

“O people! We created you from a male and a female, and (divided) you into (large) peoples and tribes, so that you might recognize one another” – “so that you might know one another” This verse from the Koran, the sacred text of Muslims, was one of the many different prayers, songs and scripture passages read on at the prayer gathering for all people on Friday night at St. Paul’s downtown. About 100 of us came together, including John and Barbara Ambrose and me, from different peoples and tribes, races and nations to share a moment of unity, togetherness, love, peace so desperately needed in these times. We came together that we might recognize one another – that we might get to know one another. We were Muslim, Hindu, Pagan, Buddhist, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and more. And leaders from many of these traditions offered a prayer, scripture passage, chant or song from our own tradition that would speak into this moment of unity, togetherness, love and peace.

In one of the most powerful moments for me – a moment that I entered into somewhat reluctantly because it was also, initially, the most nervous-making and potentially hokey until we actually did it – that powerful moment was when we were invited to get up out of our pews and walk in between the aisles singing, “I walk gently upon the earth, I bow to you, a flower.” Each time we sang, “I bow to you”, we would stop, look gently into the eyes of the person nearest to us, and bow in reverence to the beautiful human being, the stranger, standing before us. It was intimate, tender, and, yes, at times awkward and yet, it was perhaps, as the verse from the Koran suggests, a moment of coming to recognize and know one another in the deep and mysterious way of God.

Dr. Archana Pathak, a professor at VCU and a Hindu, gave what we would call the homily that night, and there were so many compelling and challenging moments, that I wished I had a pen and paper out to take notes. One phrase in particular, though, stuck with me. I believe it may be a Hindu mantra. It is simply: I offer my ego as an oblation. An oblation being an offering, a devotion, a holy gift offered to the Divine. “I offer my ego as an oblation.”

It occurred to me in that moment that this mantra may be the exact the response called for in Paul’s letter to the Romans. While I obviously can’t speak to the Hindu understanding of this mantra or the ego (and I hope I am not doing it dishonor), when I think of the ego – I think of the over-functioning ego run amok, which I daresay inflicts most of us – I think of the sense of self subsumed in “me” and “mine.” The sense of self that is preoccupied with self-preservation

above all else, that demands setting itself up over and against others, that has become its own judge of all that is good and proper and right and true, that is often as harsh with its own precious body and soul as it is with the precious bodies and souls with whom it shares space on this precious planet. This is not the sense of self that sees difference as a gift in order that we might recognize and know one another, but that we might obliterate the other all together, and this seems to me something of what Paul is getting at here.

In this letter, we hear of a community of people under siege from within itself. As the community has grown and people of different traditions have come together as Christ followers, there are those who are convinced of their superior faith and their understanding of “right” Christian practice. They want to dictate the terms of everyone’s relationship to God.

Paul’s response is a sharp reminder. “Who are you to judge someone else’s servants? Why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you despise your brother or sister?” Cautioning against arrogance, he writes, “It is before the Lord that we stand or fall... [because] we all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

Earlier in this letter, Paul has already suggested that they should perhaps not think more highly of themselves than they ought to, and here he reinforces the message by reminding them that they all stand as equals before their maker, and because they are all equals, no one can claim to have a corner on the market of the mind of God. They are, each of them, fallible.

Paul is not, however, calling for them to be wishing washy in their faith. Not in the least. He has already admonished them not to be conformed to the patterns of the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds so that, he writes, “you can figure out what God’s will is – what is good and pleasing and mature.” He is encouraging them to stand firm in their faith, so bold in their convictions that they are willing offer make their offerings at the judgment seat of God and yet humble enough to be upheld in them by God and God alone. Paul calls for them to be humbly convicted in their faith. When he tells them, whatever their practices, to honor the Lord and give thanks to God, present their bodies as a living sacrifice and to be transformed by the renewing of their minds – that this is their priestly service, I imagine this is something akin to “offering our egos as an oblation.”

Last December at a press conference for Standing Together, an initiative to bring diverse groups in Richmond together to speak out and stand with marginalized religious and ethnic

groups, Dr. Archana Pathak said, "The world is our mirror. As I look into it I see the Divine manifesting in diverse multitudes – all rich and vibrant forces that carry with them a uniqueness without which all of humanity would be lesser. I am guided by my faith as a Hindu to honor and respect all paths to the Divine regardless of my own understanding of them. Indeed I am called to go beyond honor and to understand that defending another's path ultimately serves to strengthen my own. To desecrate one faith, to desecrate any person, is to desecrate all faith and all people."¹

Each week, when we come together for worship we get to practice something of this in a small way – this humble conviction by which we defend another's path while strengthening our own. While we do this throughout worship coming together as the Body of Christ, perhaps most poignantly, we do this when we pass the peace.

The peace isn't just any greeting, and it's definitely not chit chat. It is a holy moment. It is a moment when we stand before each other upheld by God in the fullness of who we are – each a unique and precious expression of the Divine – and come to recognize and know one another anew, both in and beyond our differences, in the deep and mysterious way of God. So when we pass the peace today, I invite us to manifest this knowing. Look into each other's eyes and say, "The Peace of the Lord be always with you." Remember in that moment that we honor the Lord and give thanks to God as we present ourselves as a living sacrifice, as we offer our egos as an oblation, as we allow ourselves to be in those moments transformed by the renewing of our minds. Let us recognize and know one another, both in and beyond our differences, in the deep and mysterious way of God.

¹ Standing Together Press Conference, December 1, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzRRcMf7oSM>