

R.:W.: S. Gilbert Weisman, W.: Grand Orator

Grand Oration, Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Florida F&AM

2014-2015

TOLERANCE

Most Worshipful Grand Master, Right Worshipful Deputy Grand Master, Elected and Appointed Grand Lodge Officers, Most Worshipful Past Grand Masters, Distinguished East, Guests, Ladies, and my Brothers all:

First I would like to thank M.:W.: James W. Ford, a friend and Brother of many years, for allowing me the opportunity to serve the Grand Lodge of Florida as your W.: Grand Orator. I pray that I am worthy of this great honor.

In today's world, with all of its complexities, diversities, and current political atmosphere, both here and abroad, "tolerance" is without a doubt a positive trait to not only have, but a trait to vigorously attempt to instill in others- especially a Brother Mason. Tolerance, by definition, is a fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, and nationality, differ from one's own.

In the very beginning of Masonic Ritual in the early 1700s, G-d was treated in Christian terms. In English and American Freemasonry, Christian references were removed from the ritual to enable men of different faiths to take part without compromising their own beliefs. This is Practical Tolerance.

This Practical Tolerance is one of our Fraternity's great strengths - because it enables men of all faiths to meet in ordinary friendship, and, without interfering in the way each Brother practices his religion, it shows how much they really have in common.

So why then, are some Lodges less tolerant than others? Why, knowingly, are Brothers, the ones with their own agenda, allowed by the officers and members to continually render improper prayers at dinners, meeting after meeting? Is it because all who are in attendance are of like mind, and no one will care? Please understand, my Brothers, I'm not referring to the Brother who makes an accidental slip, or who unintentionally errs.

I agree with the learned Brothers who say that “no big deal should be made out of it.” But, for all to be totally silent, time after time, is to condone it.

The Masonic Information Center, in December 1993, and revised in September, 1998, produced a sheet entitled “Freemasonry and Religion.” I’m sure that many of you have read it. To quote paragraph 5, Freemasonry Compared With Religion, it states: “Freemasonry lacks the basic elements of religion: It has no dogma or theology, no wish or means to enforce religious orthodoxy. It offers no sacraments. It does not claim to lead to salvation by works, by secret knowledge, or by any other means. The secrets of Freemasonry are concerned with modes of recognition, not with the means of salvation.”

You could also define tolerance as freedom from bigotry. Have you ever heard a close friend or Brother routinely make anti-Semitic comments, use the N-word in casual conversation, or tease someone about his surname?

And you stand there in silence, thinking, “What can I say in response to that?” Or laugh along uncomfortably. Or perhaps, frustrated or angry, you walk away without saying anything, thinking later, “I should have said something.”

That would have been the time to speak up. It is morally correct to encourage people to take a stand against everyday bigotry, apathy, and ignorance. It has no place in our society, our Fraternity, our schools, our places of worship, or our individual neighborhoods.

The United States of America is the great “melting pot,” a rich blend of cultural traditions from around the world. Many American families can trace their histories to immigrant ancestors who traveled great distances, enduring risk and hardship to make a home where they would be guaranteed basic freedoms. And for many American families - freedom came with a price. Their parents and grandparents were deprived the basic rights we value or murdered for the way in which they believed in the Grand Architect of the Universe.

American Society was founded on freedom from religious persecution, and on tolerance of differences in beliefs and cultural heritage. The differences, or diversities, that emanate from people all over the world enrich our culture and bring new ideas and energy.

Today, more than ever, our kids interact with people of different ethnicities, religions, and cultures. Classrooms are increasingly diverse, as are our Blue Lodges, reflecting the communities where families live and work.

Most of you welcome the fact that we live in an increasingly diverse society, while some may feel more hesitant, especially if they have not had much exposure to people different from themselves. Many kids today are way ahead of their parents regarding exposure to cultural differences. Their circle of friends, their schoolmates, and their athletic teams are much more varied than those of even a generation ago.

Still, parents should help their kids prepare to live, learn, and work in communities that will become even more diverse - assuming that they choose to do so. Teaching tolerance is important, not just because it is part of our American heritage, but because the person who learns to be open to differences -will have more opportunities in education, in business, and in many other aspects of life.

In short, your children, and their children's success depend on it. Success in today's world- and tomorrows- depends on being able to understand, appreciate, and work with others of any race, color, or creed.

But, does tolerance mean that all behaviors have to be accepted? No, of course not. Behaviors that disrespect or hurt others, like being mean or bullying, or behaviors that break social rules, like lying or stealing, should not be tolerated. Tolerance is about accepting people for who they are- not about accepting bad behavior. Tolerance also means treating others the way that you would like to be treated.

Be aware of the way you talk about people who are different from yourself. Don't make jokes that perpetuate stereotypes. They may seem like harmless fun, but they'll surely undo attitudes of tolerance and respect. And, my Brothers and guests, sometimes it hurts.

Did you ever attempt to question and learn about holiday and religious celebrations that are not part of your own tradition? When you encourage a tolerant attitude in others and talk about their values, your listeners, especially Brother Masons – those “who can best work and best agree,” are more likely than not to follow your lead.

Political freedom, religious tolerance, personal integrity; Freemasonry – it may not be for everyone.

