

# Holy Envy

Given 11/3/19 by Robin Mitchell

In the past few years I have found myself falling in love with my Methodist church all over again. For a long time I had felt like an outsider there, appreciating the chance to observe a healthy and positive spiritual community but not being able to accept Christian dogma enough to really feel like I belonged. But that has been changing recently; as I said in my last sermon, I have been impressed and deeply inspired by how they are handling their issues with LGBTQ inclusiveness, how they are standing up for justice and inclusiveness without demonizing the people who disagree with them.

Just last Sunday they went much further, announcing that they're working on a new ministry that, in their words, "strives to be LGBTQ+ affirming, gender equalizing, creation caring, pro-immigrant, peace-making, community-building, racial-justice seeking, all-ability welcoming Christians. Doubters, seekers, atheists, agnostics and committed people of faith are all welcome." It really sounds like they've been reading our mission statement; I am beyond excited to see what comes of this.

And they've foreshadowed this by having us read some really extraordinary books in their version of our sacred circles; not at all what I would expect from a mainline Protestant church. I quoted one in my last sermon, about how our desire to divide the world into black-and-white categories of good and evil "is not true religion but maybe actually a sin", and after that we read a book about the Bible by Rob Bell where he described it as a collection of stories people had told about God and said "Don't be surprised when you meet people who have none of your religious background ... and yet clearly have a genuine connection with the divine. This is normal, healthy, and biblical."

But the one that has touched me the most is the one we just finished at the end of the summer called Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others by Barbara Brown Taylor. She is a Christian author who started her religious career as an Episcopal priest. But like Rev. Meghan she discerned that her path wasn't in pastoral ministry, so she left that and for a time found herself teaching Religion 101 – World Religions at a small liberal-arts college in Georgia, which is where the book came from.

Preparing for the class she read Krister Stendahl, who as the dean of the Harvard Divinity School had three rules for approaching other religions:

1. When trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
2. Don't compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for holy envy.

The first two seem straightforward, if sometimes hard to follow, even for us, but she says no one knew exactly what he meant by the third. It was only as the class progressed that she began to discover it for herself.

An important part of the class was field trips – like our own RE youth, they visited nearby houses of worship to see first-hand how people of other faiths experienced God. One of their first visits was to a Hindu temple in Atlanta where they watched the devotees bathe and clothe a statue of the goddess Padmavathi.

That was all fine, watching the heathens do their exotic thing, but then the priest offered to give them a special blessing. Taking them to Vishnu's shrine he offered them prasad, food

and drink that had been offered to the god and were now given out as a blessing. She shared the shock of confusion as they suddenly changed from spectators to participants in what seemed to them like idol-worship. She watched as most of the students drew back, one actually hiding behind another as the priest approached with the blessed almonds. She herself didn't know what to do, but when she saw the confusion in the priest's face – why would anyone refuse the gift of Vishnu's almonds? – she was moved to take them with gratitude.

And driving home, she found herself stewing about the contrast she had seen. She wondered "Why was my crowd so defensive in the face of their graciousness? Who had convinced us that faith was a competitive sport and that only one team could win for all eternity?" She was discovering the meaning of 'holy envy', of looking at another faith and seeing something more noble than yours.

That feeling grew the day they visited a synagogue and found that they had come on Simchat Torah, the day they celebrate the beginning of the yearly cycle of Torah readings by singing and dancing as they parade the Torah scroll around the room. The Rabbi asked her class to join in, so they all formed a holy conga line, and afterwards said "You Gentiles sure can dance!" The Hindus had freely offered them blessings, and now the Jews had equally freely asked them to help bless their own ceremony.

Or the time they visited the Islamic center and one of her students asked their host if they could buy a Qur'an. He went to a bookcase, took a box of them, set it on a chair and said "Since there is no compulsion in religion for Muslims, I won't hand you a copy, but you are free to take one if you like." And at the end of the visit, the imam told them "Our deepest desire is not that you become Muslim, but that you become the best Christian, the best Jew, the best person you can be. In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful." Struck by their rejection of religious imperialism, she yet again found herself driving home full of holy envy.

All of this affected her deeply. Like many people – like many of us, I suspect – she wasn't really used to looking critically at her own religion, and seeing it so often come up lacking shook her faith, both in Christianity as a whole and certainly in the way she had been practicing it. She had to figure out for herself what it meant to be a Christian if it was only one faith among many and not the sole source of truth and light for the world, and if there was even anything meaningful left in it in that case.

In the end she decided there was, for two reasons. She says "In the first place, no one can speak all the religious languages in the world, and there is no spiritual Esperanto. None of us can speak "language." We have to speak a language before we can learn anyone else's, and the carefulness with which we speak our own can make us better listeners to others. In the second place, my religious language is quite excellent at speaking of what it means to be authentically human. In Christian terms, it means being made in the image of God – not just you, but everyone. It means tending the neighbor's welfare as religiously as you tend your own... It means crossing all kinds of boundaries to meet people where they are."

So besides the obvious ways this book warmed my ecumenical heart, it impressed me for two reasons. The first is that my church, this mainline Protestant church, had told everyone to read it, that it was important that they read a book about why Christianity isn't the best and only true religion in the world. And it's not like this is a new thing for them – I remember our previous minister once saying "If we really believe that God is sovereign, that means we don't get to tell him how he's allowed to appear to other people." And our current minister always stresses at Communion that this isn't his table, or the Methodists' table, but God's table, open to everyone regardless of who they are or what, if any, church they belong to. I specifically asked him if that included people who weren't Christian and he

said yes, anyone who respects our Communion enough to want to take part is welcome. So I invite all of you to come take Communion with us some Sunday – we can't offer you Vishnu's almonds, but we can give you Christ's bread and wine to nourish and bless you on your own path.

