

By Random

Sermon by [Brian Russo](#)

November 28, 2010, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Isaiah 56:1-8

John 3:1-10

On October 18th, 1981, a somewhat-beautiful, absolutely chubby, baby boy was born to Edna and Robert Russo. They named him Brian and gave him the middle name, David. More interestingly however, another Brian David was born on the very same day, in the very same hospital, and was placed in a crib in the very same nursery unit; reportedly, in the very next crib over.

Thus, frequently throughout my childhood, when I was doing my part in turning my father's hair a whiter shade of gray while adding subtle bags to my mother's tiring eyes, my parents would outwardly wonder if they very well took home the right Brian David. And to own the truth, I frequently wondered the same.

Would the right Brian have been a less-quick-tempered son; would he have been a more loving teenage brother; would he have even found his way into the business world like the rest of my family has already? By the way, if you know any Brian David's working in the finance district, maybe you should think about notifying my parents...

Speaking of whom, I randomly find myself wondering what *his* parents were like; how his family was oriented. Were they/are they a loving family? Just what would have happened if we went home with the opposite parents? Would I be here today in this pulpit, or would he? Would neither of us? Would I be busy on Wall Street, stuck playing video games in the parent's basement, or on a street somewhere looking for directions to Our Brothers Place? How would everything have sorted itself out if we, if I, was raised by an entirely different family? Have you ever thought about that in relation to you and yours, as well as your other?

I imagine it would be hard for most of us to imagine being raised by another. That no matter the flaws, the fights, and all of the things that have over the years gotten in the way of loving each other, we nonetheless wouldn't trade our familial connection for anything else. And yet, I know of a minority of people in my life, and perhaps you know of the same amount in yours, who would jump at the chance to barter one brother for another, one mother for another, one father for another. That for as many families who sat around the table three days ago in joyful solstice, there were nonetheless a fraction who sat down at table of regret, pain, and anger; and even others who had no such table to speak of in the first place – families long ago ripped apart by loss and/or irreconcilable difference.

And it was during the particularly cheerful time spent with my family this past week that I began to truly understand the merits of Thanksgiving. That I should be and am supremely thankful for the luck that floated around haphazardly and by chance descended upon my coming into existence. For that's precisely what it was, my friends – luck, a random, undetermined stroke of undeserved fortune. It's not as if I did some spectacular flip in the womb of creation, such that the ethereal judges ordained for me to receive a loving and supportive family. Not at all; for I did absolutely nothing to inherit the awesome parents and amazing extended family, who have helped guide me to this special place and time. No, I never earned the silver

spoon that fed me, just as those given a rifle for means of survival never deserved their cruel fate. It's all, I do believe, unfortunately and unjustifiably by random.

Barry Switzer, a famous college and professional football coach, who, quite frankly, I never imagined could make such a point, writes, "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple." How many of us are guilty of this charge? How many of us suffer from the fallacy of entitlement? How many of us have built castles on the air of illusion, pretending to have earned something that was merely a byproduct of situation and circumstance? Just how many of us ignore the equality that is in our other, only choosing to recognize everyone else who is already standing with us on third base, irrespective of the fact that it was our ancestors who laid down the sacrificial bunts to get us over there?

And don't for a minute think this has nothing to do with our religion – it has everything to do with our religion. For unless you're deaf or blind, if you've been around Christianity long enough you've at least once been exposed to the ugliness of its often territorial and entitled nature. Surely, at one point you've seen good men and women lose their dignified sensibilities as they encounter someone else from another faith. It might have been subtle, but it's always written on their face. What appeared to be listening was merely hearing, and what appeared to be surprised interest was really just judgment and scoff. I wonder... how many of us have been those good men and women, looking down our noses at those we perceived to be stuck at first base, or even, yet to get out of the spiritual batters box?

And what's so amazing and yet so often unnoticed, is that so many of our proud and pious faiths are much like the families we were born into – a random conclusion, reached after falling donkey-backwards into a particular situation and circumstance, or as philosopher John Hick points out, a specific geography that inundated such. That is to say, Hick believes that roughly 98% of people's faiths worldwide are merely determined by the region in which they were born. In other words, if you were born in Israel, chances are you would be Jewish; if you were born in China, chances are you would be Buddhist; if you were born in Iran chances are you would be Muslim; or to make a previous connection, if the two Brian David's from 1981 switched families, and I was instead, for the sake of argument, raised in an Islamic household versus a Christian one, chances are I probably wouldn't be standing before you this very morning, preaching from this very pulpit.