As it points out in the 8° of the Scottish Rite's Morals & Dogma: “To comfort misfortune, to popularize knowledge, to teach whatever is true and pure in religion and philosophy, to accustom men to respect order and the proprieties of life, to point out the ways of genuine happiness, to prepare for that fortunate period, when all the factions of the Human Family, united by the bonds of

Toleration and Fraternity, shall be but one household- these are the labors that may well excite zeal and even enthusiasm.”

As Pope Francis pointed out in his New Year's Day Service on January 1, 2014: “We are all children of one Heavenly Father, we belong to the same Human Family, and we share a common destiny. This brings a responsibility for each to work, so that the world becomes a Community of Brothers who respect each other, accept each other in one's diversity, and take care of one another.” He could just as well be speaking to a body of Freemasons.

Do you think that the word “tolerance” might be synonymous with the words “Mutual Respect?” Isn't it just beautiful that we, as Masons, can gather together as Brothers, and witness and observe the sincere religious beliefs of each other, and do so in the true spirit of Brotherhood?

Oh, I realize that there may be some who have disdain for our beliefs, by their bigotry and prejudices. What they have yet to learn is that where there is no freedom, there can be no Masonic Lodge, and where there is bigotry, there can be no Freemasonry. Those concepts are incompatible. Our true strength is not measured by our numbers, but by our unity.

We are all Brothers – Christians, Moslems, and Jews. Yes! We are all Brothers, that was the Great Architect's plan. It's not our pins and rings that make us Masons. It's the display of how we act and how we affect other people. And that, my Brothers and friends, is what stimulates the growth and stability of our Lodges.

As a former Justice of the Supreme Court of Utah, Attorney Dallin H. Oaks said on September 11, 2011: “Tolerance is defined as a friendly and fair attitude toward unfamiliar opinions and practices, or toward the persons who hold or practice them.” As modern transportation and communication have brought all of us into closer proximity to different people and different ideas, we have greater need for tolerance.

We experience such differences in TV and the Internet, through travel, and often in personal interactions in our neighborhoods and the marketplace. We are definitely challenged. We must work harder to build mutual respect, an attitude of forbearance, with tolerance for one another, regardless of the doctrines and philosophies which we may espouse.

Tolerance and truth are a two-sided coin. Tolerance, or respect, is one side of the coin, but truth is always on the other side. You cannot possess the coin of tolerance, without being conscious of both sides.

Freemasonry has always been in the forefront of supporting freedom of thought, expression, creativity, and religious beliefs. The following typifies the Masonic commitment to Freedom of Religion: Jasper Ridley, in his book "The Freemasons," quoted from Anderson's Constitutions (1723) in his section on religion, and then concluded that, "This opened the Freemason's Lodge to anyone who believed in God," or the 'Great Architect of the Universe' (as he is called in Anderson's Constitution).

Roman Catholics were not excluded. Although they could not be Members of Parliament, Army Officers, or hold any public position in the state; they would be welcome in a Freemason's Lodge. Jews were also welcome, though they were at first a little reluctant to join. Jews had been admitted, perhaps as early as 1724, but certainly by 1732."

There may be, and probably are, times in life when situations develop that make compromise necessary; but when principles of right and wrong are involved, compromise is not a viable option.

A few notable quotes from well-informed sources, if I may? The Reverend Ralph Sockman, 1889-1970, former Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church in New York City, said, "The test of courage comes when we are in the minority. The test of tolerance comes when we are in the majority."

Author Brigitte Gabriel, born and raised in Lebanon, in her book entitled 'Because They Hate,' stated that, "Without understanding the past, you will never understand the present, and will have no idea how to plan for the future."

The Kabbalah notes that, "Change occurs when the pain of changing is less than the pain of staying the same."

And our learned Brother, M.W. Benjamin Franklin, once said, "The doorstep to the Temple of Wisdom is a knowledge of our own ignorance." Remember, my Brothers, friends, and guests, "People of character do not allow their opinions to be silenced."

The meaning of prejudice is apparent in the word itself. It signifies what it says, "to prejudge," to make a decision beforehand. Bro. Leonard Wenz wrote an article in the Square & Compass, in March, 1970, pointing out that English Sociologist, Dr. Samuel Lowery, writing a book on this subject, affirms as Freud does, that prejudice is a mild form of paranoia, of the persecution mania, and is caused by the projection of stored-up resentments against some object other than that which caused them.

Dr. Lowery added, "Individuals then, must have a scapegoat on which they can release these tensions. It is usually a group, a race, or a religion, and usually there is little realization of the fact. It can go as deep as the sub-conscious." He points out that if children were taught to regard prejudice as socially undesirable, and evidence of an unbalanced mind, they would logically seek other outlets for their hidden aggression. However, he concluded, "Prejudice is never reasoned into anyone; therefore, it cannot be reasoned out."

In conclusion, and for a brief moment, let me take you back to the year 1938, November. In Nazi Germany, Kristallnacht, or Night of the Broken Glass, did not happen in a vacuum. No one intervened, and it paved the way for 'unimaginable evil' – aided by the local police, the very people you would expect to protect you.

The same is true for any form of abuse, bullying, humiliation, and terrorizing. We witness it every day, whether it's in another country, on the playground, in the workplace, or in the privacy of a home. It starts in small ways, and then escalates.

Holocaust survivor, Marie Silverman's prayer that was offered in memory of Kristallnacht says it all - "Compassionate God, bless the leaders of all nations with the power of compassion. May we see the day when war and bloodshed cease, when a great peace will embrace the world."

Thank you and may God bless you.

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