

'Adopting' the baby born on Christmas Day, then and now



CHRIS HIGHLAND
GUEST COLUMNIST

A Buddhist priest and a Christian minister went into a brewery... No, seriously, they once sat with a mixed group of church and sangha folks to teach a course on the book, "Living Buddha, Living Christ," by Thich Nhat Hanh.

The priest was my friend Lee, and I was the minister. We met in the church where I was parish associate, and then we gathered at the Zen farm where Lee had practiced for many years. Lee and I were already friends and colleagues, since he served as the chair of the street chaplaincy where I was interfaith chaplain. I also had enjoyed several personal retreats at the farm with its deep green fields rolling down toward the blue Pacific. A beautiful place where anyone, of any faith or no faith, can feel welcome.

Every student in that course was moved by the respectful manner in which the book treats Jesus as a kind of brother to Buddha, and each person could see how easy it is for two leaders of two historic faiths to sit together, teach together and work alongside each other as friends.

Later that year, Lee and I invited

faith leaders from churches, synagogues, mosques, meetings and more to celebrate Thanksgiving together. That was 19 years ago, and that interfaith service still happens every year on the night before Thanksgiving. What always made those celebrations so wonderful was the diversity of the assembly, grateful and giving.

Yet what made it very special was including people who lived outside — those who often feel excluded from our communities. Not only were unhoused neighbors invited to attend, they were an important part of the service, no more and no less important than clergy, as they joined in by leading music, reading and telling their stories of living without homes.

Before sharing a common supper, a procession flowed forward carrying blankets, gloves, coats, sleeping bags and other essentials. This was a very emotional moment — we all could see how simple gifts were helping people survive. No one with a house walked out into the cold that night without a deep gratitude for a place to call home, and a deeper concern for their neighbors sleeping outside with nothing but stars for a roof.

One pastor spoke at this Thanksgiving Eve service and said that anyone who was treating home-challenged human beings with compassion was "doing the work of Jesus." All the as-

sembled folk, of all faiths and no faiths, were nodding their heads. Even non-Christians understand what that means.

An ancient Palestinian rabbi taught people to show love and compassion and work for justice. It's a message echoed in Buddha and Krishna, Confucius and Muhammad ("in the name of The One, the compassionate and merciful"). What could be more inclusive than that? What an energizing call to live and learn together!

I was born on Christmas Day. Born and adopted on Christmas. Maybe Jesus would have understood that feeling since, in the original story, he was "adopted" by Joseph. Then, he was "adopted" by a ragged group of outsiders and later was "adopted" by a powerful institution called by his name. Unfortunately, at times Jesus' adopted family seems more distracted by "believing in the baby" than living his grownup message.

Do you ever wonder who owns Jesus?

That's a stunning question, but it might be good to ask from time to time. Is there one church that can claim he belongs to them, that they and they alone know who Jesus is and what he wants? I grew up in a church that believed that. They may never have said that, but it was the feeling you got.

Now that seems a rather sad thing to do to the baby in the manger or the man

on the mountainside. Could anyone own him?

My Buddhist friend Lee would always have a peaceful smile on his face when Jesus was the topic of discussion. He was happy to be sitting in a meeting even when people were trying to "preach the gospel" or say prayers "in Jesus' name." That didn't bother him. But it bothered me. I didn't like the disrespect shown to Lee, or other people of different faiths, or the group of streetfolk sitting as captive audience for someone's "mission."

For many years, even as a minister, I was displeased and disappointed to hear people evangelize "the poor." I wondered if these same people would try to convert Mary, Joseph and the Baby himself. Because, as we all know, they weren't "insiders" either.

In this season of light, maybe it would be good for us to "adopt" some enlightened ways of thinking. If we can adopt more compassion and understanding, maybe more than one baby would smile.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and freethinker. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, are new to Asheville, but not new to the issues common in all communities. Learn more at chighland.com.

Clipped By:



chris_highland
Fri, Aug 25, 2017