

Listening to all views is good for fostering contemplation



CHRIS HIGHLAND
HIGHLAND VIEWS

In the brief series on “bridges,” we’ve heard from a handful of clergy responding to questions relating to their thoughts on secular people (agnostics, atheists, freethinkers). I’m grateful that we have heard from Muslim, Jewish and Baptist leaders. This week, Rev. Jerry Prickett of St. Matthias Episcopal Church in Asheville offers his thoughts. (The church has an interesting history as “the first African-American congregation in Asheville.”)

I asked him how his faith tradition views nonbelievers. He responded:

“The baptismal covenant of the Episcopal Church ends with two questions that speak to this: ‘Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?’ ‘Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?’

“Jesus, in his parable of the Good Samaritan, identifies everybody as our neighbor. The Episcopal Church was among the early groups seeking justice and peace and dignity of all. Scripture, reason and tradition are the guiding elements for the church. All three have influenced the approach that Episco-

lians have taken toward justice and peace initiatives taken since the late 1700s.”

I’m struck by how Prickett places the approach to nonbelievers in a wide historical context from the time of Jesus through the traditions and covenants of the church. The emphasis on peace, justice and dignity has certainly been a central concern for the secular community historically as well.

When I asked him how important it is to change the minds of nonbelievers, to persuade people toward his faith, he replied, “We are not inclined to proselytize on street corners or in conversations with those who express a lack of faith. Though we may not initiate the conversation about faith, we talk about it in positive terms that, we hope, fosters contemplation.”

This has been my delightful experience over the years working with Episcopalians. There has been a strong sense of grounding in their churches while bringing an openness to learn and engage in dialogue as they are active in the greater community. Over my years as a chaplain, I served alongside deacons, priests and laypeople from Episcopal churches, as well as seminarians and interns.

That kind of cooperative effort and presence tends to “foster contemplation” as he says. I assume Prickett would agree that contemplating life and beliefs is always best as a two-way

street. In other words, a person of faith might be challenged to reflect on the questions raised by a person who does not share their faith. This can save us from talking to ourselves.

I asked him if he views the secular worldview as a threat, a challenge or invitation to learn.

“Secular worldviews that promote one race — or one anything that inhibits treating our neighbors as ourselves — are a threat and a challenge because they do not present an invitation to learn. It must be noted that there are many religious views that are equally inhibiting.”

A fascinating invitation to ask more questions — and build more bridges. Treating our neighbors as ourselves is a great step toward common ground. Of course, this teaching is not exclusively Christian. Yet whatever the origin, perhaps this is simply a quality of living a good human life, faith or no faith.

I appreciate that he recognizes religious views can also inhibit our ethical ideals.

As a lover of nature, I enjoy asking religious believers what they think of the natural world and naturalistic views that do not accept supernatural beliefs. Prickett responded with classic Christian theology and a nice twist:

“The world and all that are part of it are a creation of God. I love James Weldon Johnson’s view: ‘And God stepped out on space and said “I’m

lonely, I’ll make me a world.’” Prickett says you don’t have to be a six-day creationist to feel “we are all responsible for maintaining [the earth] in perpetuity because God created it.”

This can be taken as another invitation to work together for our common home, whether or not we believe it came from a deity or a natural process.

Finally, I asked if he feels there is value in honest dialogue and cooperative action between people of faith and those without faith and if this happens in his church.

“Without a doubt, conversations between all people are imperative if there is to be resolution of issues affecting everyone, and it does happen in our community.”

Pastor Prickett sent me a short piece on atheism written by Christian writer Frederick Buechner, asserting that nonbelievers have no standards for ethics because “With no God to point the way, humans must find their own way.”

For me, this opens the door wide for much more dialogue and contemplation.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com