

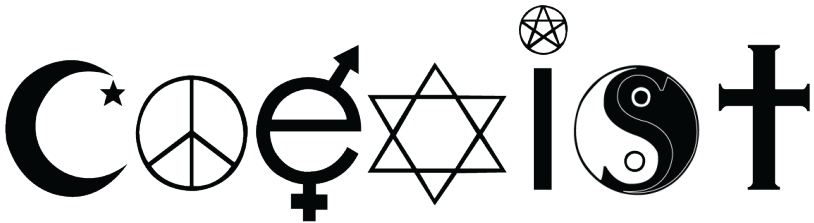
# Menifee United Church of Christ

Established in 1962 by God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

## SERMON FOR

September 20, 2015

*“Religion Is Not A Completion”*



Reverend Bill Freeman: Senior Minister

Eckart Seeber: Music Minister

Marie Paulus-Nyquist: Children's Minister

Eleanor Sorenson: Lay Reader

## ***Menifee United Church of Christ***

*Sunday Service and Sunday School 10 AM*

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***Live Life Fully Alive!***

September 20, 2015  
“Religion Is Not A Completion”  
Rev. Bill Freeman

**James 3:13-18**

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*

**Mark 7:31-37**

*Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’*

*Religion Is Not A Competition*

A man named Sam was walking across a bridge when he saw another man named Dave about to jump off. Sam said “Don't do it!” Dave said, “Why not?” Sam said, “There's so much to live for!” Dave said, “Like what?” Sam said, “Well, are you religious?” Dave said, “Yes.” Sam said, “Me too! Are you Christian?” Dave said, “Yes.” Sam said, “Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?” Dave said, “Protestant.” Sam said, “Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?” Dave said, “Baptist.” Sam said, “Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist

Church of the Lord?” Dave said, “Baptist Church of God.” Sam said, “Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?” Dave said, “Reformed Baptist Church of God.” Sam said, “Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?” Dave said, ”Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!” Sam said, “Die, heretic!” and pushed Dave off the bridge. (Sorry, that’s not a very nice story.)

Some see Christianity as a competition between denominations. They see it as a competition between the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church, or between the Lutheran Church and the Baptist Church, or between the Episcopal Church and the Catholic Church. But is it a competition? Aren’t all Christian denominations pointing to the same God, the same Jesus, the same Holy Spirit?

Some see religion as a competition between faith traditions. They see it as a competition between Christianity and Judaism, or between Buddhism and Hinduism, or between Islam and Sikhism. But is it a competition? Aren’t all faith traditions pointing to the same ultimate reality, whether we call that ultimate reality God or Allah or Ultimate Reality?

How about you? Do you see Christianity as a competition between denominations? Do you see religion as a competition between faith traditions? This is going to sound like I’m bragging on our denomination, but I don’t mean to. It’s just that this is a United Church of Christ church, so you’re free to answer those questions however you think is best. And I’m a United Church of Christ minister, so I’m free to ask those questions. And I ask those questions because of a story about Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus asked his disciples, when they came to Capernaum, “What were you arguing about on the way?” They must’ve been embarrassed, because they didn’t answer him, since they were arguing about which one of them would be greatest (elsewhere it says, in heaven). But, of course, Jesus knew what they were arguing about. So he sat down, called the twelve, and said,

“Whoever wants to be first must be last and serve (or help) everyone.” Then he took a child in his arms (and children back then didn’t have much status in society; back then they were like women, the poor, immigrants, and minorities). Jesus essentially said to his disciples: Whoever welcomes and helps one like this - a child, a woman, a poor person, an immigrant, a minority - welcomes me, and thus, welcomes God.

So Jesus is saying to all the disciples: Hey, Peter and John, Matthew and James, Philip and Andrew, and all the rest of you, you want to be greater than everyone? Then help everyone. And treat everyone equally; everyone: children and adults, men and women, rich and poor, immigrants and native-born, minorities and the majority.

It sounds like Jesus is saying to all the Christian denominations: Hey, UCCers and Methodists, Lutherans and Baptists, Episcopalians and Catholics, and all the rest of you, you want to be greater than everyone? Then help everyone. And treat everyone equally; everyone: children and adults, men and women, rich and poor, immigrants and native-born, minorities and the majority.

And it also sounds like Jesus is saying to all the faith traditions: Hey, Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and all the rest of you, you want to be greater than everyone? Then help everyone. And treat everyone equally; everyone: children and adults, men and women, rich and poor, immigrants and native-born, minorities and the majority. Jesus must’ve learned this kind of sentiment growing up as a boy. And he apparently wasn’t alone.

James backs up what his brother Jesus says about the need to help everyone. James writes, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” This is a variation of James’ earlier writing: Faith without works is dead.

So James seems to be saying, if a Christian denomination wants to be the greatest among the other Christian denominations: Feed the most hungry people, clothe the most naked people, house the

most homeless people, and help the most needy people. But that's not the kind of competition Christian denominations are used to. The competition between Christian denominations usually takes the form of: My mega-church is bigger than your mega-church, or my mega-church takes in more money than your mega-church, or my mega-church jet is bigger than your mega-church jet. (I hope I'm speaking from a position of truth, and I'm not experiencing mega-church jet envy.)

