

“The Church as a School of Love: Diversity of Religions”
2 Kings 5:1-19a

I recently watched an interview with Salman Rushdie about his new book *Knife: Meditations after an Attempted Murder*.” Rushdie wrote this book after he was attacked and stabbed almost to death two years ago in Chautauqua. The attacker was a young man who had believed in the teachings of the religious leaders in Iran that Rushdie’s 1988 book, *Satanic Verses*, was a mockery of Islam and that Rushdie deserved to die for his writing. Killing and hating in the name of God seem to be a common thread throughout our human history. When our needs for control, security, and esteem take over, they even infect our religious views. This makes religion a weapon of our egos where only one group, i.e., our group, can be right, and all other groups or religions are wrong. Our fear of people of other religions may also drive us to violence and the devaluation of the lives of others.

Yet, at the heart of all world religions is the golden rule as religious historian Karen Armstrong puts it: <https://youtu.be/bhHJ4DRZNZM>. (Text: For years I've been feeling frustrated, because as a religious historian, I've become acutely aware of the centrality of compassion in all the major world faiths. Every single one of them has evolved their own version of what's been called the Golden Rule. Sometimes it comes in a positive version -- "Always treat all others as you'd like to be treated yourself." And equally important is the negative version -- "Don't do to others what you would not like them to do to you." Look into your own heart, discover what it is that gives you pain and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else. And people have emphasized the importance of compassion, not just because it sounds good, but because it works. People have found that when they have implemented the Golden Rule as Confucius said, "all day and every day," not just a question of doing your good deed for the day and then returning to a life of greed and egotism, but to do it all day and every day, you dethrone yourself from the center of your world, put another there, and you transcend yourself. And it brings you into the presence of what's been called God, Nirvana, Rama, Tao. Something that goes beyond what we know in our ego-bound existence.)

Instead of seeing religion as an extension of our egos, the invitation is to see religion as a container that helps us to get to the heart and essence of life and love, of God! Our Bible story is an incredible example of how religion could lead us to see the divine in people of other religions through compassion.

Naaman, a great and powerful Syrian commander is told through his wife by a slave girl, who was captured during the last war between the Syrians and the Israelites, that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal him from his leprosy. These are the same people whom they conquered and humiliated. In that time and culture, such military victory did not only mean social and economic loss, but it also meant that the god of the conquering people was stronger than the god of those who lost. It was about the power

of the victor's religion and gods and not just their military might. So, we can only imagine how difficult it was for the commander of a powerful army with a strong god to seek healing from the god of the enemy, the people who were conquered and seemed to have an inferior god. That is why when the king of Israel received the letter from the king of Aram/Syria, he was terrified. He tore his clothes and worried because he thought this was a provocation to start another war. It seemed to him that the whole request was absurd, unheard of!

Let's listen to 2 Kings 5:1-19a

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵ And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.' ⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' ¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!^[1] ¹² Are not Abana^[a] and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.' ¹⁶ But he said, 'As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!' He urged him to accept, but he refused. ¹⁷ Then Naaman

said, 'If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. ¹⁸ But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.' ¹⁹ He said to him, 'Go in peace.'

A very dramatic element in this story is the fact that Elisha the prophet was willing to help Naaman. How many of us would be willing to do the same? If we had the commander of the army of our enemies at our door, would we be willing to offer him/her help? The prophet Elisha not only offers healing to Naaman, but he also refuses to take any payment for it. He does it out of the goodness of his heart. And at the end of their conversation, Naaman asked Elisha if it was okay to go back and worship the god of the Syrians. He admitted to Elisha that he believed that the God of Israel was the only true God, but he knew that he had religious obligations that he had to fulfill when he returned to his own country. This was another opportunity for the prophet Elisha to take revenge on the people of Syria. He could have said to him, that it was not acceptable to go back and worship in the Syrian people's religion, but Elisha did not do any of that. Instead, Elisha did the opposite. He told him to go in peace. Just like that! No attempts to brag, to convert, or to chastise. All that the prophet saw in Naaman was a man in need of healing and not just a commander and an enemy. Elisha was satisfied to see that the heart of Naaman was transformed.

I find this story to be extremely challenging and encouraging at a time when all of life seems to be divided into simple boxes of good and bad, righteous people and evildoers, right religion and wrong religion, and good guys and bad guys. Holding grudges and keeping score are the ways we are encouraged to behave to make sure that our rights are protected. Feeling superior to others seems to be the norm in many religious cultures. Thinking about the well-being of our enemies seems to be just out of the question. Even in the simple acts of daily life, we seem to judge others for the way they dress, behave, or look. And no matter how many times we read or hear the scriptures about loving our enemies, it seems impossible to accept others for who they are and to have compassion for the people we dislike, even when their well-being does not threaten ours and in fact, may even enhance it.

Think of how we have enacted this on a small or a large scale in our lives. People who are judged to be wrong or a threat to the health of the rest of society are often shunned and deprived of their human dignity because of our fear. Even in our personal lives, those whom we label as our enemies become worthless to us and we are unable to see any glimmer of God's image in them.

Our common bond with people of other religions is love and compassion. We may disagree about doctrine, rituals, and stories, but the essence of what religion is supposed to do for us is to help us become more loving, and thus more connected to God, to others, to ourselves, and to all of creation. If religion is not teaching us to grow in the golden rule, then it has lost its purpose. Religion is the container that helps us to

enter a sacred experience where all the fears and worries of life are healed and transformed through love. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: “The only clear line I draw these days is this: when my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor... Jesus never commanded me to love my religion.”

We will end with a reading of 1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Song: The Spirit in Me Greets the Spirit in You, by Jim and Jean Strathdee

<https://youtu.be/pcElpPbxcfk>. Amen.