

“Can you please?!” – Interfaith Thanksgiving Service

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St. Anthony of Padua Church, West Harrison

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Lebron James rode the subway this week. The C-train to be exact. After a morning shootaround at Madison Square Garden, he and his team decided to opt for a 6 minute subway ride back to the hotel rather than a 45 minute bus ride. Any NYer knows that the train at rush hour is a much better bet and apparently the Cleveland Cavaliers know it now, too. Well, as he's filming a selfie video of the ride, he pointed the camera at the passenger next to him who held up his hand in front of the camera and said, “Can you not?!” Clearly, the man did not know that he was missing his once-in-a-lifetime chance to shoot a video – to hangout with – The Lebron James was passing him by. He missed his chance to connect with a star, his chance to enjoy – even for a minute – being with a once in a generation athlete. He missed the opportunity and now the whole internet is laughing at his expense.

It is lucky for us that our missed opportunities are not on the internet for the world to see. Indeed, those videos would be endless. How many times a day do we miss an opportunity to connect with friends, to show love to our family? How often do we skip a time to seek blessings with our faith communities, with the wider community? And how regularly do we miss a chance for holiness in a connection with God? We are all that man on the subway. We are all the guy who has the chance for something meaningful but – but we are stuck in our routine, in our own way of thinking, in our narrow sameness – we hold up our hands and say “Can you not?!”

So often we miss those opportunities for connection and love and blessings and holiness because our minds are trained to see difference, to be wary of it. In pre-historic times, when we were hunters and gatherers, we needed to see distinct patterns in the woods so that we could tell prey from predator, so that we could eat rather than be eaten. But now, now that we live in incredible community and security, that instinct for seeing and fearing difference stunts our potential for finding meaning and truth in the world. We usually shun difference thus missing opportunities for connection when we see a person with a different color skin, a neighbor with a different religion, a family member with a different political view, or a house of worship with a different set of belief. When we see difference, we usually walk away, like that man on the subway we say “Can you not?!”

But there is another choice. The creation story insists that we are all descended from one person. This can inspire us to celebrate what makes us unique instead of walking away. We can see those things that we share as opportunities to connect and uplift. And, where true difference exists, we can celebrate the diversity of our world. In that diversity we can find lessons and truths that we could not find by ourselves or only with others of our own color, religion, political party, or belief. When we can get outside our comfort zones, when we can explore the differences in our world, when we can appreciate the many pathways that people take towards holiness, then we can find a bit of truth to uplift in our own lives, then we can learn to truly love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

This idea lies at the core of our gathering this evening. The theme this year, “Celebrating our Diversity of Faiths,” challenges us to love even when we do not feel like it. The theme can inspire us to challenge the narratives about one another, to get close to people that otherwise make us uncomfortable because of our differences with them. In a nation so full of division and rancor, so full of hatred and suspicion, so full of “Can you not?!” our celebration of our diversity of faiths asks instead to say “Can you please?!” Our gathering tonight is not simply a celebration of motherhood and apple pie fit for a Norman Rockwell painting. No, being together in this church with priest and pastor, rabbi and Islamic leader will send ripples of hope and trust and love that our nation desperately needs. We will leave here as changed people; changed with trust and faith and love and “Can you please?!” in our hearts.

Yes, we give thanks for the many blessings that we share. But, we also learn from and celebrate the differences of our faiths. Each of those differences represents the great variety of ways that the human heart cries out for the Divine, that the human spirit seeks holiness. Surely the God that we worship here tonight is big enough to approach via different paths, surely our God welcomes each of us as travelers on different roads all seeking holiness and connection with that Greater Power. Like light refracted through a perfect diamond, together – and only together – we create a rainbow of good will and blessings and love that we can only see when we celebrate our diversity, when we open our eyes to the differences between us and then pull one another even closer.

During the week of Thanksgiving, Jews around the world will read the story of Jacob fleeing his homeland. We can imagine that out in the wilderness by himself he discovers a world he does not know. We can picture him – exhausted and overwhelmed – surrounded by sights and sounds different from his home. In his need to escape these feelings of strangeness and loneliness, he lies down out in the open, a rock as a pillow, and shuts it all out by falling asleep. In that sleep he sees a ladder “set on the ground and its top reaching to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.” When Jacob awakes from his dream, he declares, “אָכֹן יִשְׁיָהוּ הָאָהָרָן בַּמְקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאָנוּכִי לֹא יְعַדֵּת Surely God is present in this place, and I, I did not know it!”

In a place so different from everything he had known, Jacob found the Divine and the holy. He could have held up his hand to the strangeness of the place and said, “Can you not?!” Instead, in an environment that seemed alien, he discovered angels, he found the very presence of God. This year, as we celebrate our diversity, our differences, may we too find holiness and blessing. Instead of saying “Can you not?!” may we, too, look around at everyone that is different from ourselves and declare: “אָכֹן יִשְׁיָהוּ הָאָהָרָן בַּמְקוֹם הַזֶּה Surely God is present in this place!”

כִּי יְהִי רְצֵנוּ
May this be God’s will