

## ***Understanding Other Religions***

Genesis 14: 17-20; John 14: 1-7

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### **I. Introduction**

A year ago this week, I got an e-mail from a visitor to our Easter service who was sharing with me all of the various and sundry ways that we had been a disappointment to her. It's okay. Pastors get this kind of e-mails almost weekly. I don't take it personally.

She was, for example, very offended that we were a reconciling congregation and spoke to me at some length about that. She was also disappointed in me personally because she had read the little blurb about my sabbatical and noted that if I really wanted to be a proper role model, I would've been taking my sabbatical to deepen my Christian walk rather than studying about Buddhism. So, pastors get these kind of e-mails and you sort of let it roll off but you know it's worth unpacking why it's important for us as Christians, Christian leaders, to engage with other faith traditions because on some level, she's right. There is not as though there's any shortage of opportunity to deepen our own understanding of our faith. There is an infinite well there to draw on, so why spend the time to see what's going on in other faith traditions.

Today would've been a deep disappointment to her because we're kicking off a sermon series about looking at other faith traditions. We're going to be doing this all throughout this Easter season and we're going to look at some very specific traditions. We're going to look at Judaism. We're going to look at Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism and we're also going to spend a little time looking at some of the other members of our Christian family, the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. But today I wanted to kick us off on that series reflecting a little bit on why this is important for us to do and laying a little bit of the Biblical and theological groundwork for why we do it.

### **II. Why this is important**

One of the first and perhaps most obvious reasons that this is an important topic for us as a Christian family is that we live in an increasingly shrinking world where what happens in any place in the world is known almost instantly to us and impacts our lives often in very profound ways. We live in a world that is shaped on so many levels by people's religious convictions. We live in a world where so much of the violence and war is often rooted in people's religious convictions. And we need to understand what's going on there. Why is it that the Sunni Muslims and the Shiite Muslims are often fighting each other when they seem, from a Christian standpoint, to be members of the same family? What is at work in the dynamic that keeps such ongoing intransigence in the relationship between the Jewish community and the Muslim community in Israel-Palestine? All of these are important for who we are and how we

live our lives, not to mention the fact that so many of the debates that happen in our country are rooted in people's different perspectives on their faith, interestingly, in a country where we have been very explicit about the fact that we don't want to support one particular faith tradition. So, just educating ourselves so that we can understand the world is an important part of it.

Beyond that though I want to suggest that having some understanding of other faith traditions and how ours interfaces with them is a vitality important piece of being able to be in healthy dialogue and community with people. It's not just that we want to know about them so we can understand their world. We want to be in dialogue and community with people who are of different faiths and knowing something about their faith tradition is a really important part of that process. It's how we engage in a healthier, more productive way.

I had a lovely lunch a couple of months ago with Rabbi Zemel, who's the senior rabbi at Temple Micah, and many of you know that Temple Micah uses our sanctuary on the Jewish High Holy Days so we've got a wonderful long-term relationship with them, and we were just catching up a little bit and he was telling me about a project that he was working on, writing what he's called the American Talmud. And it sounded like a really interesting project and I said to him, "So, how does this relate to the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud?" And totally throwaway line but what he heard immediately was here's a Christian who's taken enough time to at least understand that there is a Babylonian Talmud and a Jerusalem Talmud, and he lit up like a torch because so often in our country people of other faith traditions are treated as though they are objects for our conversion.

And just to indicate that we have enough interest to have studied a tiny bit opens up a huge wellspring of goodwill and opportunity to be in meaningful relationship and dialogue. It's like when you go to a foreign country and even haltingly you try to speak a few words of their language, and there's this hugely grateful and gracious response from people who know that you took the time to try and understand.

It is so often that we as Christians compare what is best and most noble in our faith with what is worst and most ignoble in other people's faiths and that allows us to feel very smug and proud of ourselves, right? So, we hear this conversation in our public discourse all the time, how prone the Muslim community may be to violence, for example, blithely ignoring all of the wonderful scripture passages that we have in our canon that invite us to slaughter our enemies and blithely ignoring all of our history in which we have done that just fine. So, part of what we want to do is acknowledge the best of what is in another person's faith tradition as we look for the commonalities in our own.

The third reason that I think this is an important journey for us is that as we explore other faith traditions, we often find places where we have the opportunity to dig a little deeper into our own understanding of our own faith. And so many of our great religious leaders over the years have been very profoundly shaped by their encounters

with other faiths. So, Father Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk that has written so powerfully about contemplative prayer in Christian tradition, found his encounter with Buddhism to be a critical part of that journey as he engaged in some of the Buddhist traditions around meditation and that shaped how he encountered a lot of the Christian mystics in very helpful ways.

Likewise, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to his understanding of non-violence as a tool to change society not through his Christian study but through his study, his encounter with Mahatma Gandhi and Gandhi's passionate non-violence out of his own Hindu beliefs, and that then in turn shaped Dr. King's way of engaging his Christianity differently. Likewise, of course, Gandhi engaged his Hinduism from a different perspective when he started studying the teachings of Jesus. So, there's this wonderful interplay of how we engage and deepen our own faith as we engage and encounter the faith of another.

### **III. A Middle Way**

Now it's worthwhile noting just from the start to acknowledge that we've got some very mixed messages in our own faith tradition about how we do this, and those mixed messages come from a somewhat conflicted witness in Holy Scripture itself about how we engage people of other faiths. There are lots of scriptures that highlight the dangers that other faith traditions pose us so there's this repeated warning throughout a lot of the Hebrew Scriptures about getting tempted away from the true faith by the faiths that we might encounter.

