

## Love in Truth and Action: Considering the Bahá'í Faith

### 1 John 3:11-24

Yesterday, I was proud to be a part of the group that pilgrimaged into Wilmette to visit the Bahá'í Temple. There are 8 temples around the world, with at least one on every continent except Antarctica. The beautiful structure with its white cement filled with quartz glistens in the sunlight, and the series of 9 stars, 9 archways, 9 gardens, and dome stretching 138 feet into the air is simply breathtaking. My 7 year old twins weren't sure they wanted to go wherever I said we were going, until they saw the Temple. As we approached driving south on Sheridan Road, I said hey look, that's where we're going...and with wide eyes and open mouths, they exclaimed, "We get to go inside there!?"

It's apropos to conclude our diversity of faith series with the Bahá'í tradition, since attempts to envelop each tradition into its own. The Bahá'í faith began with the Báb, who was a prophet in Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He professed to have a divine mission in 1844. He taught and wrote, and gained both followers and enemies. He had to leave his home and was imprisoned and later martyred in 1850. One of his students, however, was the Bahá'u'lláh, who in 1863 declared he was the final messenger spoken about by the Báb.

The Bahá'í tradition teaches that all religions come from one God, and that God had sent Divine Messengers including Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Muhammad. These messengers helped to bring civilization forward to prepare for the last of God's messengers, Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh would teach and interpret scriptures so that all faith communities would be united in the pursuit of peace, justice, love, and compassion.

The Core Principles of the Bahá'í faith are the Oneness of humanity and dignity of every human being, freedom from prejudice, equality of women and men, spiritual solution to economic problems, commitment to education and the search for truth, harmony of faith, science, and reason, and the highest moral standards. Bahá'ís have eight temples around the world, with extravagant gardens and grounds. Each one is built with its own unique design, gardens encircling a nine-sided structure covered by a single, majestic dome, symbolizing the unity of all people and religions under God.

There are 5 million Bahá'ís throughout the world, organized by an elected councils of directors at a local, national, and global level. There are no Bahá'í clergy – each person reads and directs their own path. There are no sacraments or set times of prayer. Adherents are supposed to read their scriptures and apply them to their life daily. Work and service are emphasized as being methods of prayer. There are monthly gatherings organized at a local level called "feasts"

which have time for readings, prayer, announcements, and fellowship. When the time comes to build a new Temple, the Bahá'í community covers the cost, not accepting contributions from anyone who is not Bahá'í, as the Temple itself is considered a gift to the world, for all peoples. During prayers and devotional time at the Temple, there are readings presented from the Qu'ran, the Torah, the Gita, the Gospels, and the Bahá'í Writings.

The Bahá'í faith is a fairly young religion, introduced formally in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, one year after the Báhá'u'lláh passed away. The location for the Wilmette Temple was selected and purchased, and the son of Báhá'u'lláh was present for laying the cornerstone. They were intentional to include women in the process of design, funding, and building.

I appreciate the beauty of the Bahá'í tradition, especially in celebrating all religious perspectives. The Bahá'í faith amplifies the common themes in the various religious traditions, including the service to humanity, compassion for the most vulnerable, and each person choosing their own valid path to God. The Bahá'í writings are vast, but emphasize kindness and unity of all mankind. I say mankind because the language has not been updated for gender inclusion. The Bahá'í tradition, for all of its emphasis on the equality of men and women and the unity of all people, it has not had a history of supporting those who identify as gay or lesbian.

I enjoy considering each religion like a jewel, and to be able to pick each one up, consider its history, the practices each one encourages, the people and the hearts that comprise each is valuable. There is much to admire, and many ways that the teachings in other faith traditions align with my own. However, I don't believe that the Báhá'u'lláh was the last Divine Messenger. I think God continues to inspire and teach us through the voices of many people around the world, and if we can pause our own preconceived notions and assumptions and biases long enough to listen, we might find God is speaking in many different languages. I can read other religious texts and find plenty to agree upon, but at the end of the day, the scriptures I read as my guide as those contained in the Bible.

I am aware of the ways all religions have been coopted for harm, including Christianity. I hope that our cursory learning about the variety of traditions will insure that we don't reduce entire religious traditions to sound bites. I hope that our appetite to understand others' perspectives has been stoked. The author of 1 John, who may or may not be the same author as the Gospel of John, is attempting to bring unity within the body of believers. There is some discord and division over doctrine, and the guidance on how Christians are to conduct themselves lands on love – in truth and action.

For Love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. We should not hate our brother or sister. We should not see a person in need and look away. Jesus gave up his life in his faithfulness, and we should be willing to make sacrifices to care for one another. Love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

There's a tribe in the Eastern Part of Africa known as the Masai, whose traditional greeting is "Kasserian Ingera," or "How is it with the children?" for they understand that whether or not a person has children of their own, the best measure for how things are going is to inquire about the children. And the respondent knows this isn't a question about their offspring specifically, but about the state of the children. I think this is a good question to ask how we are doing within the religious community – to our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, Orthodox, and Bahá'í friends.

As a global faith community – how are we doing at working together to care for the children?

How are our children in Hong Kong doing as the protests have seemed to settle down, arising from a desire for democracy and not being extradited to China?

How are the children doing in Libya, where war rages on, fueled by religious difference?

How are the children doing who came to the United States of America searching for a future and were separated from their families, many abused, and then lost in the system – over 5,000 children and infants in the last two years?

How are the children doing in Baghdad and in Syria? How are the Kurdish children doing who fear the next invasion? How are our Palestinian children doing?

The Center for Disease Control cites rising rates of death by suicide for children age 10-14. How are our children?

There are children all around the world whose cries should break our hearts. We should - in Bahá'í fashion - skip past the religious differences to unite to work together in love, seeking peace and justice for all. I celebrate the ways we have overcome gender inequality and celebrate the female astronauts in space.

I celebrate that the protests in Chile have calmed down and President Piñera is working to find solutions to address the inequality experienced in such a beautiful country. I celebrate the

daughters of the Honorable Elijah Cummings who were taught that their blackness was beautiful and they could be anything they wanted to be. I celebrate the faithfulness of a congregation raising over \$11,000 and walking alongside children and seniors to help feed those who are hungry. I celebrate a congregation going to Wilmette and Glenview to meet and learn from our neighbors in other traditions.

These are examples of love in truth and action. Finally, I celebrate the courage and strength of teachers in Chicago, striking not for their own benefit, but because the children whom they serve deserve to have counselors and nurses and supports in place. The Chicago Public School system boasts some extraordinary students, children with minds eager to learn, and yet far too many of our children come to school needing a variety of needs met before learning can take place.

How are we motivated to truth and action by the love of our Creator who made us all to respond to the needs of the children? We march, we call, we write, we pray, we vote, we cross lines of difference to find commonality to love – in truth and action. Amen.