

“Faith and Other Religions”

Acts 4:8-12

I Corinthians 10:14-32

February 8, 2009

The Rev. Christine Chakoian

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

The content of this sermon is deeply indebted to Dan Clendenin for his reflections in, www.journeywithjesus.net.

* * *

In 1859, our church was founded as a congregation. For decades, aside from the Irish Catholics at St. Patrick’s and the freed slaves at the African Methodist Episcopal Church, we were the only game in town. It was a major crisis when the Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit began building in 1902. Today, our church’s founders wouldn’t recognize the landscape. Every brand of Christianity is found in the northern suburbs ... plus Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and more. The context of faith has changed radically for our congregation. One scholar has identified “10,000 distinct religions, 150 of which have a million or more adherents” (David Barrett in *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2001), cited by Dan Clendenin in www.journeywithjesus.net posted 5/1/06). This poses a problem for Christians: if Jesus is the only way, what about all the others? Another study estimates that Christianity in all its forms enjoys 2.1 billion believers, Islam comes in second with 1.5 billion; Hindus with 900 million; Chinese traditional religion with 394 million; Buddhists with 376 million. The non-religious alone count for over 1 billion people (www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html). We are hardly the first to wrestle with diversity. As I said, even the earliest Christians were surrounded by people who worshiped a whole constellation of gods and goddesses. In the 16th c. Reformation, one of Calvin’s contemporaries – also a lawyer, by the way – asked rhetorically, “who can doubt that the Christian religion is the true religion or rather the only one?” His answer: “Almost the whole world” (Jean Bodin (1530-1596) in *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, in www.journeywithjesus.net posted 5/1/06). As Christians of every age have had to wrestle with this question, it’s our turn now: How do we who are baptized into Jesus Christ relate to other religions?

It's a complicated question. On the one end there's the strict Christian evangelical answer that unless you profess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will not go to heaven. The most conservative form of this is what we call fundamentalism which includes additional absolutes like belief in the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, the inerrancy of Scripture, and so on. Our small group Bible study last week curriculum reminded us about an experiment Marcus Borg conducts regularly in his religion classes at Oregon State – where a huge number of students grew up outside the faith. Borg says, “When I ask them to write a short essay on their impression of Christianity, they consistently use five adjectives: Christians are literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted” (from *Heart of Christianity* (2003), cited by Dan Clendenin 4/17/06). Unfortunately, this stereotype is not uncommon in the broader culture, and to some extent it is not altogether undeserved. The most radical end of the spectrum is often the loudest, and softer voices get lost in the noise.

Perhaps in reaction, the “silent majority” of American Christians would fall on the other end of the scale: what's known as pluralism. One of the consequences of living in a “global village” is that it's hard for us to simply write off all other religions as wrong. It's certainly painful for us to imagine neighbors and friends of a different faith as doomed to eternal damnation. Pluralism allows us to believe that all religions are equally valid, and no single faith is normative for everyone. All roads lead to the same end; all paths climb the same mountain.

So what's wrong with pluralism? Writer Dan Clendenin nails it when he writes: “Radical religious pluralism sounds and feels good, and across the years I've always wanted to believe it. But I can't, because I don't think it's true.” And frankly, I have to agree. There are two major problems he points out.

First, some religious practices are “false, harmful, and even despicable.” Mother Teresa and David Koresh are not equally acceptable leaders; Aztec

human sacrifice and Buddhist almsgiving are not equally appropriate offerings; Hindu widow-burning and Jewish shiva are not equally valid responses to the death of a husband. So, Clendenin says, “pluralism that consistently treats all religions as equally valid comes at an unacceptably high price of endorsing the diabolical as well as the divine.” All religions aren’t true.

Second, all religions don’t teach the same thing, and the “least common denominator” approach to smoothing over the differences doesn’t do anyone’s belief justice. Monotheism – the worship of one God alone – is confined to the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All the other religions are either polytheistic – following a number of gods; or non-theistic – with no god at all, such as Buddhism. As Clendenin points out, contradictory religious claims “might all be false, but they cannot all be true – monotheism and polytheism, for example, cannot both be right” (5/1/06). Moreover, reductionism does a disservice to everyone’s faith. Try telling a Shiite Muslim, an Orthodox Jew and a secular humanist that they’re all the same anyway.

So if pluralism doesn’t work – if all religions aren’t equally valid or essentially the same – then what is a Christian to do? Is “my way or the highway” our only other option? Not necessarily. Let me offer a few principles that can help – principles gleaned from people much wiser than I am (most recently Dan Clendenin) that have helped me think this through.

