

GANDHI'S HOPE
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University Congregational Church
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**Reading: "On the Meaning of Brotherhood" by M. K. Gandhi,
offered at a meeting of Christians in Calcutta, August 25, 1925**

"The question then arises: How is it possible to love those who consider themselves to be our enemies? Almost every week, I receive letters either from Hindus or from Mussalmans, sometimes from Christians, combating this fundamental position (the position of brotherhood of man) that I have taken up. If it is a Hindu who writes then he asks me, 'How is it possible for me to love a Mussalman who kills the cow, which is as dear to me as my life?' Or if it is a Christian who writes to me, he asks, 'How is it possible to love Hindus who so ill-treat those whom they call untouchables, Hindus who have suppressed a fifth of their numbers?' And if it is a Mussalman who writes, he asks, 'How is it possible to extend the hand of brotherhood or fellowship to Hindus who are worshippers of stock and stone?' I say to all these three, 'Your brotherhood is of no value to me if you cannot love the respective parties that you have described.' But what does the attitude signify after all? Does it not signify cowardly fear of intolerance? If all of us are God's creation, why should we fear one another or hate those who do not hold the same belief that we do? A Hindu will ask me, is he to sit or look on while a Mussalman is doing something which is most repugnant to him? My brotherhood replies, 'Yes.' And I add, 'You must sacrifice yourself, or in the language you have just listened to, you must bear the cross. If you want to defend one who is dear to you, you must die without killing.' I have personal experience of such occurrences.

If you have the courage to suffer lovingly, you melt the stoniest heart. You raise your hand against one whom you regard as a ruffian, but how if he overpowers you? Will not the ruffian be more ferocious because of his victory over you? Does not history show that evil feeds on resistance? History also furnishes instances of men who have tamed the fiercest men with their all-embracing love. But I admit that such non-resistance requires far greater courage than that of a soldier who returns two blows against one. I also admit that if a man has anger instead of love in him for the evil-doer, it is better for

him to fight clean rather than, in a cowardly manner, to sit still for fear of dying. Cowardice and brotherhood are contradictory terms. I know that the world does not accept the fundamental position that I have endeavored to place before you. I know that in Christian Europe, this doctrine of non-retaliation is pooh-poohed.”¹

This past Friday, January 30, 2009, marked the 61st anniversary of the death of the Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi is one of the world’s religious leaders whom I deeply revere and on the occasion of this anniversary I always take time to remember him and the legacy of non-violent social action that he offered to the world. I have taken time over the last 35 years to read and try to understand his work.

Gandhi’s ideas seem ever more incredible and improbable in an age of rabid religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Extremists pollute every religion of the world. Sermons of intolerance, judgment, and hatred vomit from some preachers of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. Every one of them has gathered a list of infidels who are to be destroyed, marginalized, or colonized. Armed zealots of various religious persuasions bomb restaurants, tourist sites, wedding parties, and villages to inflict death and fear into their perceived enemies. They even assassinate members of different sects within their own religion. In many communities, including our own, there is a palpable wariness and mistrust

¹ M. K. Gandhi, “The Meaning of Brotherhood,” *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford, 1986), Vol. I, 530-531.

of differing religions. Dialogue on substantial issues is rare and often includes the usual cast of characters that are seen at every Multi-faith or Inter-religious event. Sadly, those who do attend such events are often there to “represent” their religious tradition as if the meeting was the binding arbitration of theological ideals. Too seldom do we go to listen to one another, enjoy one another’s company, feed and be fed by one another. Too seldom do we claim our common humanity, love our brothers and sisters, embrace their sorrows and celebrate their victories.

I invite you to reconsider the Mahatma Gandhi’s perspective on human unity and brotherhood. I will use Gandhi’s own words throughout this sermon because it is important to hear Gandhi’s voice in our own time. I hope you will discover that he is plain spoken and readily understood. Perhaps you will be encouraged to read and listen to Gandhi. Returning to the original source material remains the scholar’s foundation, especially when there are so many who dare presume to speak for Gandhi or interpret Gandhi. We need to hear a voice of conscience that is uniquely humble in the midst of voices that are arrogant, proud, distrustful, and deceptive. Every one of these is a voice of violence.

