

Tree of Life Conference 2012

A STATE WORTHY OF OUR CONCERN: THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE TREE OF LIFE EDUCATIONAL FUND

Last year marked the 10th anniversary of this church's engagement on this issue, a journey that began shortly after the tragedy of 9/11

After that fateful Tuesday morning one of our church's governing boards met, and we asked ourselves how we should respond, and one of things we resolved was that we needed to redouble our efforts to strengthen our interfaith community, to be not only in ecumenical relationship with other Christian traditions and denominations, but also we felt we needed to deepen our relationship with those of other faith identities. Little did we know then that one really cannot have an authentic – an **authentic** conversation -- with our Jewish, Muslim and Christian neighbors without ultimately coming to the tough and oftentimes painful issue of Israel and Palestine. While certainly there are lots of interfaith conversations and opportunities to learn more about each other, I submit that those conversations are really quite superficial unless we “open the door to Elijah” to hear what the prophetic voice of conscience has to say about the world we live in today, that without addressing this tough issue, our interfaith conversations can resemble what Simon and Garfunkel called “The Dangling Conversation” or what Martin Heidegger called, “Idle Talk” or as the poet, T.S. Eliot said, “Will we after tea and cakes and ices have the courage to push the moment to its crisis.”

Well, as today's conference is an illustration, those interfaith conversations here in Southeastern Connecticut have taken us figuratively and quite literally right into the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We've now had 10 annual “Tree of Life Journeys” to Israel and the occupied territories in which over 250 have participated. In 2003, my friend, Jerry Fischer – the Executive Director of The Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut – and I led an interfaith journey, and one of the things I learned on that journey and every subsequent journey is that there are extraordinary voices of conscience – Jewish, Muslim and Christian – over there who were simply not being heard over here, that there were in fact many Israelis for whom Aipac and other members of Israel's lobby did not speak. Thus began the educational mission of Tree of Life, to try to do all we could through our Tree of Life conferences to allow those other voices to be heard, to amplify those voices of consciences, and we've been very honored to hear from a few more of those prophetic voices today.

These annual interfaith conferences have been held not only here in Old Lyme, but also NYC, Cape Cod, Philadelphia, West Hartford, Harvard University, Springfield, Massachusetts, Koinonia Farm in Georgia and this year we will visit Yale Divinity School as well.

Please allow me to say that our engagement on this issue, our interfaith conversations on this issue, haven't always been easy. I have seen how our Jewish American friends and our Jewish Israeli friends – oftentimes behind their backs – have been dismissed and

demonized by such unspeakable epithets as “self-hating Jews”.

Likewise, it hasn't always been easy or pleasant for this church or this Christian minister to be engaged on this issue. The forces of intimidation are plentiful, and for me there is nothing, nothing more painful than being on the receiving end of the charge of “anti-Semitism.” Knowing full well the role that so called “Christian” theology played in the anti-Semitism that ultimately led to the horrendous atrocity of the Holocaust, I find that term to be incredibly painful when it is applied to me or to the efforts of this church. I confess it would be so easy to be silent on this issue. I am deeply concerned by the way in which that term is used to silence anyone who dares to criticize the Israeli occupation. That term – anti-Semitism – is far, far too important to be bandied about by those who would carelessly use it for such purposes.

I think we're all deeply concerned about the increase in anti-Semitism, and we need to be ever so careful to make it understood that our Tree of Life efforts have nothing to do with such a ghastly form of prejudice. That being said, I also need to say that criticism of Israel, criticism of our own country's one sided, lopsided support of the State of Israel is not tantamount to anti-Semitism, and I will not be silenced by such accusations.

Sometime ago this innuendo, the suggestion of anti-Semitism was made by one of our local newspaper journalists who called me up, clearly unhappy with one of our programs. Having lived for a while on a kibbutz, he felt fiercely loyal to the State of Israel, and so quite belligerently he asked whether or not I believed that the State of Israel had a “right to exist.” Now, you understand, how I answered that question, would be the litmus test on whether or not I had any legitimacy.

Now, if I had been Governor Romney or President Obama, I would have said or done anything to show my undying loyalty to the State of Israel with promises of our country's unqualified support. But alas, I'm not that much of a politician.

So, here is what I said. I said that I believe that people have a right to exist, not states. I don't believe that any state has an inherent, God-given right to exist, for I believe in the wisdom in the words of Thomas Jefferson in our Declaration of Independence – “When in the course of human events...”; I believe that States have a right to exist only to the extent to which they honor the social contract of its citizens, and any State should be measured by its treatment of its minorities and whether or not it honors the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And by that standard there are many nations, including our own, that should be called to account.

