

John 17: 1-3,9,11,17,21-23

Jesus... looked up to heaven and said, 'Father... you have given [me] authority... to give eternal life to all.... And this is eternal life, that they may know you....

I am asking on their behalf.... Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth....

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one....

Ephesians 4:14-16

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Church of the Common Ground

Epilogue from *Holy Envy* by Barbara Brown Taylor

In the middle of writing this book I decided to retire from teaching religion. During the months that followed, my feelings mimicked those of empty nesters suddenly faced with a quiet house and no young energy to govern. Students of all ages had brought me so much delight through the years—such real questions, such uncensored reactions, such spontaneous humor and natural affection—that there was no substitute for them in my life. I kept waiting to tire of teaching them, but it never happened. To the very last, they called forth my best efforts and repaid them by being thoroughly themselves. They forgave me my bad days as I forgave them theirs. On our good days, there was no better place to be than the classroom, where we changed each other in ways that still matter.

At the same time, I was ready to let someone else teach the world's great religions. The longer I did it, the more dishonest I felt.

Fifteen weeks was not enough time to do justice to even one of them. The only way to get through five that fast was to desiccate them, reducing each to its skeletal outline with enough names and dates to anchor a ten-point quiz. In my effort to present the best of each tradition, I often sent students away with positive stereotypes that served them no better than negative ones. Every time we went on a field trip to a place of worship or devotion, I wondered how wise it was to split religion off from the rest of life. Why didn't we go to a girls' basketball game at a Muslim high school instead, or invite an entire Hindu family to class? Even the textbook treated religions like sealed compartments that could be kept separate from one another, each with its own glossary at the end.

Something I learned in college came back to me with force. There is no such thing as religion. There are only religious people, who embody the scripts of their faiths as differently as dancers embody the steps of their dances. Until someone grabs a partner and heads to the dance floor, the tango is no more than a list of steps on the wall. The same is true of faith. We have inherited a sacred pattern, a series of artful steps meant to lead us closer to God and each other, but until someone finds a partner and gives it a try, it is an idea and not a dance.

What this means is that is it not possible for a generic group of Christians to meet with a generic group of Buddhists to discuss a generic issue on which they differ.¹ If you have met one Buddhist, you have met exactly one—and the same is true of the followers of other faiths as well. Although we may all be tuned to the singular teachings of our distinct religions, our religious experience is not singular but plural. This is as true within our religions as it is between them.

.... My holy envy has taken an interesting turn in recent months, as the practice ... has led me to explore different churches in my own faith. My best friend, Martha, has joined me in these voyages, which have taken us from the huge Passion City megachurch, which meets in an old Home Depot, to Our Lady of Lourdes, the mother church of African-American Catholics in Atlanta. One Sunday we visited a tiny storefront church in a strip mall with people from many nations inside, tended by an Episcopal priest from South Asia. Another Sunday we sat

quietly with the Quakers. Still on our list are St. Elias Antiochian Orthodox Church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the Buckhead Church, where members watch a hologram of their pastor preaching from one of the six other churches in his network.

I have found something to envy every place I have been—the parking-lot hospitality at Passion City, the graceful dancers who waved banners of red silk over our heads at Our Lady of Lourdes, the refugee ministry at the storefront church, the blissful stillness of the Quakers. But none has compared to my first experience of the Church of the Common Ground, which meets at a public park in the heart of downtown Atlanta. “We’re like any other church,” their website reads. “We just don’t have a building.” I envy that.

The crowd was bigger than usual on the day I visited, since the bishop was coming to help welcome the new vicar, an Episcopal priest named Monica. I recognized a few people from my old congregation down the street, a classically beautiful and well-endowed parish named All Saints. There were also a lot of people who looked as if they had spent the night on the street. When I asked a Native American man with a gray ponytail how long he had been a member of Common Ground, he said, “Years.” Trying to make conversation, I told him I had started at All Saints down the street. “Well,” he said, in an obvious effort to be kind, “we all have to start somewhere.”

A small wooden table covered with a white cloth had been set up for Communion in the middle of the park. Behind us, a wall of water ran down the side of a public fountain. Blackbirds flew between the trees overhead. When the bishop had arrived and most of the regular members were accounted for, the man with the gray ponytail held up a brass gong and banged it lightly, summoning us all to gather around the table. I found my place at the edge of the inside and surveyed the array of faces around the circle: the father holding his premature baby, the teenager with the uneven skull, the couple in their seventies whom I knew from All Saints, and the man with the rusty beard who had lost all his front teeth, along with Monica’s husband, Simon, holding the hand of their youngest child. There must have been close to a hundred people in all, representing a divine swath of the human condition.

