

Sunday, September 27, 2015
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Sermon - "Who Is To Blame?"

This past Wednesday, September 23 was a special day in the religious world.

It was Yom Kippur – the holy day celebrated in the Jewish tradition.

Yom Kippur is known as the ‘day of atonement’ the day set aside to commemorate God’s forgiveness of the sin of the Golden Calf, the Israelites’ slip into idolatry after the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Yom Kippur marks the end of the Days of Awe, a 10-day period of teshuvah (Jewish reflection, repentance and return) that begins with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

During the Days of Awe, the Jewish people seek forgiveness from friends, family and co-workers.

Yom Kippur is considered a joyous day – a day to spiritually start anew.

Our Muslim brothers and sisters celebrated Eid al-Adha on Wednesday.

This is the holy day that marks the end of the Hajj – the time when Muslims visit Mecca.

During the Hajj, Muslims remember and commemorate the trials and triumphs of Abraham.

One of Abraham's main trials, as we know from the Genesis story, was to face the command of God to kill his only son.

Upon hearing this command, he prepared to submit to God’s will.

When he was all prepared to do it, God revealed to him that his "sacrifice" had already been fulfilled.

He had shown that his love for his Lord superceded all others, that he would lay down his own life or the lives of those dear to him in order to submit to God.

Rather than sacrificing his son, he offered a wild ram instead.

During the celebration of Eid al-Adha, Muslims commemorate and remember Abraham's trials, by themselves slaughtering an animal such as a sheep, camel, or goat.

The ritual is described this way:

“The meat from the sacrifice of Eid al-Adha is mostly given away to others.

One-third is eaten by immediate family and relatives, one-third is given away to friends, and one-third is donated to the poor.

The act symbolizes our willingness to give up things that are of benefit to us or close to our hearts, in order to follow Allah's commands.

It also symbolizes our willingness to give up some of our own bounties, in order to strengthen ties of friendship and help those who are in need.

We recognize that all blessings come from Allah, and we should open our hearts and share with others.”

For Christians, Wednesday was the day that Pope Francis came to the United States.

I know that the Pope is technically the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, but this particular pope has emerged as a world leader who preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that is accessible to many.

In welcoming the Pope, President Obama said,

““You shake our conscience from slumber. You call on us to rejoice in good news and give us confidence that we can come together, in humility and service, and pursue a world that is more loving, more just and more free.”

So those of us in religious circles were hoping that Wednesday, September 23 would be a day when the seeds of peace might be sown.

We dreamed that a holy day, shared by the three Abrahamic faiths, would create a moment in time when people would turn and recognize the image of God in the faces of their neighbors.

I'm not sure that this happened, but I am also not sure that it didn't.

Perhaps there were seeds sown last Wednesday that won't come to fruition until a future time.

If nothing else, three holy days in one help to remind us that our faith traditions are based on the same stories.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus calls his disciples to task for discrediting someone who was calling out demons in Jesus' name.

He says that if the man is using his name for good, he will not be able to use it for evil later on.

The famous line, “Whoever is not against us is for us” is uttered.

This particular bible verse has often been twisted to say “whoever is not for us is against us,” translated in today's parlance to, “If you don't agree with me you are my enemy.”

I picture Jesus rolling his eyes when he hears his words misinterpreted so.

One of my classes this semester is focusing on how organizations work.

A recent reading assignment included a chapter entitled “Common Fallacies in Explaining Organizational Problems.”

The premise was that organizations often simplify problems in a way that precludes them from recognizing the complexity of the issues at hand.

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying “a thing should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.”

Two primary ways issues are oversimplified are by blaming other people and blaming bureaucracies.

Rather than exploring the complexities of a relationship, we simply blame someone else for failure.

As a culture, we too often jump to simple conclusions – including blaming someone else, rather than looking more deeply into the issue at hand.

Much of our inter-religious hostility is based on lack of information; misunderstanding; judgment and blaming.

A perfect example is the misunderstanding surrounding the Muslim ritual of slaughtering an animal for their holy day.

Rather than understanding the complexity of the rite, many jump to a conclusion about blood sacrifice and religious slaughter.

Do you ever find yourself blaming others for circumstances in your own life?

In our reading from the Hebrew scriptures this morning, Queen Esther boldly requests that Haman, the man who has been tormenting her Jewish brothers and sisters, be held accountable.

The Book of Esther explains the origins of the Jewish Feast of Purim, a celebration with feasting, drinking, and sharing gifts with one another, as well as the poor.

Esther had the courage to expose the religious bigotry and intolerance of Haman, thereby saving a whole generation of Jewish people.

It is important that we not be seduced into simplified explanations of behavior.

In this day of quick communication, brief tweets, news received more often in pictures than words, we must work at understanding at a deeper level.

We must not accept flip analysis as profound truths.

We must look for common ground with our neighbors.

One commentator summed it up this way:

It is amazing, when we look around, at the tremendous good that's being done in the world by various organizations.

It's inspiring to see how many opportunities are arising and being taken, and how many people are being healed, saved, rescued, and given a chance at life because of it.

This is something we can and must celebrate.

What is unfortunate is when groups are unable or unwilling to collaborate because of theological, ethnic, national, or operational differences.

It is also unfortunate when hierarchies and structures keep us from responding to surprising opportunities.

Yet, God's desire is to bring wholeness to the world, and God will use whomever is available to do this work of healing.

If we can recognize that compassion, done by anyone, is still compassion, and that we achieve far more when we pool resources and opportunities, so much more can be done.

When political parties can learn to work together for the good of the people, instead of denouncing each other in order to gain or cling to power, we will see immense healing in our world.

When religions and denominations can learn to work together for the good of the world, instead of competing with one another for converts and for dominance of the religious landscape, we will see immense healing in the world.

When corporations can learn to work together for the good of the world, instead of fighting one another over control of ideas, and seeking legislation that protects them at the expense of freedom, collaboration and social contribution, there will be immense healing in our world.”

Obviously, the world did not change dramatically last Wednesday – but we must live in hope.

God's love is a part of our being, a part of each created being.

We must focus on that love and do whatever is necessary to nurture and grow that love in our communities.

Our brothers and sisters around the globe are yearning for peace just as we are.

We must join our prayers with those at other altars to bring God's kingdom to fruition here on earth.