

"Time Out, Time In"
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Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: John 14:1-7

I. Time Out

When I was growing up, I fought with my brother, Scott, far more than I fought with anyone at school. In fact, when it came to living peacefully with others, I was practically soulmates with Gandhi. But when it came to my brother, my conduct more closely resembled Atila the Hun!

When Scott and I would fight, our mother would put us into "time out" in separate rooms. Her approach generally stopped the fight, but not the fighting. Our "internecine warfare" didn't stop until I left for college. Quite soon afterwards we both realized we'd been idiots for fighting so much and became best friends. We remain so to this day. If only we could have lived our childhood knowing what we know now ...

When it came time to having my own children, I dreaded having boys precisely because I knew how hard it was on our parents to deal with our constant rivalry. I literally prayed – and prayed hard – for girls. My prayers were answered. When two girls came, born two years apart to the day, people would ask me if we were going to try for a boy next time. "Oh, no!" I'd say. "We're going to quit while we're ahead!"

Yet before the girls graduated from potty training, I found that girls can be every bit as vicious and brutal as boys. Their tactics may differ, but they can basically act like Atila the Hun in dresses.

Thankfully my wife, Melanie, approached the challenge of sibling rivalry more effectively than my parents were able. Melanie did not place the girls in separate rooms for "time out." They were sent to the bathroom. To *the same* bathroom, with the stern warning not to even think of coming out until they were getting along.

At first, we'd listen at the door hearing outbursts of blame and name calling. Then it would go so quiet we'd press our ear to the door. Eventually, a small giggle let loose, followed shortly by a torrent of laughter. Pretty soon they'd be having so much fun goofing off in the bathroom that we could hardly get them to leave.

After a handful or two of sessions like this, they worked their fighting almost completely out of their system. Unlike my brother and me, Maren and Arianna didn't have to wait until one graduated to become best friends. They were besties long before they finished grade school. Credit goes, at least partly, to those bathroom "time outs."

Isn't it interesting how we can often tolerate differences with people outside the family more easily than we can with those most closely related to us? It's like we have two completely different sets of expectations. We don't expect people outside our family to

agree with our every thought and action, but we experience something just shy of apoplectic shock when a family member disagrees with us.

What happens in biological families often holds true in faith communities. We expect far more agreement among those of the same faith than we do with people of other faiths.

Etched in my memory is a time in 2011 when a popular evangelical Christian leader named Rob Bell posted a simple, two-minute-and-fifty-eight-second video to promote his forthcoming book on YouTube. Within hours, the internet blew up in a firestorm of controversy. The feeding frenzy was centered around Bell's simple assertion that a non-Christian like Mahatma Gandhi may *not* be burning in Hell. That's it.

Among the first to raise the Crusader's clarion call were two prominent evangelical leaders. One, Justin Taylor, claimed on his blog that the sky was falling! Okay, he didn't use those *exact* words, but he clearly saw God's fire and brimstone headed straight for Bell and his church. The other, John Piper, simply Tweeted, "Farewell, Rob Bell."

By the end of the day, Bell's video was the tenth hottest topic on Twitter. Within a few days, over 2,500 blogs had been posted in response and Facebook was abuzz with heated debate. Indeed, within a few weeks, more had been written about Bell's video, and the book it was promoting, than was written about Martin Luther in the entire decade following his posting of the 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church. Rather impressive considering that the book *had not yet been released!*

According to many Christians, everyone but themselves is fated to burn in hell's eternal fires, and anyone who believes otherwise is itching for a fight. Many further believe that dissenters are not true Jesus-followers and thus will join people like Gandhi in hell. Personally, I might trade an eternity in heaven spent with these folks than one in hell spent with the likes of Gandhi.

This belief that God would torture non-Christians in the fires of hell may strike many of us, ironically, as being evidence of a frosty cold heart. Yet, a great many people who believe such things are kind, generous, and quite evidently warm-hearted. Perhaps you know a few people like this. Christians on different sides of the theological fence tend to assume that those on the other side are on the front lines of the *Zombie Apocalypse*. That's because, as members of the same general faith family, we have a much higher expectation that they agree with us than if they are members of another faith.

Consider this curious example from Rob Bell controversy. In the midst of the firestorm over Rob Bell's claim that Gandhi might not be in hell, some of the most vehement responses came not from Christians who disagreed with Bell, but from those on the liberal side of the theological fence who sought to provide Bell ground support. They would lash out at Bell's detractors with comments to the effect of, "Love wins! Go to hell yourself!"

Yet many "progressive" Christians who wouldn't be caught dead sharing a meal with an evangelical Christian who believes that everyone but Christians go to hell broadly support movements that promote interfaith relationships, including with Muslims. I don't know how many Muslims would believe that Gandhi is in hell, and the Qur'an itself asserts over

and over that righteous Christians and Jews have nothing to fear of hell's flames. But Muslims believe in a place called hell every bit as much as evangelical Christians do, even as they may assign fewer people to it and allow that hell may be a temporary location for some.

