

*A sermon given on Tuesday, May 2, 2023,
at the annual clergy conference of the Diocese of Massachusetts,
held in Devens, Massachusetts,
by the Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop of Massachusetts*

The Universal, the Particular, and the Law of Love

I have been reading Ari Shapiro's new memoir *Best Strangers in the World*. It turns out that, in addition to his work as an NPR journalist and co-host, Ari Shapiro also performs frequently with the band Pink Martini. Shapiro relates how, in 2016, he several times performed a song with lyrics by a Jordanian Palestinian named Iyad Qasem. The song imagined the lament of a refugee for the homeland she might never see again. Shapiro writes:

At each of these concerts, before I began to sing, I would introduce Iyad to talk about the song's meaning. He would always end by saying, 'And it is an honor to have this piece performed by my Jewish friend, Ari Shapiro.' We would hug, Arab and Jew. Despite the cliché, or maybe because of it, the audience would stand and cheer.ⁱ

On one occasion the performance was held at a musical festival in the mountains outside Beirut, Lebanon.

When Iyad introduced [his song], the applause felt more tepid than usual. After the concert ended, the festival organizer crisply informed Iyad that while the music was excellent, it was 'unnecessary' of him to mention that I was Jewish. ... We resigned ourselves to the reality that musical diplomacy can only do so much.ⁱⁱ

Here we have the age-old collision between the Particular and the Universal. Shapiro and his friend were striving to be ambassadors of the *universal* message of peace. In so doing, they ran up against a posture of resentment born of the listeners' *particularity* – namely, recent, ongoing attacks by Israeli fighter jets and drones in the very same mountains of Lebanon where this concert was taking place.

Sometimes this interplay of Universal and Particular results in a collision, a posture of mutual exclusion, one position negating the other. Other times the two can present a kind of complementary dialogue, in which the two perspectives combine for a genuinely more complete whole.

At Old North Church, as part of the recent 300th anniversary celebration, we sang a couple of patriotic hymns. The singing of those hymns can present a tension familiar to you from your own contexts. At Old North that tension is perpetual on account of its status as an icon of American patriotism and democratic ideals. In fact, Old North engages in deep reflection on the intersection of ideals *and* failures, alignments *and* hypocrisies – in its own history and in the history of our nation.

At a consecration this past weekend in Ohio, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry spoke about his experience at Old North. He related having been deeply moved singing "America, America, God

shed his grace on thee... God mend thine every flaw," just after hearing the Old North research fellow Jaimie Crumley share a litany of the names of enslaved persons who had worshipped in the galleries of Old North.

Along with a patriotic hymn that day was offered the hymn "A Song of Peace." Many of you know this hymn, most often sung to the beautiful tune *Finlandia*.

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is,
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
O hear my song, thou God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*

[words: Lloyd Stone, b. 1934; tune 'Finlandia:' J.Sibelius, b. 1899]

Here the particular love I have for my own country is placed alongside the universal truth of such love by others for their own country; neither is denied, neither negates the other. As the prophets would say, the particular and the universal have kissed one another.

This Sunday's Gospel [Jon 14:1-14] is a text which often draws us into the conversation about Particular and Universal as relates to religions of the world. We know that every world faith has its own unique and *particular* proclamation. Whether it is the Koran delivered verbatim to the Prophet, or the gift of the Law delivered not verbatim to a Chosen People of Israel; the Buddha finding enlightenment under a tree, or the Son of God dying on a tree – each religion shares its own experienced revelation. Every world faith also contains a *universal* vision – some recognition of the dignity of all humankind, some striving towards a unified human family which reflects the transcendent unity of the Holy One.

Harvey Cox suggested that it is the mark of a great religion that these two dimensions, the universal and the particular, are not only held together, but that they strengthen and reinforce each other. ⁱⁱⁱ Cox argues that if we dwell only on the universal dimensions of a religion, ignoring its particularity, it becomes a watered-down, vapid collection of vague religious clichés. On the other hand, to dwell only on the unique particularities of our faith can lead us to lose the "large-hearted vision of the universal." ^{iv}

The Gospel lesson for Sunday points to this paradox. In John 14:2, Jesus tells us that "in my Father's house there are many dwelling places" – or in other translations, "many mansions." In verse 6 Jesus announces, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."