And the other reason I love the book is that it has given me a way to understand my own feelings. Practicing three religions gives me a lot of chances for "holy envy", and it's really helpful to have a name for something I've been feeling for years. Envy gets a bad rap as a negative emotion, but at its core it's your heart telling you that it isn't getting something that it needs. And each of my traditions seems to leave my heart needing something that it can only get from the others, which I think is why I have kept following them all for so many years.

For example, when I'm sitting anywhere other than here I envy us our spiritual openness; how we can draw wisdom and inspiration from all faith traditions and not just our own. I absolutely loved Rev. Meghan's Hafiz service back in May, where she read his poems and shared his ecstatic love for God. (I loved it so much that most of our readings today are from Hafiz...) Those poems would resonate so well with the Methodists, whose Bible shares that same passionate love – here is God talking to Job: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation... while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?" The Sufi poets are the morning stars singing together, the angels shouting for joy, but I'll never hear them there because they aren't Christian and they aren't in the Bible, and so I'm left with this massive case of holy envy.

Or at the other extreme, Mark Tuller's sparkling humanist sermon three weeks ago. I am neither an atheist nor a humanist, but his sermon made me wonder how much of the inspiration and beauty I find in my religious calling would really be lost if I were. I so treasure that kind of challenge to my ingrained ways of thinking, but again; not a sermon I will ever hear from a Methodist pulpit.

On the other hand, when I'm sitting here I have other kinds of holy envy. I envy the Methodists their cultural and political diversity – I remember walking through their parking lot on Communion Sunday during the 2012 election season and seeing two cars parked next to each other, one with a "Romney/Ryan" bumper sticker and the other with an "Obama 2012" sticker. I was so struck to see these two very different people, who literally wore their partisanship on their sleeves, coming to take Communion together, drawn to our church by something greater than political partisanship.

But mostly I envy both them and the Buddhists the fruits of their religious unity – as much as I love our diversity, there is a power and depth in religious practice that for me only seems to come when everyone shares the same story, the same myth. I have talked before about how the great religious myths speak to our deepest questions and longings, how they present them in a way that invites us to take action in our lives to move closer to the answers. And when I'm in a roomful of people who are un-self-consciously praying to God or to the Bodhisattva Chenrezig I feel that invitation more strongly than I do here. Both of those faiths are tapping into stories that are compelling and beautiful and on some deep level true, and my heart wants that so much.

But then when I'm sitting in my Methodist pew looking over at the Buddhists, I feel so much envy of the "open source" basis for their religion. The Christian Apostles' Creed is full of these arbitrary claims – "I believe that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; that after he died he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again to judge the living and the dead." There's no way to investigate any of that; you either take it on faith or work to see it as a myth that reveals some deeper truth.

But the Buddha's Four Noble Truths – life, as we're living it, involves deep suffering; the cause of that suffering is clinging to illusory things; the way to end the suffering is to cut the clinging at the root; and that there's a path that leads to that – those are things you can go out and investigate; you can look deeply at your life and ask whether those things make sense in light of your own experience. I so envy the Buddhists for having created such a beautiful and compelling religion from such a plain, approachable foundation.

And when I'm sitting on my cushion with the Buddhists and looking at either us or the Methodists, I'm filled with envy of our communities. I love the Buddhist groups here at the Fellowship, and we are a loving community for each other, but we're just too small to do all the things that this Fellowship and my Methodist church do – having potluck dinners and sacred circles, sending aid to the Bahamas and feeding homeless people here, doing social-justice work and having art fairs and concerts and all the other things that a larger community can do to nurture its members and engage the world.

And the social-justice thing seems to run deeper than just the size of the community. When I'm with them I envy the way both we and the Methodists see it as a vital part of our spiritual path. For us, looking at our own biases and privilege the way we have in the old Welcoming Congregation and the current Beloved Conversations workshops is a very real spiritual practice, one that's directly tied to making the world a better place. And for the Methodists, serving God by serving our fellow human beings, loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, is an essential response to God's abundant love and grace given to us. Many of the individual Buddhists I know are giving deeply of themselves and doing wonderful things in the world, and the Rinpoches I have studied with are tirelessly organizing schools and health care in Nepal and India, but it doesn't seem to be front and center in their practice and teachings the way it is for us.

So those are the things that keep me going to two services every Sunday and a meditation group every Friday, but I suspect I'm not the only person here with some form of holy envy. When I hear people talking about their childhood religions, or what they see in their friends' or their children's friends' religions, sometimes there's a sense of wistfulness along with their relief at being here. Wistfulness, maybe, for shared ritual, for a sense of the Divine, for something that once fed them and now isn't as much. Or maybe from our humanist past, when we felt freer to ask questions and challenge authority than we do now. Whatever it is, this is something to pay attention to; as I said before, envy and wistfulness are a signal from your heart that it isn't getting something it needs.

And now is a good time to pay attention to it – one of the things I envy about us when I'm anywhere else is our flexibility, how our congregational polity allows this Fellowship to be whatever we need it to be. And now is an especially fertile time, this pregnant pause between settled ministers, when we have even more of a chance to shape it in the ways our hearts need. So listen to your hearts, where they are full and joyous and where they are perhaps emptier and distanced from what they love, and help us shape this Fellowship again into a place of holy fulfillment.

Amen, namaste, and may that be so.