1. We begin by finding places of agreement with other religions. St. Paul himself did this – I think of his sermon to the sophisticated people of Athens (Acts 17:22f) when he praises their religious commitment and cites their own philosopher who taught them to turn to the god “in whom we live and move and have our being” (17:28). Dirk Ficca, the Executive Director of the Parliament of World Religions, points out some places of agreement between the Christian and others: the Hindu that “believes that you cannot be at peace with your neighbor unless you are at peace within yourself”; the Buddhist who “strives to overcome anger, greed and illusion”; the Jew that “affirms life and its goodness, and then sets about

... to repair what is yet awry in the world”; the Sikh who “proclaims that all persons are equal in the sight of God, regardless of sex, class, caste, or station in life”; the Muslim who “believes that peace can only come through justice” (http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/ficca_4326.htm). It doesn’t threaten our faith to celebrate the places that Christianity and other religions coalesce.

2. We acknowledge our places of honest disagreement. As Clendenin points out, “In most areas of human knowledge, when you encounter contradictory views you do not throw up your hands and concede, ‘they’re both true.’ No, you study hard, make an informed choice, then remain open to further insight” (5/1/06). Forgive me, but it is either lazy or condescendingly dismissive to say “we’re all the same anyway.” Nor does it hurt our faith to explore our differences. In fact, one of the most intriguing benefits to cross-religious conversation is that we find out more about our *own* faith as we try to articulate it with nuance and attention.
3. We learn to articulate our beliefs and state them with conviction. Clendenin sides with the Jewish writer Michael Kinsley and others in suggesting it is not intolerant to try to convert people: “Christians should vigorously protect ... the right of every person to hold any faith or no faith at all, and extend to every ... culture unfailing courtesy and kindness. We should never prohibit, hinder, manipulate, or coerce the beliefs of others. But that does not mean you cannot conclude that someone’s beliefs might be false and consequently try to persuade them of your understanding of what is true” (5/7/06). And, I will suggest, your relationship with those who differ is made stronger by honest conversations. To speak the truth in love, and to listen carefully to know the other’s perspective: this is a much healthier relationship than avoiding a topic that is at the core of who you are.

So, these are the “rules of engagement,” if you will. The \$64,000 question remains: how do you *know* what you believe so you can articulate it clearly? I know that many of you feel inadequate to that task, and I’m sorry.

For too many years we pastors have not done a good job equipping you for these questions. But frankly, if you do not learn to speak up now, the voice for Christianity may end up being the most zealous and the most harsh. And in the end, it is your faith we're talking about. You owe it to yourself to know what you believe. Where to start? Among the three authorities for faith -- our personal experience, the tradition we've inherited, and first and foremost, Scripture -- let's take a quick glance at Scripture.

As you know, the Bible isn't monolithic -- it's more like a conversation. So alongside our first lesson, in which Peter says: "There is salvation in no one else [but Jesus Christ], for there is no name under heaven ... by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12) -- alongside this we hold other passages. Job promises that "God will treat every person with perfect love and justice" (Job 34:10, cited in Clendenin). St. Paul writes that "God is the 'father from whom every family derives its name'" (Ephesians 1:14-15). The gospel of Matthew reminds us that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (5:45). The Psalmist ... rejoices that Yahweh is 'loving toward all he has made' (Psalm 145:13). In other words, God is not only *our* God, but the God of "the whole human family" (Clendenin, 7/24/06).

Does that mean that Jesus Christ doesn't matter? Hardly. Instead, Christ is the ultimate way God extends his love to the world. In the New Testament, we see God's intentions at work: according to Paul, God intends to "reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Col. 1:20 and Eph. 1:10); "The whole creation will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21); Peter anticipates the "universal restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). How will God do this? Through Jesus Christ, God's ultimate means of salvation. And the writer of I John (2:2) reassures us that Christ is the atoning sacrifice not only for Christians "but for the entire cosmos" (citations provided in part by Clendenin 7/24/06 and 5/1/06).

How do these two truths fit together -- the universal love of God and the particularity of Jesus Christ? In the end, I am indebted to the great evangelical author and Oxford University professor C.S. Lewis who once wrote this:

“Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him” (*Mere Christianity*, cited in Clendenin 5/1/06).

Is everyone saved? Fortunately, that is not ours to decide; it is only the decision of our sovereign God. But as Scripture says, “Nothing is impossible with God” (Matthew 19:26; Luke 1:37).

Whether that’s where you stand or you come to a different conclusion, God bless you on your journey of thinking it through. Wherever you land, in the end, remember this: we are all called to speak the truth, and we are called to speak the truth in love. Or to return to where we started in our second Scripture lesson, as St. Paul once said, “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God” (I Corinthians 10: 32). Give no offense; listen carefully, think hard, and then, speak up. Amen.