

An important question for friends and strangers



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

In conversation with a close friend I listened as he told me his views on God, the Bible, Jesus ... and LGBTQ people. I found it curious, as I frequently do in these matters, that my friend was most upset about the people who didn't believe or live as he did. In fact, it really didn't seem to matter if a "differently sexual" person read the Bible, went to church and believed in God. They were "wrong," "against the scriptures" and made God (and my friend) very unhappy.

When it was my turn to share my thoughts about this, I asked a question that has become a standard default for me to ask: What do you [in this case, LGBTQ] friends say about this?

You might think that's a dumb question but I think it's the best one to ask. It goes right to the heart of the matter. My friend had no LGBTQ friends—or at least he didn't think so.

When another friend was commenting on how she felt about having an immigrant couple living next door I was about to ask The Question but she surprised me by saying, "You know, I've gotten to know them, we talk about our flowers and neighborhood issues, and they're actually very nice people. I like them!"

It's not so easy to be prejudiced toward another when they are your neighbors, co-workers or friends.

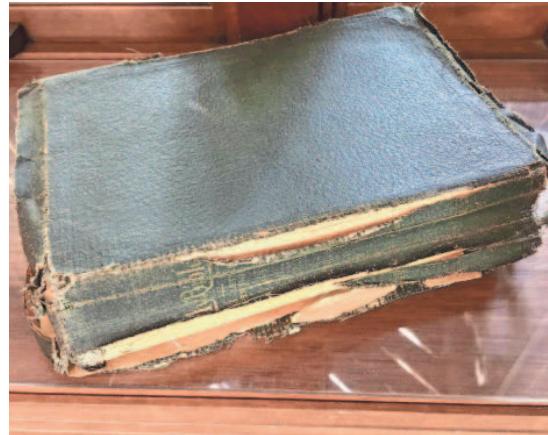
How often do we hear people with strong beliefs speak disparagingly or judgmentally about "those people," be it "the immigrants," "the homeless," "the gays," a selected ethnic, religious or political group or some other disliked "them"?

Those who hold so tightly to their Bibles (or Qur'ans, Torahs, Vedas or Sutras) sometimes seem to forget not only to read their holy books but to practice their basic teachings. In ancient societies, any "outsiders" were often held in suspicion as aliens, heretics, infidels or worse. Those beyond the boundaries of the community were feared, avoided at all cost—and not just the people, their "foreign" beliefs as well.

Yet, we have threads of passages that run like binding through scriptures, such as this teaching woven into the narrative: Abraham is told to "go from your country and kindred," becoming a sojourner in Egypt. In the land of Canaan, after his wife Sarah dies, Abraham has to ask the local inhabitants for a place to bury her since "I am a stranger and an alien residing among you" (Genesis 12 and 23). Later, in the time of Moses, the Lord instructs the people to show justice to those they don't know: "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10).

Centuries later we have Hebrew prophets proclaiming that the Lord is more interested in the treatment of strangers than in religious rituals (see Isaiah 58). God will punish those who treat strangers like dirt (Amos 2).

The Stranger of Nazareth dared to suggest the



What binds your beliefs? CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

treatment of strangers was his special concern (Matthew 25). Early Christians believed that the faithful are all "strangers and foreigners," so they should be very careful to show hospitality to any strangers (Hebrews 11 and 13).

When discussing Islam, I always point out that nearly every chapter in the Qur'an begins with "In the Name of God the Compassionate and Merciful." A Muslim, or anyone else, who forgets this thread that binds the book, can "miss the point" of the scriptures or the religion itself.

Those who say they "believe the scriptures" might pay attention to the bindings of their special books—the threads often missed when the concern is more about being "right and righteous" and "winning the culture wars" than living a compassionate life.

What if someone uses their "Word of God" to judge a whole community of people? This is so common I think it's worth a reasonable response. First, I would ask: How can you apply one strand of your teaching and not others? Second, I would ask: How are those "others" harming you or threatening your faith? Third, I would ask The Question, the one that really supersedes all the others: What do your friends in that other community say about your feelings?

Most people will answer, "I don't know any of them; none of those people are my friends."

So, they are strangers? You don't really know them? If so, how can you judge them, let alone dislike them or even hate them?

I may have a bit of an advantage here, since I've taught courses in world scriptures and spent much of my life around people of various religious beliefs.

Yet, honestly, I have to ask myself The Question each time I slip up and judge "them"—even some of the most judgmental.

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