Gandhi saw a common Source of inspiration running through every religion and every human heart. This was the same Source of human

unity and brotherhood. The Source of all life was a gracious and inviting God with whom we can receive our neighbors of differing religions.

While many today still “pooh-pooh” Gandhi’s vision, I challenge them to demonstrate how fundamentalism, intolerance, fear, and terrorism bring peace on earth or prosperity to the people of the earth. How do these characteristics of violence give witness to God, by whatever name we give to the Sacred One?

“To me,” Gandhi wrote, “God is truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the Source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist...He transcends speech and reason. He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is embodied to those who need his touch. He is the purest essence. He simply is to those who have faith.”² These words should not come as a surprise to us.

Listen to the doxology we sing every Sunday morning:

**Praise God, the Love we all may share,
Praise God, the Beauty everywhere,
Praise God the Hope of good to be,
Praise god, the Truth that makes us free. Amen.**

² M. K. Gandhi, “Young India, March 5, 1925,” *All Men are Brothers*, Krishna Kripalani, ed. (New York: Continuum, 1982), 53.

Gandhi would find himself at home with many 19th Century American transcendentalists and contemporary panentheists. He declared, “There is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. I feel it though I do not see it. It is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses. But it is possible to reason out the existence of God to a limited extent.”³

“I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever changing, ever-dying, there is underlying all that change a Living Power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves, and recreates. That informing Power or Spirit is God. And since nothing else I see merely through the senses can or will persist, He alone is... And is this power benevolent or malevolent? I see it as pure benevolent. For I can see that in the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in the midst of darkness light persists, in the midst of darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth, Light. He is love. He is the supreme God.”⁴

Scholars agree that Gandhi’s association with the Sacred is abstract and not personal. Gandhi understood that some would find his

³ “Young India, October, 11, 1928,” *All Men Are Brothers*, 51.

⁴ *Ibid*, 52.

relationship with God too distant or intellectual. At the same time Gandhi understood that many people, I dare say most people, need a God that is close and interpersonal. These are people who need to believe that God is not only active in human history, but also an agent in their personal history. Gandhi did not ridicule those who put their faith in a God who knew the numbers of the hair on their heads. He could easily pray with the Christians, Jews, and Muslims, as well as he could pray with Hindus.

Gandhi did not need to judge or ridicule another's belief in God. He did not need to correct or convert anyone to his way of thinking. There are no infidels in Gandhi's thought. How could he believe such a thing? He wrote, "There is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything." And, "a Living Power that is changeless, that holds all together." In other words, the Living Power that some call God, or Allah, or Brahmin, or Truth is the same power that creates, empowers, enlightens, destroys, and recreates us all. This Living Power creates every person, every thing, every religion, every sect, every disciple, and every prophet. God, understood in these broad and sweeping metaphors, is the foundation of every mosque, temple, synagogue, and church. Every mosque, temple, synagogue, and church weaves in and out of its unique

creation and demise, but the Power of Life is pervasive and constant through all of time. God transcends them all.

Gandhi honored the fact that each religious tradition, from the Vatican to the home altar, was an expression of faith that is shaped by history, culture, and tradition. He saw God in the clapping, dancing, and singing of Pentecostals, just as he did in the silent service of the Quakers. From the esoteric philosophy of the most educated raja yogi to the simple chants of an illiterate peasant in a remote village in India, Gandhi saw the same light through them all. I believe that is the hope that Gandhi offers to the 21st Century.

The hope is that no religious tradition needs to prove its veracity to anyone else. They do not need to prove that they are children of God, or the chosen ones, or the saved. Gandhi's hope is that my faith and your faith must be large enough to embrace theirs. Gandhi believed firmly that God percolated through each and every human being. His challenge was to see God in the faith of others – the religious expression of others. Gandhi said, “I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given, and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed.”⁵

⁵ “Harijan, February 16, 1934,” *All Men are Brothers*, 55.