When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the exile in Babylon, they had spent the last 40 years surrounded by other faith commitments and one of the very first things they did when they got back and started to rebuild Jerusalem is make sure that nobody was involved with another faith, so that if you had a spouse, a husband or a wife who was not Jewish, we read in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, that they were to be expelled from the community. We wanted to keep our faith pure.

Likewise, we hear these words from Jesus in this beautiful sermon the last night of his life in which he says to the disciples, "I am the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me." And we have heard those words over the centuries in often a very exclusive tone that if people are going to engage in a faith journey, they better do it through Jesus because that's the only way to get to heaven, right? This is not news to you, right? Give me some response. Okay.

What that does or what that has done for us as a community often is that it has meant that we have engaged other faith traditions with primarily an eye to convert them, because reasonably if Jesus is the only way to get heaven and I love you and you don't know Jesus, then I better tell you about Jesus. And that sort of colonialism has typified a lot of how Christians had been perceived around the world. But there are some counter-witnesses in scripture to that exclusivism as well, so that at the very same time that Ezra and Nehemiah were telling the Jews to put away their spouses

that were not Jews, we have beautiful stories like the book of Ruth written the same time and in Ruth we hear the story of a Moabite woman whose Jewish husband dies and who chooses to become part of the community and becomes the grandmother of Israel's greatest king, King David. And the subtext there is other faith communities bring something to the dialogue that we need to pay attention to.

When St. Paul is in Athens and he's trying to find a connecting point with the Athenians to start his sermon, he finds an altar to an unknown God and he says to them, "This altar that you all have set up is to the God of the universe and let me tell you about him." Finding connecting points.

Likewise, in this beautiful passage from Genesis, Abraham is coming back after winning a battle and two kings that he was supporting come out to greet him, and Melchizedek, King of Salem, greets Abraham in the name of his, Melchizedek's god, El Elyon, "God most high," and Abraham in his response says, "I worship the God most high also." Abraham uses the same phrase to talk about his God. He is making a connection and able to say, "Your God and my God are the same God."

Now, if exclusivism is the danger on the one side, the danger on this side is the tendency that sometimes we have to say, "Well, all paths to God must be equally valid. We have no right to judge anybody else's faith tradition. We're all on our own path to the same source." And while that has a wonderful beauty in its inclusiveness, its danger is it invites us to not bring a critical analytic eye to how we explore other people's religions and our own.

And I want to suggest that there's I think a very healthy middle ground between those two poles and it is our very central Christian affirmation that Jesus Christ is our ultimate view of what truth is about. Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of who God is and that everything gets judged through the lens of who Jesus is.

This is true frankly, dear friends, even of our own tradition. We had a dialogue recently in one of the Great Hall sessions where we're talking about scripture is the word of God and scripture is the word of God, but Jesus is *the* word of God and it's through the lens of Jesus that we interpret everything else that happens in the scripture. All of scripture is not of equal weight. We judge and evaluate the truth of scripture through the lens of who Jesus is.

And I want to suggest that as we engage in this exploration of other faith traditions, that we find that middle ground between saying Jesus is the only way to get to God and everybody's on an equal path, to acknowledge that if Jesus is our consummate revelation of the divine, that we can explore other faith traditions by looking through the lens of Jesus and finding the places of resonance and finding the places of difference. It is worth noting that this is exactly the journey that one of our greatest evangelists went on, E. Stanley Jones, when he went to India. We talked a little bit about this when we dedicated the Matthews Plaque a few months ago. But E. Stanley Jones went to India to convert the Indians to Christianity. He went to take the

good news of Jesus Christ and call Hindus out of their native faith into a relationship with Jesus. He has a wonderful phrase though that when he got to India he found Jesus was already there and that he started to understand that his role was not to convert people from Hinduism to Christianity. It was to find the places where they already knew Jesus maybe under a different name to be moving among them. And he says he gave up preaching Christianity and spent his life introducing people to Jesus and seeing where the resonance was.

There's a wonderful and very helpful concept that's part of our Methodist heritage that undergirds this which is a term that John Wesley called prevenient grace, and you've heard me use this word before. Prevenient means that which comes before. And prevenient grace is the grace that God is always extending to us even before we know that God is extending it. It is the grace that is at work in our lives and at work in the lives of people around the world regardless of their faith tradition through which God calls us into union with God's self. Prevenient grace is God moving in our lives even before we have the words to say it. And for John Wesley, prevenient grace meant that God was not just moving in the lives of Christians but moving in the lives of people of every faith around the globe calling us into relationship with God's self.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As you all know, my sabbatical last year, digging a little bit into Buddhism and Buddhist contemplative tradition was a profoundly enriching experience for me and made my spiritual life in Christ richer. What I'm hoping is that as we engage in this journey together, that your spiritual life will be richer for the journey. I want to invite you to not treat this as a series of lectures about other religions. It's not a seminary course. It will be impacted by seminary courses, but I want to invite you to use this as an opportunity to explore what you believe even more deeply, to maybe as Janet suggested, explore some ways of prayer that may feel a little bit different but maybe very profoundly meaningful. I want to invite you in Dr. Sathi Clark's words -- Sathi teaches over at Wesley -- to be passionately Christian and compassionately interfaith. We can do both of those with great integrity and find our journeys deeper because of it.

E. Stanley Jones wrote, "I was a follower of Christ with the consent of all of my being. Christ was related to all other faiths as fulfillment and I saw Christ gathering up all of these scattered truths within himself and completing and perfecting them. I could therefore be the friend of truth found anywhere." I like that line. "I could therefore be the friend of truth found anywhere." So, I want to invite you as we journey together through this Easter season to be deeply rooted in your faith at the same time that we look for and celebrate truth found everywhere.

Amen.