I also happen to believe in another Jeffersonian principle – that being the “Separation of Church and State.” And so also I believe in the Separation of Synagogue and State and the Separation of Mosque and State.

Be that as it may, the State of Israel does exist, and like any other nation in our community of nations, it should be respected for its sovereignty, but I said to the journalist, there's another problem with regard to Israel.

Frequently, the Israel lobby will criticize its critics, demanding that they “recognize that the State of Israel has a right to exist.” While I believe Israel has that right – within the qualifications I mentioned earlier -- the problem is too many of these staunch defenders of Israel cannot or will not tell me **where** Israel exists, for it hasn’t declared its borders, appearing to be more like an amoeba than a stable state, with every new settlement, colony in the West Bank confusing Israel’s geographical identity. So now, when I’m asked whether Israel has a right to exist, I respond by saying, “You tell me where it is and what its boundaries are, and then I’ll answer your question.”

You know, in such conferences as this, inevitably we come around to the question of whether we believe in a 2 state or 1 state solution. I confess I don’t know what the right answer is to that question, and further, I think this is something for Israelis and Palestinians to resolve. But also, I have to say, having seen the damage that nationalism has done to the human family, ultimately, the resolution is to be found not in one state or two state or 5 state configurations, but rather in a very different kind of state – one that is very much worthy of our concern. – that being a State of Mind – a State of Mind in which all the different races and classes and religions and nationalities stop their incessant division of the world between “us and them.” Thus the theme for this conference, “Education: How Can We Embrace Our Common Humanity.” How can we raise up a new generation who will be free of the shackles of sectarianism? How can we overcome the fear of the “the other” that so divides us? How can we reach and teach that exalted State of mind? That’s the *state* worthy of our concern?

When I was in college, one the things that led me to want to pursue a theological education was the philosophy of a Jewish man by the name of Martin Buber. This great spiritual teacher said that there are two ways to comport yourself to the world – “I and It” and “I and Thou.” It doesn’t take too much observation to see the damage that the “I and It” relationship can do not only to our human relationships but also in our relationship with the earth itself. “The Land Mourns”, as the prophet Hosea said, and every day we see outward manifestations of that “I and It” State of Mind, perhaps even in the cataclysmic climactic changes we have seen most recently in Hurricane “Sandy.”

But thankfully, there’s another State of Mind, and thankfully there are Jews and Christians and Muslims and Buddhists and Native Americans and Hindus, believers and also I would say unbelievers or not-yet believers who have shown us that there is a different mode of being, one that is free of the nationalism and petty sectarianism of the past, one that rejoices in all the rich diversity of the human family, one that sees and celebrates the sanctity of all creation, one that Martin Buber would call “I and Thou”. That, as I see it, is a State worthy of our concern, for it is in that and that alone that ultimately we will find a resolution.

I like very much a poem written by Wendell Berry entitled, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.”

In that spirit, I have composed what might be called, “Our Tree of Life

Manifesto”, and as I offer these words, I would have you contemplate these photographs.

TREE OF LIFE MANIFESTO

Around the ancient walls of the city of Jerusalem, there are many different gates – Jaffa Gate, Damascus Gate, New Gate – to name just a few. But if you were standing in the Garden of Gethsemane, looking across the Kidron Valley, the Gate you would see is called, “The Golden Gate.” This gate is completely walled in, and there are at least some who believe that it will remain closed until the Messiah finally comes, so it’s also sometimes referred to as the Messiah’s gate.

I like very much how the Hopi Elders have said, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” We don’t have to wait for that golden gate to be opened up; the golden opportunity is now. The Messiah is a beautiful spirit present within each one of us – Jew, Christian, Muslim, believer and non-believer.

I know it may seem outrageous, but we are the answer to someone else’s prayer. We are the fulcrum on which this fragile world is balanced. We can model and teach by our example that “I and Thou” relationship and so bring hope and joy to the children of this world. We can be a bridge between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We can be a gate in a place that has known so many, too many walls. We will not sit on the sidelines and wring our hands in despair. We will be a voice for those who think that no one listens and no one cares. We will live and work for that day when nationalism no longer rears its ugly head. We will do all that we can to restore justice and decency and integrity to our human institutions. We will live and work and dream for that day when the streets of Jerusalem shall be filled with boys and girls, Jews and Christians and Muslims playing in the street, no longer divided, no longer afraid. That is the State of Mind worthy of our concern. We are an interfaith community, and we refuse to be enemies. We are the answer to someone else’s prayer. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for!

Thank you for listening.

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