships with those of very different faiths.  
May they and all of us endeavor to learn and listen with open hearts.  
Amen.