And James seems to be saying, if a faith tradition wants to be the greatest among the other faith traditions: Feed the most hungry people, clothe the most naked people, house the most homeless people, and help the most needy people. But that's not the kind of competition faith traditions are used to. The competition between faith traditions often turns violent. In the past, it took the form of the Crusades, Christians killing Muslims. Today, it takes the form of Isis, Muslims killing other Muslims, or Muslims killing Christians or persecuting them.

By the way, when some Christians walk into a store in December in America to do some shopping, and they're greeted by the words "Happy Holidays" rather than the words "Merry Christmas," I realize they might feel like they're being "persecuted," but I have to believe that Christians in the Middle East would say: We'd much rather have that kind of "persecution." It's too bad Christians today can't get along together the way Christians a couple thousand years ago did.

Remember how the disciples were arguing, were in competition with each other, about who would be the greatest (in heaven)? Well, according to the Book of Acts, that competition must've evaporated. Acts says, "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." The disciples and those other early Christians were now about cooperation, not competition. They had created what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would eventually call the "Beloved Community." The United Church of Christ is all about creating the "Beloved Community."

I believe the UCC motto - "That they may all be one" - means:

May all Christian denominations be one. But I don't believe the UCC is saying give up our UCC denomination. After all, I'm a United Church of Christ preacher, because I speak about progressive issues. But I'm not a Fundamentalist preacher, although Fundamentalists are fine people, I just don't speak that much, if ever, about sin. And I'm not a Pentecostal preacher, although Pentecostals are fine people, I just don't speak that much, if ever, in tongues. (Although I have been known to babble every now and then. And I have been heard to utter: Shama Lama Ding-Dong, but that's a song, not speaking in tongues.)

I also believe the UCC motto - "That they may all be one" - means: May all faith traditions be one. But I don't believe the UCC is saying give up our Christianity. After all, I'm a Christian preacher, so I usually speak about Jesus. I'm not a Muslim Imam, so I don't speak much about Muhammad. And I'm not a Buddhist Monk, so I don't speak much about the Buddha. (But if I come across some insight from Muhammad, or the Buddha, or anyone else, I wouldn't hesitate to speak about it in a sermon. And I can do that, because I'm a UCC minister.)

And even if we don't all become one Christian denomination or one faith tradition, I believe we can all at least be about cooperation, not competition. And maybe that's what the UCC motto means. Like when our church joined the Methodists and the Lutherans for Good Friday Services this year. And when our church hosted my Interfaith Installation Service this year, where a Rabbi and an Imam read passages from their sacred scripture. To me, those events - our joint Good Friday Services and my Interfaith Installation Service - felt like we had achieved, at least temporarily, the Beloved Community.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, a Swiss theologian and Catholic priest, proclaimed, "Even if a unity of faith is not possible, a unity of love is." I like that. A unity of love. All Christian denominations and all faith traditions could use a unity of love.

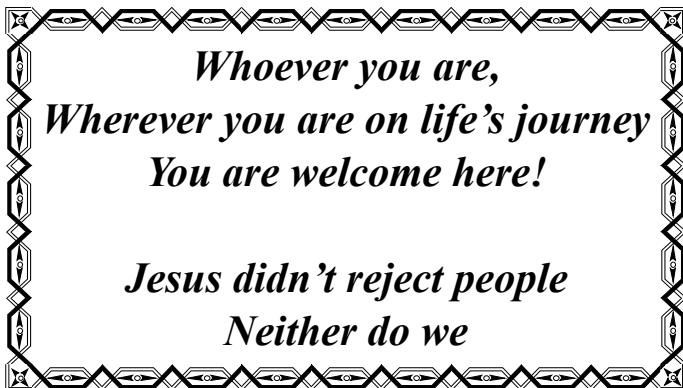
Clergy who use the Bible or the Quran or the Bhagavad Gita or any other sacred scripture to encourage competition, rather than cooperation, just don't understand the job of clergy. The job of

clergy is to create Dr. King's "Beloved Community," maybe not where we pool all our possessions, but where we all are of "one heart and soul."

Jesus was saying a couple thousand years ago to all of his disciples: This is not a competition between any of you. And I believe Jesus would say today to all Christian denominations: Christianity is not a competition between any of you. And I also believe Jesus would say today to all faith traditions: Religion is not a competition between any of you. I believe what Jesus would say to all of us today is: Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, servant of all, and help all; and whoever welcomes a child or an adult or a poor person or an immigrant or a minority, welcomes me, and, thus, welcomes God. So, let us work in cooperation whenever we can - UCCers and Methodists, and all Christian denominations; Jews and Muslims, and all faith traditions - and help everyone to one day live in the Beloved Community.

Let us pray...

*God of Love,  
Help us to be about cooperation, not competition.  
Help us to be a servant of all and a help to all.  
And help us all to live in a unity of love.  
Now and forevermore.  
By the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.*



## THE GOLDEN RULE

*What is hateful to you  
do not do to others.*  
Judaism

*Do to others what you would  
have them do to you.*  
Christianity

*None of you believes until he wishes for his  
brother what he wishes for himself.*  
Islam

*Do not do to others  
what would cause pain if done to you.*  
Hinduism

*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself  
would find hurtful.*  
Buddism

*Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain,  
and your neighbor's loss as your loss.*  
Taoism

*Do not do to others  
what you do not want them to do to you.*  
Confucianism

*Treat other people  
as you'd want to be treated in their situation.*  
Humanism