

## *“One Holy City”*

**Text: Matthew 5: 1-2; 7: 12, 28-29**

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### I

Inspiration for sermons sometimes emerges in unexpected places and today is a case in point. because my thoughts for this morning came to light as I fiddled with my camera on a January morning about 6,000 miles away.

The setting was Jerusalem and I was basking in the sites and discoveries of pilgrimage. The view-finder on my Nikon was my window as I searched my lens for the perfect shot. It occurred to me that a broader perspective would be possible if I changed from telephoto to wide-angel lens. And so it was, I made the switch. Moments later, when I looked through my camera’s eye again an astounding scene opened before me. It was nearly spell-binding because in one glance I could see the Dome of the Rock, sacred to people of the Muslim faith; the Western Wall, essential to those of Jewish belief; and the domed tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, revered by those of Christian belief.

I was astonished and amazed all at once. Amazed and astonished because it was all so close, as if to be able to almost touch them – these three holy sites. I was at the epicenter of religious diversity with three great world religions so clearly in focus: Jewish, Muslim and Christian. These three each trace their roots back to that very city and to a common ancestry with Abraham. It was a moment of the holiest variety just to have the privilege of that picture.

But I was also humbled and challenged. Challenged and humbled because I know only too well, as you do, that misunderstandings about and between these three different faiths is at the heart of enormous discord and anguish, worldwide. To see it so compact as to be one photograph pushed the edges of diversity in me like never before. “If only the whole world could look through my lens and refocus,” I thought to myself. One Holy City brought all of this to light for me with new urgency.

### II

Here is the truth: there is so much that we do not understand about one another – Christian, Muslim, Jew. We do not understand what each faith truly values. We make judgments about the worst that we hear of other ways, and want our faith to be seen only for its better moments. We do not share long enough or deep enough to both appreciate our differences or find the solid rock of common ground. In the press of the day we favor a fairly thin veneer of tolerance when tolerating one another is simply not enough. Please, I am not meaning to be critical. But I am meaning to say that we all have very hard work ahead of us for the good of this earth, our only home.

And this is very hard work. It challenges deeply. Really it does. Joseph Hough, recently the President of Union Theological Seminary put it this way.<sup>1</sup> “What is essential for Christian faith is that we know we have seen the face of God in the face of Jesus. What is not essential is to believe that no one else has seen God and experienced redemption in another time or place.”

Powerful words. He goes on. “The fear that openness to other religious traditions will destabilize our Christian faith is completely unfounded, and has led many to resist full recognition of the adequacy of other religions to transform human beings with hope and promise. What we need,” he concludes, “is to find the difference between attempts to convert and attempts to bear witness. To bear witness is to state honestly what you have discovered in Jesus Christ, and to share the things in your life that are of highest value to you. This is an act of true friendship. It is very different than saying, ‘Now that I’ve told you this, you’ve got to believe as I do and experience what I have come to know.’ The first is an opening dialogue. The second is a closing of conversation.”

### III

A week before embarking on our pilgrimage I read an enormously helpful article written by a rabbi whom I found to be disarmingly broad in his thinking.

Rabbi Baird<sup>2</sup> began his essay by saying that “most of us know precious little about our own religious traditions to the extent that we can’t think clearly about or come to know the faith of others.” He then proposed three key words that set the importance of this in full light. Three words and they all rhyme: news, pews and views.

First, he says, just listen to the news! The cycle of virtually every week of life has news coming at us that contains significant components of faith. This is true from the rising temperature in Iran to our recent presidential election; from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to cooperative perspectives on global warming. And though none of these stories are exclusively about religion, they all have strong religious underpinnings.

Second, he says, look around in the pews! The pews are his metaphor for the world in which we live. And the increasing reality of families around and about us is that a multi-faith, multi-cultural world is the new norm. This reality calls for more than the polite fiction of “can’t we just all get along?” Families have increasingly diverse profiles – Jewish children, Christian friends, Muslim cousins, Hindu in-laws, Buddhist neighbors, agnostic co-workers. In West Harford alone we have children in our schools whose families speak 65 different languages at home!

And third, the Rabbi Baird turns to the views. “There is a high probability,” he writes, “that coming to know the world-views and convictions of others will increase and enrich your own faith. In fact, those who spend time learning about different religious traditions report that they come to understand their own tradition better and that they are stretched to grow.” Rabbi Baird ends with this maxim: “to know one religion is to know none.”

### IV

You see, you just never know what thoughts and insights are going to come rushing to mind when you look through the lens of a camera – especially when it’s a wide-angle lens in an international city brimming with contrast. You just never know!

Another day my eye gazed through the same wide-angle lens as we gathered on the top of the Mount of the Beatitudes. This is where Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount – words that we

are given from the Gospel of Matthew and the core ethical teachings of Jesus. It's a breathtaking view to say the very least and opens up a panorama of wondering. We listened as Dennis Dewey and Lynn White opened up the scriptures and spoke the whole of those words – three chapters of the Gospel.

In and among those words of Jesus we heard this. “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law of the prophets.” We call that the golden rule and it's core to our Christian faith. But who really owns it? Our Jewish friends have these words: “Whatever is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor.” That's a pretty close parallel! And those of Muslim faith say this, “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.”

I place all of this before you today for your critically thinking . . . along with this prayer from the heart of a teenager by the name of Amy Maddox.

He prayed – it wasn't my religion.  
He ate – it wasn't what I ate.  
He spoke – it wasn't my language.  
He dressed – it wasn't what I wore.  
He took my hand – it wasn't the color of mine.  
But when he laughed – it was how I laughed.  
And when he cried – it was how I cried, too.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph C. Hough, Jr. “Acknowledging that God is not Limited to Christians” in The New York Times, January 12, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Justus N. Baird, “The Case for Multi-faith Education” January 18, 2010, the Alban Institute.