So, just four verses apart in the same passage, these two lines have provided opposing parties within Christianity with proof texts for their positions. Those eager to explore and respect the revelation of other faiths frequently cite John 14:2, with “many mansions” referring to the heavenly places in which Hindus and Buddhists will dwell – alongside Christians – in the hereafter. Those who insist that all others must accept Christ or be damned cite John 14:6 and declare that Jesus alone is the one true way to salvation.

Here is what I believe. The language of love is often expressed by the exclusive and superlative. I will tell you honestly and emphatically that for forty-three years I have been married to the smartest, funniest, and most beautiful person there is. I defy you to tell me otherwise. I expect that others will assert the same about their own beloveds – and I find no contradiction in these parallel assertions, because the language of love is expressed in exclusive and superlative terms. Of course it is, for we have no other way to communicate the depth of the experienced reality of this love. When I describe the person who has in so many ways completed my life, I will use the superlative language of love. And that in no way denies the reality of the generative partnerships of others.

When you and I declare, as we did at our ordinations, that we believe that “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain all things necessary to salvation,” we confess our experience of the wholeness of divine revelation in Christ. And that in no way denies the authenticity of revelation in other religious traditions.

When I sing “O beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,” I express a deep love of my country which is genuine. And that in no way prevents me from acknowledging that others share the same deep and superlative love for their own motherlands.

And then: if we understand all these places where we reach for exclusive and superlative language as expressions of love – which I believe they are – then we have to apply the *criteria of love* to our application of such language, and we have to return again and again to the necessary balance of Particular and Universal. We must not use the superlative language of love to describe a thing, and then fail to apply the Law of Love to it.

In inter-religious reflection and relations, we declare our conviction that divine revelation is fully manifest in Christ, and we embrace in that faith the paradox of One-in-Three; and we embrace in that faith the paradox of fully human/fully divine; and we embrace in that faith the paradox of dying that we might fully live; and therefore we are capable also of embracing the paradox of revelation in other religions. And because God is Love, we apply the criteria of love to our own ways of relating to other faiths. We reject anything that divides us in the name of religion.

In our national life, we claim those ideals which are genuinely aligned with our deepest Christian principles. We seek forms of patriotism that represent honesty-infused gratitude, not so-called patriotism which is nothing but jingoism. The God who is Love will not countenance the acts of bigotry, hatred, and violence being perpetuated under the banner of “America as a Christian nation.” We condemn Christian nationalism not only because it is in fact un-American, but because it is most certainly un-Christian.

It turns out, the profound error of particular revelation unchecked by universal truth has been with us for a long time! The zealots in today's reading from Acts [7:55-60] were certain of the particular truth of their faith, but failed to balance that conviction with the universal message of justice also contained in the Hebrew prophets, or the commandment proscribing murder. So they "covered their ears" (literally!) against hearing anything that questioned their religious perspective, and used that perspective to rationalize the murder of Stephen.

They covered their ears! Does that sound like anything you've witnessed lately? They covered their ears, and banned books they didn't like. They covered their ears, and passed laws that forbade sharing basic health information. They covered their ears, and prohibited even talking about the lives of people they don't understand. They covered their ears so they couldn't hear the sound of gunfire murdering their own children. They covered their ears so they wouldn't have to distinguish between lies and truth.

Unchecked by the Law of Love, conviction will deteriorate into fanaticism. Unbalanced by a compassionate vision of the universal, our particularities will condemn us to the sins of pride and fear.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." We need not attempt to delete this verse. We need rather to recognize it as the superlative Language of Love. And we need to place it alongside the rest of the story – saying in the same breath, as did Jesus himself, "In the Creator's house are many dwelling places." How beautiful is that!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

ⁱ Ari Shapiro, *Best Strangers in the World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023), p. 67

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), chapter 1.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 4.