As we on the Tri-Faith Commons become closer to one another, seeing each other less as "the other" and more as people from the same faith family, I wonder how we will negotiate differences like these? Will there continue to be a generosity of spirit that trusts that even our most significant differences of faith ultimately are resolved in the mystery of God, or will we expect that we all believe the same thing because now we're more like a family?

If we're not self-aware and open to God's mystery, we could be like my brother and me when we were growing up. Or, perhaps God will send us to some sort of spiritual "bathroom," until our arguments are turned to laughter.

II. Time In

When it comes to Christians who disagree among themselves about who Jesus is and whether there are other paths to God besides Christianity, I think we could benefit from God reminding us that it is not us, but God, who gets to choose who is in God's family. Then, maybe God could send us all to the spiritual "bathroom" until we either work out our differences or learn to see something more magnificent that transcends them.

If I were locked in the bathroom with my theological nemesis – perhaps one of those leaders who raised the clarion call against Rob Bell – I'm sure that I would be reminded of something I know very well but keep forgetting when I hang out only with Christians on my side of the theological fence: these people who believe that Gandhi is in hell and spend half their time trying to convert those who don't believe the way they do are not part of the Zombie Apocalypse. (At least not most of them!) I find that the majority of those who are more conservative than me are, in fact, warm-hearted, kind, generous souls whose desire to save souls from hell comes not from hatred but from compassion. Given their belief, it would actually be cold-hearted not to try everything you can to save souls from this fate.

Yet, in that theological bathroom, I hope they would also let go of their presuppositions about Christians like me. While we believe that God is great and loving enough to provide as many paths to God as there are people, we still find the path of Jesus to be *our* path to God. We love Jesus, we devote our lives to him, and we see no need to convert a sincere practitioner of another faith to Christianity, we are also quite happy to share our faith and joy with anyone who asks; who actually wants us to tell them about Jesus and why he matters so much to us. We do this not to save them from hell, but more as beggars who are telling a hungry person who asks where we've found food.

If I were sent to the bathroom with my theological opposite, I would also want to stick a strip of mylar in my pocket. Mylar is a kind of stretched polyester film that is both transparent and reflective. It is so highly reflective, in fact, that it can reflect enough of the sun's light to actually look at the sun – briefly – without going blind.

Before taking the mylar out of my pocket, I'd open the bathroom window, allowing the sunshine to gently warm both our faces. Then I'd ask, "Is the sun warming your face like it's warming mine?" Perhaps both of us would be impressed by a God who would allow the sun to bless both of us with warmth without regard to who is wrong and who is right, or checking to see which one of us loves Jesus more.

Perhaps, too, we would realize that if one of us knew it was the sun warming our face and the other believed that the sun was actually a heat lamp in the sky, the sun would still warm both of us, just as the sun warms believers and atheists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, even Republicans and Democrats.

At some point, I would ask my more conservative bathroom mate if he (or she) had ever looked at the sun directly. Of course, you can't look at the sun for more than a few seconds before damaging your eyes or even going blind.

That's when I'd pull that strip of mylar out of my pocket to explain how I can love Jesus, finding him to be my way, truth, and life, without insisting that Jesus be that source of revelation and relationship for all people.

While the sun's brilliance may blind you if you look at it directly, you can look at the sun much longer if you hold a piece of mylar up in front of it. You can also see its precise shape much better than ever. Its edges are clearly defined, making a tight circle. [Note: This is an illustration. Even looking through Mylar long enough will blind you!]

When I look at Jesus, I have the same experience, only in relation to God. As the Bible asserts from cover to cover, God's brilliance is much too great for any mere mortal to behold. Yet through Jesus, I get a significant glimpse at what God is like. I can see that God is not just brilliant, but compassionate; not just "high in the sky" but "up close and personal," and not just willing to be in relationship with us only if we're perfect, but actually chooses relationship over perfection.

If I didn't have Jesus, I'm not sure I would know these things to be true of God. Yet this is not to say that other people, using other means of looking at God indirectly, can't make these things out for themselves.

Most significant, to me, is that by looking at Jesus, I find that God's heart is not shaped as a circle like the sun, but is Cross-shaped. That is, God's love is self-giving love, full of grace and forgiveness, and is capable of finding and transforming us even when we sit in deepest darkness.

A Hindu like Gandhi does not need to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, or even to believe that God's heart is Cross-shaped in order to experience God's Cross-shaped love and respond to it. Yet when a Hindu experiences this warmth and illumination – this love – a Hindu has the same decision to make as you or I do, as Christians: Shall I step out

from the shadows and walk where this light guides me, or remain in the darkness where I can remain the master of my own destiny?

Perhaps if those of us whose beliefs are quite different from one another would spend less time fighting and more time in the spiritual “bathroom” with one another, we could come to know God’s love even better by discovering how it is reflected by those we’ve been sent to the “bathroom” with. Perhaps we would not only come to *know* God’s love for us better, but we would, in fact, learn to love others as God loves us.