We had just gotten started when a loud voice from the back rose above all of the others. “Liars!” a woman’s voice shrieked. “This is all lies, lies, lies!” As she pushed her way through the crowd toward the middle, it became apparent—at least to me—that she was in her right mind. She was African American, about five foot four. She wore nice sweatpants, a navy hoodie over a ball cap, and reflective aviator sunglasses. With her trendy pink backpack, she could have been a student at Georgia State University across the street. She did not look or sound crazy. She just looked and sounded really mad.

“Wake up, people!” she screamed. “This god you’re praying to, what does he look like? What does he look like?” She spat each word out as though it had a period at the end. “They are killing us all day long, people. You know they are, and here you are praying to their God! What do you think that’s going to change? It’s all lies, lies, lies!” As she ran this tirade a couple more times at high volume, people in the congregation started talking back to her.

“You need to step back now,” a man said. “You’re in my space.”

“Take your rant somewhere else,” someone else said. “This is a peaceful place.”

“There’s always one,” another person said.

The bishop had tried to begin his sermon once, but the woman had drowned him out. Since he is the first African-American bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, her smack talk about God fell short of its mark. To his credit, the bishop just folded his hands over his vestments and stood in front of the Communion table waiting for her to wind down. A minute later, a man in a red and blue jacket and a bicycle helmet rode up to the back of the crowd on a Segway. When he started walking toward the woman, she quieted down. When he reached her, she turned and followed him out of the crowd. His jacket had “Ambassador” written in big block letters on the back. I had not been this awake in church in years.

“One of the great things about Church of the Common Ground is that there are no walls,” the bishop said when he resumed his sermon. “This is where the church meets the world.” Everyone around me nodded and hummed their approval when he said that. Then they

listened to him so quietly that I could hear the sound of the water running down the wall of the fountain behind me. The angry woman was still standing at the back of the crowd talking to the ambassador. The bishop did not put her on the spot by looking at her, but he included her when he said, “There is nothing to prevent us from hearing the real concerns other people have about us, some of the legitimate questions they have about who we are and what we do. We need to listen to them too, so it is good that we are here, with no walls to keep us in or shut them out. What better way to remember that we really are one?”

There it was again—the “one” word, the expressed faith in Christian unity—only this time it sounded different to me.

“As different as we are,” the bishop said, “whatever concerns we bring, we are all one.”

Coming from him, in that place, with those people, I hoped it was true. I wanted it to be true. He said more after that, but pretty soon it was as if his words were coming out of the mouths of the people all around me. I could not separate what he was saying from the sea of human beings who proved the truth of it—not just the ones in the Christian circle, but also the ones walking by on Peachtree Street still dozy from brunch, the ones still rolled up in sleeping bags over by the fountain, and the ones I could see looking down on us from some office windows higher up. Were they janitors or executives? There was no way to tell. All I could tell, looking up, was that there was no ceiling on this church either. The sky just went on and on.

After we had all joined hands and listened to each other’s prayers, the new vicar invited us to come closer to the Communion table. I left my spot at the back and got as close to the table as I could. This was partly because I wanted to be one of the first to sip from the common cup—I’m just saying—but it was also because this was the only church in a long time that had drawn me to the center. I looked around to make sure I was not blocking anyone else’s view. The man with the rusty beard and no front teeth was on my left. A woman with platinum hair and a sparkly cap with “The Ministry Team” written across it was on my right. When the vicar finally held out the bread to me, it was as

sweet as honey in my mouth. So was the grape juice. Then I must have sailed to the island of paradise, because I do not remember much after that. There was nothing left to envy. I was exactly where I wanted to be.

At the end, after the vicar gave the final blessing, I saw the angry woman standing under a tree at the back of the crowd with a pleasant-looking man from the community. She had kept her back turned to us the whole time. She never showed us her face again, but she never left either. Did that put her at the outer edge of the inside or the inner edge of the outside? Wherever she was, she was still there, nodding at something the man was saying, so that her pink backpack bobbed up and down.

Just before I left to go back to my car, a fresh wind blew up out of nowhere and tossed the leaves of the trees around, sending the blackbirds scattering with loud cries. Then they settled down on new branches, watching as the church below them drifted back into the world again, all of us blinking in the sunlight of a brand-new day.

– *Barbara Brown Taylor, Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of others, HarperCollins, pp. 215-224*