

**BIBLE READINGS:** Numbers 11:24-29 Mark 9:38-50

## **SERMON**

*"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."* John's statement in verse 38 gives a classic expression of intolerant religion. It is a theme that runs through much of the Old Testament and is still popular today.

In many ways, the Old Testament is a primer on intolerant religion. Even God is described as exhibiting intolerance and anger towards humans in many Biblical passages:

- In Exodus 34:11, Deuteronomy 12:2-3 and 2 Kings 11:18 God orders the Israelites to destroy pagan temples.
- In Numbers 21:34-35 and 31:7-41, God orders the Israelites to exterminate the Amorites, the Bashan and the Midianites because of the religious beliefs and practices.
- In Exodus 22:20, God says people of other faiths are to be utterly destroyed.
- In Deuteronomy 13:1-5, religious prophets of other faiths are to be exterminated.

The Christian Church picked up the idea and ran with it. And after Constantine, the church added state authority to intolerant religion. The Crusades were fought as a Holy War against the "infidels." Everyone knew what to do with heretics. You disemboweled them on the public square. In the 1700s, it was common knowledge that witches would gladly admit their evil ways if they were dunked under the water long enough.

Even today you can find Christian preachers proudly proclaiming their opposition to tolerance in religion. Tolerance has become a bad word in some circles. One Pastor condemns what he sees as the growing influence that he feels tolerance is having upon Christianity: "Rather than condemn opposing beliefs, some advocate tolerance toward them. As a concept, tolerance initially sounds pleasing and...(politically) correct. There is the notion that in a...melting pot society, great latitude must exist to accommodate a broad spectrum of thoughts and practices...The 'tolerance' argument is a smoke screen that diverts attention from the issues at hand."

Others emphasize the Christian responsibility to hate what God hates. They usually tack on a qualifying platitude saying, "We hate the sin but not the sinner." But I believe the sinner always feels hated anyway.

Back in the 1970s, an important minister said, "God does not hear the prayer of a Jew." for 30 years up until his death in 2014, Rev. Fred Phelps, the pastore of Westboro Baptist Church in Arizona USA, led his church members to protest at the funerals of gay people. Pastor Phelps' congregation went to funerals with signs that said, "God hates fags" and "They are in hell." Pastor Phelps claimed, "Not only is homosexuality a sin, but anyone who supports fags is just as guilty as they are. You are both worthy of death (Romans 1:32)."

All of these examples of intolerance make me cringe. I don't like being associated with such ideas and such people. The long tradition of Christian intolerance led the famous existential philosopher Albert Camus to say, "Believe me, religions are on the wrong track the moment they moralize and concoct commandments. God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow men suffice, aided by ourselves. You were speaking of the Last Judgment; I shall wait for it resolutely, for I have known what is worse, the judgment of men! I'll tell you a big secret, ... [don't] wait for the Last Judgment. It takes place every day"

Intolerance has a long history in the Christian Church. And Christians are still known for a spirit of intolerance. Ask people on the street what they think is a Christian attitude, and they

will use words like "judgmental," "narrow-minded," "dogmatic," "condemning," and "intolerant." Another writer made a telling commentary on Christians when she said, "You have created God in your own image when you are convinced that God hates all the same people you do."

Most Christians are addicted to intolerance like a gambling addict is addicted to the pokies. Well-meaning people sell their intolerance as a desire to keep the truth uncorrupted. They treasure their intolerance as a means of assuring themselves of their own unique superiority. With it, they never have to bother with the necessity of open-mindedness or from the painful necessity of changing their minds. They defend their racial, religious and class prejudices and assert their right to force their views on other people. Intolerance mixed with dogmatic authority is the favorite tool of the fundamentalist to enforce orthodox unanimity on their churches. The temptation to be intolerant is very strong in religion.

In our passage, John said, *"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."* But look how Jesus responded to John's statement of religious intolerance in verses 39-41. *"But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.'"*

Jesus is not alone in the scriptures in being tolerant. In the Old Testament (Numbers 11:24-29), Eldad and Medad were prophesying apparently without proper authority. Joshua wanted Moses to stop them immediately, but Moses said, *"Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"* It's one of the few places in the Old Testament where someone who stepped out of line was not summarily executed on the spot.

Paul echoes this theme of toleration in Romans 14:13 when he says, *"Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another."*

In Philippians 1:15-18 Paul says, *"Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice."*

In each of these cases, someone is performing miracles, prophesying, or preaching without the proper authority. Given how often the Bible promotes intolerance, we are led to expect a sound condemnation. But in each case, they are tolerated.

These statements of tolerance are all the more striking because they contrast so vividly with the predominant themes of the Old Testament. These verses are like Galatians 3:28, which gives superior insight into the relationships between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female. These verses show us a better way, the way of tolerance.

Tolerance is a better way because intolerance is a sign of a weak faith. When some people find themselves insecure in an argument, they think they can win the case by talking louder. In the same way, insecurity about matters of faith leads to intolerance. People are often uncomfortable with uncertainty and disorder in their spiritual lives, so they push absolute rules that they hope will overcome any doubt or ambiguity. They hope that a blustering attitude of confidence and intolerance will banish nagging questions into their hiding places.

In fact, it takes real confidence to show tolerance. Moses could have been threatened by the prophecies of Eldad and Medad, but in confidence he let them go. Jesus could have worried that there were those using his name to heal without authorization, but in confidence he tolerated them. Paul could have condemned those who preached Christ out of selfish ambition, but he had confidence in the proclamation of Christ even from wrong motives.

Tolerance is a better way. Tolerance is a better way because intolerance is ineffective. It does nothing but damage to the cause it seeks to defend. Attack a heretic, and you give him an audience. Banish a book, and everybody reads it. Condemn a sin, and some want to try it out. An intolerant attitude will alienate the sinner rather than draw them to a loving, life-transforming God.

The church can model tolerance to a hate-filled world. The churches are supposed to be presenting Christ. But how can the churches present him with arrogance, commend him by coercion, make him who was "full of grace and truth" acceptable by dogmatic intolerance? We cannot commend the highest spiritual beauty and truth by the use of intolerant moods and bad tempers. We cannot exalt love by encouraging hate. Only tolerance is Christ-like.

Many think tolerance is a sign of a lack of commitment, a lack of confidence, a lack of backbone or worse. Some people look at the Uniting Church and assume that we don't stand for anything just because we exhibit a spirit of toleration. They suggest that we don't believe in "absolute truth" just because we refuse to coerce faith. But tolerance is not the absence of commitment. Rather it is a costly commitment to the spirit of Christ.

We choose the path of tolerance and grace, not because it is the broad and easy path, but because it is the narrow path. It is the narrow path advocated by the highest and the best that the Bible has to offer. It is the path of Moses and Paul and Jesus. And we, too, can chose this high road of grace.