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eChimes Newsletter

Dear Friends,

At times in its history, the ancient Roman Empire attempted to squash out the rapidly growing “novelty” religion of Christianity. Leadership did so by using ordinary incidents of Christianity’s practices and blowing them out of proportion. First, they falsely interpreted the incidents. Then the interpretations were generalized, as if they were happening everywhere or would be soon. All this created fear, if unevenly in the empire, with greatest effectiveness in the most populated areas. To keep it going and spread chaos further, officials would fan the fear they created with wildly exaggerated untruths, giving emperors public support and willing collaborators in torturing and executing those who refused to deny Jesus Christ and pay homage to gods of the empire.

In our weekly bible classes, affectionately called Bible Jam, we have been studying Bart Ehrman’s book *The Triumph of Christianity*. Ehrman documents the spread of Christianity from the early First Century CE. It is a fascinating document that attempts to understand the growth of Christianity from the handful of family, disciples and followers who remained following Jesus’ execution—to becoming the religion of the Roman Empire by the turn of the Fifth Century CE.

In explaining the opposition and persecution of Christians over these centuries, Ehrman points out that the Christians were not targeted because of crimes they had committed but because of who they were and what they believed. A crime of being, so to speak. The charge was that their belief in one God disrupted the order of the Roman Empire, which relied on worship and sacrifice to multiple gods for everything from crops, to fertility, to weather and more. So, when things went poorly in the empire for any reason, it was because a god or gods were angry. And the Christians were upsetting the gods and, as a result, fruitful life in the empire.

It was a crime for being who you were, fanned by wild accusations of being incestuous (because they called each other brother and sister) and cannibalism (because they regularly consumed the Body and Blood of Christ) and worse. It was enough false information with the smallest thread of truth to bring segments of the masses into revolt against Christians, or at least prevent them from getting in the way of the authorities' plans for control.

While our bible studies help us better understand the texts of the bible, they also implicate deeply rooted ancient practices that are evident today. They affirm the mounting influence of the Good News during this period of time and the opposition it provoked. The studies underscore the power of the Good News that continues to impact the world and our lives together, exposing differences that we have yet to resolve.

Without question, deeply rooted challenges remain in our times, just turn on your news of choice. Our role and voice in world events, whether near or far, remains as important as ever. It is still true, I say, that the Power of Love instills fear in the hearts and minds and souls of those who would seek to control and manage by fear. Some would suggest that this tension frames the struggles of our time: Love v. Fear. I believe it is how we address those challenges that measure the value of a lifetime together.

And so now, as a congregation, we address one of the components of fear: the dismantling of respect.

In the next few weeks, with the approval and enthusiasm of the Boards of Sayville Congregational United Church of Christ, we enter into discourse as a community of faith. We will do so with banners simply stating, "Respect for All," against a backdrop of the recent public call for U.S. Representatives Ocasio-Cortez, Omar, Pressley, and Tlaib "...to go back to where they came from." While none of us agree with everything any elected or hopeful office holder thinks, states or proposes—respect for one another is foundational in the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart, loving one another as ourselves.

This is a call for a return to discourse over division; balance over bullying; fairness over fear, and love over libel.

Our congregation has long been courageous in using its voice in public discourse because of who we are as believers. Being who we are is not a crime, nor should our voice be silenced by those who would hold us hostage to threats. Too many people rely upon us—not for exaggeration of untruths—but for reaffirmation that there exist places where all are welcome, respected and loved and where God is still speaking.

The banners will be displayed next week, preceded by information on our website and Facebook pages, as well as press releases. We are committed to informing one another about the reasons we stand and speak as we do, hoping for responses that invoke dialogue and change.

Being who one is requires courage and encourages others to find that courage in themselves. It is an act of love.

Please reach out in love to someone who is waiting to hear your voice...

In love and gratitude,

Ray



Respect for All.



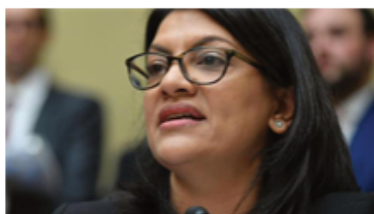
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
New York 14th
Congressional District

Ilhan Omar
Minnesota 5th
Congressional District



Ayanna Pressley
Massachusetts 7th
Congressional District

Rashida Tlaib
Michigan 13th
Congressional District



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