The Jews have nothing to prove to me. The Muslims have nothing to prove to me. The Buddhists have nothing to prove to me. The Hindus have nothing to prove to me. The real proof of faith is not theirs to demonstrate to my satisfaction. The real test is my own vision of God. Can I hear the voice of God in their hymns and prayers? Can I feel the presence of God in their sacraments and rituals? If God is Truth, as Gandhi insisted, can I find the truths of God in the *The Koran*, *The Torah*, the gospels of Jesus, the letters of Paul, the *Vedas*, and the *Sutras*? If the answer to these questions is “no,” then the problem is not with their God. The problem is with my God. It suggests to me that my God is too small. The Mahatma wrote, “How can I even secretly harbor the thought that my neighbor’s faith is inferior to mine and which that he should give up his faith and embrace mine? As a true and loyal friend, I can only wish and pray that he may live and grow perfect in his own faith. In God’s house there are many mansions and they are equally holy.”⁶

Gandhi, we must hasten to say, did not believe that he fully apprehended God. In his *Autobiography* he wrote, “There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a

⁶ “Harijan, April 20, 1934,” *All Men are Brothers*, 54-55.

moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him.”⁷ Gandhi never claimed full comprehension of the Truth he sought so diligently throughout his life. I think he saw each one of us as pilgrims and he did not claim to be the line leader. When we recognize that our beliefs and our faith is limited and incomplete we must of necessity honor the beliefs and faith of others.

I do not worry about people who are fervent in their faith. I do not think much about those who wave their arms in prayer, speak in tongues, and pray for sanctification. I do worry; indeed, I am frightened by those who claim that they have found the one and only true God; by those who claim that their scriptures are inerrant, and their interpretation of scripture infallible. I think men are dangerous who claim that they speak for God. Gandhi recognized that we are imperfect as human beings. Thus our scriptures are not perfect, our theologies are not perfect, and our religions are not perfect. Even the most brilliant and saintly human being can only catch a glimpse of God. With all of the religious scriptures from around the world; with all of the hundreds of thousands of preachers and prophets throughout time; with all of the untold millions of faithful devotees, not one can claim full comprehension of God. As the Taoist stated so simply,

⁷ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiment With Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957)

“The Way that can be told is not the eternal way.” The only way is Gandhi’s way of humility.

At the same time I would be remiss to suggest that Gandhi did not have personal religious experiences. Gandhi believed that God resided in the human heart as truth, life, love, and service. He wrote, “Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities political, social, and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service to all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavor simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. And this cannot be done and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity.”⁸ On many occasions he spoke of the service to humanity as his vocation, and he especially saw the plight of the poor and untouchables as the desire of his service.

Gandhi also saw and spoke the truth in the midst of falsehood and lies. He saw light in the midst of darkness. He saw hope in the midst of despair. He saw mercy in the depths of fear. He saw grace in the throes of terror. In the worst of human circumstances Gandhi sought truth, light,

⁸ D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* (Bombay: Vithalbhai & Tendulkar, 1953), Vol. VI, 108-109.

hope, love and grace. Indeed, Gandhi would die with the words, “Ram, Ram,” on his lips. Ram means, of course, “God.”

Gandhi’s approach to the Sacred was open, inquisitive, inclusive, expansive, and welcoming. He anticipated that God would be present in every human being he met, even his most ardent political and religious enemies. I believe that is the hope for us all. I would like to think that every Christian, Jew, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, *et. al.*, would be open to the larger presence of God throughout the world and through all of God’s people. I would like to hope that we would not be so arrogant, and ultimately violent, to believe that we can confine God to our particular religion, scripture, or ritual. I would hope that we could be thankful for what glimpses of God we have been given, rather than be fearful of the glimpses of others. I would hope that we could welcome others with humble service to the world’s poor and outcast. You see, I finally believe there is greater evidence of God’s grace in our service to others than all of the Bibles, encyclicals, doctrines, creeds and holy writ combined. Or as Gandhi said, “To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and the promise of food as wages.”⁹

⁹ “Young India, October 13, 1921,” *All Men are Brothers*, 123.

May it be said of University Congregational Church that our minds are open to the Truth of God as expressed by the faith of all; our hearts are open to the Presence of God in the lives of all; and that our will is bent to the service of all.

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