

Finding Faith in a Diverse World
BHUMC Worship Service – George Grove
May 23, 2010

Over the past four Sundays, Pastor David has described four major religions, other than Christianity, that are being practiced by different people of different cultures. He briefly described Hinduism that originated in India and is largely practiced there. He described Buddhism that is largely practiced in China. He described Islam, which is widely practiced in the Middle East and elsewhere. And he summarized Judaism, which is a foundation of Islam and of our own faith, Christianity. As he progressed with his messages, I was reminded that billions of people, a majority of the world's present population, look to a god or to some fundamental philosophy as a guide, solace, and inspiration for their lives. As I savored and enjoyed our pastor's messages, I couldn't help but to start thinking about what the effects of such diverse personal beliefs may have played in the history of human experiences. Written history extends back five thousand years or so, and some of the faiths have been expressed and followed for much of that time.

Of course, I am not a historian, although I have had a lifelong interest in history, at least the history of our country and the so-called Western world. I have traveled very briefly in Western Europe, Japan, and China, and experienced something of the vast distances and differences in life-style at the times of my trips. My experiences have been limited, but modern news services are abundant, if not wholly objective. Much of the time, based on my limited experiences and readings, and perhaps cynically, I have the impression that the religions of mankind have not been very successful in leading to world peace or to assuring the prosperity of all individuals. I notice that the ancient story of Creation in the text of Genesis is closely followed by the story of the fall from grace of Adam and Eve and of the killing of their son, Abel, by his brother, Cain, in an early dispute between farmer and herder. The news we get today brings similar stories of man against man.

Much of what I value now, I learned in my youth. And I assume that many people are guided by experiences of their youth. From my earliest memory, my parents took me to Sunday School class at Westlawn Methodist Church in Detroit. I learned, accepted and believed, without serious questioning, the stories from both testaments of the King James Bible. I learned the two great Commandments from Luke's Gospel and the broad definition of neighbors. And my mother asked me to learn the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. I did it without question, assuming that everyone did that. One day, in a high school age Sunday School class, an associate pastor, Donald Crumm, at Westlawn started the

class by looking around our group, let his eyes fall on me, and asked, "George Grove, What do you believe?" That took my mind off my daydreaming. Lacking any original thought, I repeated the Apostles' Creed from memory. "I believe in God, the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only son. Our Lord." My memory was better then.

My grandparents worked small farms in Ohio and my family visited them each summer. During family visits, I noticed that my grandmothers attended church but my grandfathers didn't. Grandfather Grove, in particular, worked his farm on Sunday just like any other day. Years ago, I saw a tidbit in Readers Digest that described my grandfather. It went as follows. Farmer Grove's wife went to church each Sunday, but farmer Grove didn't. The pastor was intrigued and thought he would look into the situation. One Sunday afternoon, he visited the Grove farm and saw farmer Grove leaning against the fence of one of his fields. The pastor approached farmer Grove, who nodded silently in recognition and greeting. The pastor paused and then said, "This is a lovely farm that you and God have here." At first, farmer Grove was a little surprised, but he recovered and said, "Yes, it is. But you should have seen it when only God had it." I never knew my grandfather to refer to God or the bible, but the ways that he interacted with his family and neighbors, the ways he respected nature at work in his farming, and his sincere care for his farm animals revealed feelings beyond self-interest and self-accomplishment. And often, just as I thought our day's work was done, he found an extra job, like taking some seed or harvested food to a neighbor. I came to understand that my grandfather recognized that he wasn't working his farm by himself or exclusively for himself.

So, in my own family, I learned from both those who participated in formal religion and those who did not seek public worship but, nevertheless, conducted themselves in a way that reflected a love of God and of their neighbors.

But the cultures of the world and its religions, and the cultures within our country are much, much broader than my sheltered life. It is impossible to generalize and gain a simple understanding of any wide portion of the world. For example, I value reading and learning. But it seems to me that many educated people see no reason to discuss the existence of God. I don't know what they really think, but that's what I read in their actions and words. Some say that science can explain the world as we know it without requiring a creator. Others look at the many problems of mankind and created by humans and say that there can't be a god because no god would let such things happen. I would not call myself a professional scientist, but I have had a lifelong interest in science. And I

have practiced a serious combination of engineering and law on behalf of scientists and engineers. And the increased knowledge of the universe provided by the Hubble telescope and the discovery of the structure of DNA leaves me in awe of the beauty and complexity of life on earth. The Creation stories in Genesis are more than three thousand years old, but I understand them as inspired insights for that time. The variety of life in our world is immense and elegant. Millions of complex life forms exist and they are interconnected, vital, and changing. I cannot believe that it just happened. I cannot imagine this life without God, our creator. In the words of the English poet, Joyce Kilmer, "Poems are writ by fools like me, but only God can make a tree." Humans may need some self-confidence and arrogance just to survive. But to deny the existence of God requires a level of arrogance that to me is unhealthy and unreal. I suspect that many people believe in God in some way; the question is how their beliefs affect how they deal with others.

When I really try to understand and express my beliefs for comparison with what I see elsewhere, I realize that I accept Jesus Christ and God as revealed in the New Testament. I believe it because it makes sense to me and possibly because I was lucky enough to be born in the United States. I have studied American and European history, first because I had to, and then because I wanted to. American history isn't pretty and it doesn't always reveal the practice of the two Commandments taught by Christ. Americans may have loved God, but they didn't love all Native Americans, they didn't treat their slaves with love, and, often, they didn't love immigrants, who weren't like them. But still our history reflects some acceptance and practice of Christ's teachings.

