Thursday, May 4, 2006

INTERFAITH APPROACHES TO PROMOTING UNITY AND PEACE (2006 Mayor's Interfaith Prayer Breakfast)

It is currently estimated that there are more than 1,500 active religions in the world. Of course, some can claim only a very small number of adherents, and some are clearly subsets of larger entities. In a world with an estimated population of over six and a quarter billion people, over five billion are claimed as members of one religion or another. Religions abound!

To acknowledge this wide diversity of religions, each believed to be valid by its adherents, is not to endorse each and every one. The good news of this diversity is both a blessing and a curse. Furthermore, if you begin with the conviction that there is only one right way — namely, your way — then other people become objects to be fashioned by whatever means necessary to fit the "right way."

The militant extremists in each religion require that all other views, and those who hold them, must be challenged, and then corrected (converted) or destroyed. In its most virulent forms, militant extremism spawns terrorists committed to imposing their view of the world on those around them, no matter what the cost. There is finally no room for the "other" and no reason for tolerance or civil discourse aimed at bettering the whole human family.

Most recently, militant extremism, in its most highly publicized form, has been associated with a militant version of Islam, but there are plenty of examples of the same attitude among Christian, Jewish, and other groups, both from the past and the present. We desperately need interfaith approaches to promoting unity and peace in today's world, the theme of this morning's breakfast.

I am convinced that the vision we need to support, which is present here this morning in the religious traditions represented, and in many other religious communities, is the inclusiveness of divine love. It is a vision that understands God as One who has been in relationship with human beings as long as we have existed, in a multitude of contexts and in a variety of ways.

The only way for an interfaith approach to promote unity and peace in today's world is by embracing the belief that Divine Love, which many name "God," is offered freely to everyone. We will never have unity and peace in this world until the various religions learn to get along with each other. We don't have to agree, but we must respect the other traditions.

I would like to suggest some approaches to unity and peace which apply especially to my tradition but will also apply to other religious traditions.

The first problem for Christians, and this is true for many other religious traditions, is that Christian theology across the centuries has tended either to ignore the reality of the diverse and numerous religions in the world or to condemn all other religions as irreligion, paganism, or falsehood. For too long, the vast majority of Christians have assumed that Christianity was the only valid religion. There was no other way into a meaningful relationship with God except through faith in Jesus.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the killing of vast numbers of indigenous people was rationalized, in part, as necessary to “save” them from their pagan ways and make them Christian, either peaceably or by force as necessary.

In the 19th century, a huge project was undertaken to evangelize the world, to convert the “heathen” in all quarters of the earth to Christianity. This was done out of the sincere conviction that all the non-Christians of the world faced the terrible, but inevitable, prospect of eternal punishment unless they could be brought to faith in Christ.

There was also a downside to this that is only now being fully appreciated. The missionary enterprise was inextricably bound with colonialism. We now know that those who were being “saved” did not always appreciate the efforts of their “saviors.” The Christian message was far too closely packaged in a social, economic, political, and cultural wrap that was distinctly and unnecessarily European and North American.

Furthermore, Christians in the West, until very recently, have lived for the most part in situations where people of other religions (Judaism being the exception) rarely existed. Thus, for many, the reality of other religions was largely unrecognized. Other religions were viewed mostly as evidence of the need to send out missionaries to convert these nonbelievers.

I am convinced that the best interfaith approach to promoting unity and peace is this: instead of assuming that since Christianity or any other one faith is true, all other beliefs must be false, we need to begin at another place. Let’s reflect on the wonder of creation. One of the most notable aspects of the world in which we live is the wide diversity we find among the living and nonliving. How many varieties of butterflies are there to delight the eye? How many types of trees are spread around the world?

There are thousands, millions, billions of human beings, all similar but distinct from one another, each with inherent value and potential. The diversity in creation is something we take for granted. There are in the neighborhood of fifty million species of plant and animal life currently to be found. Wouldn’t one kind of butterfly or bird have been sufficient? Apparently not, because variety seems to be the way things are supposed to be.

So why should there not be different religions? Why should we be surprised or troubled by the reality of different ways to express spirituality? The trouble comes in the human family when one group assumes that it alone has the truth and then claims superiority over others.

In the Bible, God is said to have looked upon the whole creation and declared it to be very good. If the Creator deemed creation to be very good with all the diversity found therein, shouldn’t we also come to the same conclusion?

One of the most important teachings of wisdom is that there is wide diversity in life and many varieties of human experience. Uniformity is neither possible nor desirable. To affirm truth and light from one source does not rule out all others.

Let me be very personal. Because I find life and truth in Jesus, it is for me to celebrate God’s intimate and particular revelation of divine love. But God is never restricted or limited by particulars, only enhanced. We who are Christians know Jesus to be the way to God. What I must not forget is that the God I meet in Jesus is the God whose love reaches out to all in relentless and diverse expressions of compassion, forgiveness, and recreating love.

In his book The Dignity of Difference, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks makes this important observation: “I believe that we can no longer, as religious leaders, assume that nothing has changed in the human situation. Something has changed: our power for good and evil, the sheer reach and consequences of our interventions. We have come face to face with the stranger, and it makes all the difference whether we find this threatening or enlarging. Every great faith has within it harsh texts, which if read literally, can be taken to endorse narrow particularism, suspicion of strangers, and intolerance toward others who believe differently than we do. Every great faith also has within it sources that emphasize kinship with the stranger, empathy with the outsider, the courage that leads people to extend a hand across boundaries of estrangement or hostility. The choice is ours. Will the generous texts of our traditions serve as interpretative keys to the rest, or will the abrasive passages determine our ideas of what we are called to do?”

My choice is for the generous texts in all religious traditions. Amen.