

“True Believers”
May 5, 2019

Matthew 25-31-46

One of the best preachers I’ve ever heard in person actually left full-time ministry and full time preaching about twenty years ago. Feeling burned out in her role as an Episcopal priest, Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor left the parish she served around the year 2000 to take a job as a Religion professor at Piedmont College...a small, private college located in Demorest, Georgia near her home.

Barbara Brown Taylor is not only an outstanding preacher, but also a profoundly articulate and inspiring author, which probably accounts for why I have eleven of her books sitting on the bookcase in my office. It’s also the reason why I ordered her new book, shortly after I learned it was being published early in 2019.

The title of Barbara Brown Taylor’s newest book, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, is a bit of a departure from her prior books. Whereas many of Taylor’s books draw largely on themes and sermons and illustrations related to Christian theology, *Holy Envy* was born out of Taylor’s Introduction to World Religions classes, which she taught for a number of years at Piedmont College.

It was only when I started reading *Holy Envy* that I realized how timely her book was. Not because Barbara Brown Taylor attempts to solve global problems in one book. In fact, the opposite is true. Taylor admits early on that the perspective of her book is primarily local and anecdotal, emerging out of Taylor’s personal experience as a college professor and occasional preacher.

Rather, Barbara Brown Taylor’s book is timely because it’s set against the backdrop of what’s going on in today’s 2019 world. A world which has seen a dramatic rise not just in white nationalism, but more specifically, a rise in white Christian nationalism. A world that has been shaken in recent months and weeks by horrific violence carried out in the name of religion against faithful, religious people. A world where our collective fear feels as though it’s on the increase and it’s harder and harder to figure out whether any ground is still considered holy ground.

Six months to the day after eleven Jews were gunned down in the middle of Shabbat services at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, another gunman entered into a synagogue on April 27th, the final day of Passover. On one of the holiest days in the entire Jewish calendar, that gunman killed one woman and injured three others at Congregation Chabad in Poway, California.

Those two shootings in US synagogues bookended a six month period of grim and horrific religious violence in our world. Fifty Muslim brothers and sisters were killed by an Australian white supremacist in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15th. And nearly three

hundred people were killed in bombings in Sri Lanka two Sundays ago, many of them right in the middle of Easter worship.

Meanwhile you and I gather here for worship at Wapping Community Church, United Church of Christ, on May 5, 2019. Today is officially known as the Third Sunday of Easter or the Second Sunday in Eastertide. This is the liturgical season where you and I as followers of Jesus Christ are supposed to be celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ and sharing the Good News of Easter with the world outside the walls of this church building.

Unfortunately, it's a challenge to celebrate the resurrection when every time we turn around we hear a new story of someone's warped religious views spewing out in the form of unthinkable hatred and violence. Our world is rife with religious extremists of all kinds. Individuals and groups who are convinced they are the true believers. Not so long ago, those extremists were relegated to the shadowy recesses of society and the internet. Now they are clearly emboldened. United and motivated by the dangerous belief that they are right, and everyone who believes something different is automatically wrong...

I don't know about all of you, but in the midst of all this violence and loss of life, I'm getting tired of the phrase "religious tolerance." Tolerating someone who practices a different faith from our own, in my mind at least, should be the lowest common denominator. I wonder why we aren't aspiring to something considerably higher. Like how about "religious understanding?" When we try to understand another religion by asking adherents of that religion and not paying attention to the enemies of that religion.

Or maybe "religious appreciation?" When we try and compare equal examples of religious faithfulness rather than comparing the best examples of our own religion to the worst examples of someone else's.

Or maybe we should try and practice more of what Barbara Brown Taylor expresses in the title of her book: "Holy Envy." When people of one faith tradition respect and admire and value what someone of another faith believes or practices because it encourages them to become more faithful to their own religion. For example, I respect, admire and value the way in which Muslims regularly pray five times a day. Does it make me want to convert to Islam? No it does not. Yet the Muslim example of daily, faithful prayer makes me want to be more disciplined and regular in my prayer life. Which leads me to become a more faithful Christian...

There are a number of compelling chapters in Barbara Brown Taylor's, *Holy Envy*. One of the most compelling chapters in the book is the last full chapter, aptly titled "The Final Exam." And in that chapter, Taylor interprets a very familiar passage in the New Testament through her eyes, both as a gifted Christian preacher and as a longtime professor of World Religions.

The New Testament passage I'm referring to is the one from the Gospel of Mathew Lisa read a few minutes ago. If you have heard this Scripture passage before, and you have a general idea what Jesus was trying to say, then you might be able to recall all the undercover disguises Jesus uses to make his point. In today's Scripture lesson, Jesus is the hungry person in need of

food. He is the thirsty person in need of something to drink. He is the naked person, the sick person, the imprisoned person.

And how many of you remember that Jesus also identifies himself in that list as the stranger who needs welcoming? One of the ways Jesus shows up in our midst is as a stranger in need of welcome. In fact, there are more than a few examples in the New Testament of strangers...people from another religion...who help us understand our own faith better. The three wise men who traveled from afar to Bethlehem bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh to give to the baby Jesus. The unlikely Good Samaritan who stopped to help the man beaten by the side of the road. The Roman centurion who recognized Jesus as the Son of God hanging on the cross when all the disciples had long since abandoned Jesus.

In today's passage, it's important to bear in mind that neither the sheep nor the goats knew who they were. The sheep in Matthew's Gospel were every bit as surprised to learn they were doing something right as the goats were when they learned they were doing something wrong. Not a single sheep or a single goat recognized the Son of Man in their midst. His clever disguises actually fooled all of them.

The one thing that set the sheep apart from the goats was the way they treated other people. The sheep treated the stranger with kindness and respect. Even if the stranger was ungrateful. Even if the stranger was odd. Even if the stranger was scary. Meanwhile, the goats did not.

Kindness and respect and welcoming the stranger make all the difference. Meaning in the end it comes down to how you and I live more than what you and I believe. If my religion tries to drive a wedge between my neighbor and me, it's incumbent upon me to choose my neighbor. Jesus never told me to love my religion. But he did tell me to love my neighbor.

Instead of rising up in hatred and lashing out in violence against brothers and sisters from different faiths, I'd rather ally with Barbara Brown Taylor and like-minded people to find God in the faith of others. Knowing that if you and I can find God in friend and stranger alike...when you and I can find God in friend and stranger alike...we will become better Christians.

The same applies on a larger scale. If and when people in our world can find God in the faith of others, we will tame our ugliest human impulses. And we will encourage all God's people to become the best version of who they are. Amen.