I understand that many early settlers to our country came because they wanted religious freedom. They were denied the right to worship as they chose in their European homes, so they left their homes and took the risky boat trip across the Atlantic to settle here and to live and worship more freely. Different religious communities settled in different parts of our early colonies and, in many instances they denied later incoming neighbors the right to worship as they chose. Our country was settled by many varieties of Christians (and others) but if you lived among them, often it was their way of worship or the highway. Their lives with their religious faiths may have reflected their love of God but not especially their love for their neighbors. And, of necessity, they fought their neighbors the Indians and the French, as they existed under British rule, which included a king. They even had witch-hunts and the like in which persons were killed for their actions and beliefs.

Then, after a hundred and fifty years, or so of colonial life, came a writing that I think reflects some of the teachings of the Christian New

Testament. Think about our Declaration of Independence as expressed through Thomas Jefferson - "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," What a remarkable document. I understand that such ideas had been expressed by some British political philosophers and had gained some circulation. But still, that so-called truth wasn't self-evident to the King of England, or the rulers of all other European countries, or to the rulers in Asian countries, or to tribal leaders in Africa. It wasn't self-evident to anybody even 1700 years after Christ taught us about loving our neighbors. Still, and thankfully, the Declaration became a guiding light that sustained early Americans through a long war of revolution. And it represents some evidence to me that some Christian principles were actually applied in a political situation. I am sure there were other, and perhaps earlier examples, but that Declaration has always seem to me to reflect a love of ones' neighbors - a limited love - in a real world conflict.

Eleven years later, our ancestors wrote and ratified a Constitution establishing a representative government, and actually giving some rights to people. And it included a Bill of Rights, the first Ten Amendments to the Constitution, which assured certain personal rights. The framers of our Constitution had experienced enough strife within and between religious groups that they expressly denied any governmental establishment of a religion. They didn't intend people to stop thinking and believing. The goal was to stop people in a government role from telling others what they had to believe or do.

We remain a country of religious beliefs. Indeed, new beliefs have been started here - the Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Christian Scientists. And large groups of immigrants have brought their own Christian observances. There have been issues and struggles concerning the apparent imposition of religious beliefs by some onto others. Just last month, the U.S. Supreme Court rendered another decision concerning establishment of religion, this time concerning a simple, worn, empty, Christian cross, standing for 75 years on federal land in California's Mohave Desert, and honoring World War I American soldiers. We have always had issues of human relationships in our communities and our country that divide us. And some times it is hard to see whether the Christian faith, or Judaism, or any other faith has helped us in our lives. We have so many people with different backgrounds, different values, different needs, and different perceptions of right and wrong, that it is hard to make progress and harder to sense that role of any God.

Still in the more than two centuries of our country and under our form of government we have slowly and painfully expanded the rights and opportunities for all men and women. I attribute this in part to a combination of the Old and New Testaments. There has been very slow progress in balancing economic interests and political power. The many different people of widely different origins and backgrounds have added much to our freedoms and enjoyment of life. It has taken wars and many political struggles but there truly are opportunities for nearly everyone for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We must have made some progress because many more people are sneaking into this country than are abandoning it.

And I have slowly come to see that much has been accomplished by the role of our Christian God acting in the lives of individual people. I cannot say that I have experienced a miracle. But it is remarkable how lucky I have been. I can't take credit for that. Perhaps the difference between believers and non-believers is that believers have the humility to somehow recognize that they have been blessed. I see God's laws being lived out in the members of this congregation. I see many people of our congregation going the second mile as we try to fulfill our vision; as we strive to be a church home that reflects the diversity of our community, that gathers to praise God, and scatters to serve others. They take an extra step beyond normal expectations, and that effort adds value to our lives. Hopefully, such steps are taken by many others throughout our country and around the world. I believe that human progress is made with the help of God acting slowly and patiently through individuals.

I find my faith growing by participating in Sunday worship with this small but exuberant congregation. I find it in our pastor. I find it in our mission programs, in the imaginative and inspired efforts of the volunteers in the Kingdom Assignments. I am lifted by the music of our choir and continuing wonderful work of our choir director, Rodger Phillips. I find faith in the work of our women's groups and in the work of our trustees. I am grateful for the wonderful support of my fellow ushers and all who participate in our services. I am amazed by the faithful work of Bryn Haviland, who is cautious about stepping into the Sanctuary, but who is always serving us from our kitchen and outdoor barbeques, who teaches our youth, and produces girls' nights out. . If one bothers to look, one can sense the presence of God in the acts of people of our congregation. It is reflected in the many little acts of work and kindness that help others and advance the God's kingdom here in Beverly Hills and to extend our outreach and imagination.

Pastor David's messages on Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam have opened my eyes and broadened my perspective of human

experiences. I sincerely hope that the many believers in these faiths are growing in their own experiences and that they are helping others. I hope that their people are blessed just as I believe, as I sincerely believe, that Christianity has blessed us and continues to permit us to better observe the two greatest of God's laws and to open our eyes to the benefit of all our neighbors.

Amen.