Now, obviously, we all know people who have come to a faith that is indeed different than that which was their genesis. Perhaps you yourself are an example of such. But by and large, I do believe that most of us can agree that Hick has a valid point, regardless of his seemingly unquantifiable percentage given. For if you were born in Afghanistan, I don't think it's going too far out on a limb to assume that you probably wouldn't be praising Jesus' name on the street corners; and not even due to a proposed state of fear mind you, but simply because you wouldn't have had the foundational teaching or exposure to his ministry to begin with. The same assumption holds true for the oft-spoken example of natives living in a foreign jungle who never encounter a missionary. How are they to come to recognize Christianity as the One religion if they've never even heard of it in the first place? Would it not be just as righteous, or at the very least excusable, if they nonetheless came to God based on their own understanding, tradition and language – all that indeed was ever afforded to them?

Its questions like these that lead me to think that it is prosperous to our journey of faith to at least consider what the proponents of Pluralism have to say. Pluralism is not toleration nor is it indifferentism; rather pluralism holds that another system of

beliefs can express an equally valid viewpoint as it relates to the revelation of the Divine. It offers an answer to the natives in the jungle and the other Brian David who was hypothetically raised devoid of a Christian teaching. It suggests that God is bigger than the situation, circumstance and geography in which one was raised, and supports that God can reveal God's self universally throughout the world in any way that God so chooses, much like the wind blows on its own accord.

I imagine that even the staunchest of conservative theologians would agree that God, being God, is capable of being beyond any possible limitation to accomplish such. But if not, perhaps they should consider what our oldest of testaments has to say. For beyond our readings from today, Exodus 6:3 offers an extraordinary passage through a dialogue God is having with Moses, in which God declares "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *God Almighty*, but by my name '*The LORD*' I did not make myself known to them." My friends, God actually altered appearances, so that the patriarch Abraham and the descending tribes could be of understanding! You see, the title, *God Almighty*, is actually a translation from an earlier known divinity known as El Shaddai, while the title, *The LORD*, translates to a then more present divinity called, YHWH (Yahweh). Thus, here in the Exodus account, it is acknowledged that God, who throughout Jewish history became commonly known as Yahweh, thrice appeared as a different form and under a different name (El Shaddai), so that others from different times and places could be equal witnesses to Divine revelation. Even in scripture then, it is here affirmed that God can appear in several manifestations to different people across the large span of geography and time.

But one doesn't even have to perform the academic hurdles we just went through to acquire such illumination. All you have to do is merely turn to our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 56 declares "Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the LORD: I will give in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. ... For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." For all peoples.

Look, I'm not crazy, I know that today is the first Sunday of Advent and that it's meant to be a Christian celebration of the expectance of Jesus coming into the world. I'm not out to tell you that you might as well be at the Synagogue or Mosque this morning for we're all doing the same thing with neither message being any different. Nor am I here declaring that Christianity for me holds no greater meaning than any of the other world religions. Not at all; for I am extremely proud to say that I, like all of you, are ministers of the Christian faith, as passed down to us from the Jew named Yeshua. I am also at liberty to sing of my blessing that I was indeed born into a Christian house, which then became the situation and circumstance from which I gained my internal compass, and more thankful I could not be. For indeed our faith is a most beautiful faith, a faith that provides such a humanistic hope that it is virtually unparalleled in any other tradition I have rigorously encountered. And to that I personally whisper, Amen.

And yet, I just have this message resonating throughout my heart this morning, a message of a desire for a greater ecumenical and worldwide discussion for pluralistic admiration, such that we could acknowledge that indeed God is bigger than the circumstance, situation or geography that which we were randomly born into; that God is indeed so big that God is beyond any such limitation that would preclude revelation from existing on even the most remote or strangest of places, even those devoid of the Biblical account; that there is even so much to be learned and gained

from our foreign other, who just like you and I simply happened to come into their existence without choice or determination; and that yes indeed, we are all on third base, though none of us possessing more merit than the next. For no one here has made it to home yet, as we only make it to home when we inevitably encounter the finality that is in our death, and even then we know not what journey possibly awaits us.

So let us all, this morning and the next, come to the global and everlasting table of Thanks together as one, respecting each other for the diversity of revelation we bring, made possible by the random roll of the dice by which each of us were spawned.

Amen.