

Sermon, October 12, 2014

## **Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?**

**Who** is right?

Who **is** right?

Members of thousands of religious groups all around this globe yearn to be in touch with God and to receive God's guidance as they work their way through the sometimes difficult paths of their lives.

Thousands of religious groups are -- in ways they consider important -- different from all the other groups. If they didn't have -- and recognize -- these important differences, they just wouldn't be distinct groups.

Each of these faith groups has its own stories, its own beliefs, doctrines, rituals, services, communities, music, even architecture. All of these elements of faith are created and crafted to optimize the opportunity for communion with God, and for living a good and successful life.

But again ... who among all these faith groups does all those thing right?

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Did you read the quotes at the top of today's bulletin? These are thoughts from some deep thinkers, and they suggest a totally different concept of the religions of the world. They suggest that maybe there isn't one right faith and 10,000 wrong ones. The first quote is from Khalil Gibran. He said: *I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church; for you and I are sons of one religion, and it is the spirit.*

Well, that brings up an interesting concept. If those who bow in mosques, and those who kneel in temples, and those who pray in churches are all communicating with the same God, then what, really, is the significance of all those differences among all those faiths? Does it really make a difference if worship happens on Friday, or on Saturday, or on Sunday? Does it really make a difference if prayers are lifted to Allah, or to Yahweh, or to God?

The second quote on today's bulletin is from Mahatma Gandhi: *I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world.*

What was he thinking? Does he believe that truth found in one religion doesn't make all the other religions wrong? Could it be that truth in one religion -- and a different truth in another religion -- could both be good and right? If so, then just maybe the reality is that different people in different places, with different histories and different cultures, might just find different and valid ways to worship and to communicate with God.

The third, deep-thinker quote at the top of today's bulletin is from George Carlin. As blunt and as crude as Carlin often was, there is elegance in this simple pronouncement: *Religion is like a pair of shoes ... find one that fits for you, but don't make me wear your shoes.*

It appears Carlin buys into the thoughts of Gibran and Gandhi -- that truth can be found in faiths all across the country, and over the world ... but your faith -- like your feet -- are a different size and shape from other people's and your style is not everyone else's style. You can choose the one that is right for you.

The second part of his quote, gets into a related area -- don't make me wear your shoes: don't make me join your religion; I have my own.

I have my own religion. And my religion is good. My religion brings me close to God and I receive help in living my life in good and positive ways ... just as yours is good for you.

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Most of us found our faith because we were born into it, or we moved to it from another faith group that was not a whole lot different. I grew up Methodist and I remained Methodist for 40 years. Then I switched to the United Church of Christ. There are many differences between the two – enough that they are separate denominations with no thought of ever combining.

For most of us, and for most people in the whole world, our life-long faith is the same as our parent's faith, or something not much different.

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Suppose you were shopping for a religion that is right for you – and yet you are a religious blank slate. What if you were seeking God and had no faith background, no experience, no context for choosing a faith? Where would you go?

Look at Christianity. Your biggest choices are Protestant and Catholic. The Protestants are the ones who protested and split from Catholicism. That split happened back in the 1500s. Since then, the splits have continued over differences of theology and practice – over and over again.

You take a look at becoming Protestant. What kind of Protestant? Why are there so many? Even the Methodists are part of a world of divisions. The followers of John Wesley include the United Methodist Church, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Primitive Methodist, Wesleyan, Nazarene, Congregational Methodist, Free Methodist, Evangelical Methodist, and Bible Missionary Church. And the United Methodists are talking about a possible split in 2016.

So maybe you go with Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Episcopal or Disciples, or Congregational. They all have groups, or are themselves groups, that split off. Every group is different in ways they consider so important that the differences caused splits.

You might choose Judaism – which is also split into groups.

In the U.S. during the decade of 2000-2010, the fastest-growing faith groups in the U.S. were Mormon and Muslim. These faith traditions are also split into groups. The Mormons are actually one branch of the followers of Joseph Smith. There are many others.

And Muslims, like all the other large faith groups, have gone off in different directions, based on differences in theology and practice. When Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashiid, of the World Community in Bedford, spoke here at the Church of the Covenant last year, I asked him if he had any contact with the Islamic Society of North America – the largest Muslim organization in the U.S. He said “no”. Rashiid is a Sufi Muslim, and the ISNA was created out of other expressions of Islam ... too many differences, not much connection.

Maybe you would consider Scientology, or Buddhism, or Zoroastrianism, or Krishna Consciousness.

So many choices; how do you decide? Maybe you start evaluating the faiths by asking, “Who is right?”

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By this time, doesn't it seem like a ridiculous question? Doesn't it seem that “Who is right?” is a ridiculous question?

If one of these groups is right, and is the way to God, that means the other 10,000 faith groups around the world are wrong. That means God appears to be incapable of communicating with human beings unless they utilize some kind of narrow faith portal using the correct username and 64-digit, random-character password.

That way, all members of all other groups are excluded ... doomed ... or whatever befalls the outsiders.

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If our religions divide us, rather than unite us, then we are a miserably divided human race. We are divided by thousands of differences in our beliefs, in our practices and rituals, all while we humans, by the billions, reach out to God for guidance and help.

Here's another deep-thinker quote for you. This one is from Jonathan Swift (the author of *Gulliver's Travels*): *We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.*

Swift was looking at the religion-focused divisions among us and taking note of the tribal nature of all human beings. We belong to one group, and all other groups tend to be dishonored because they are not ours – they are not us – they are different.

We have enough religion to make us part of a faith group with its own beliefs and rituals. But our religions also allow us to see differences between us and the others, and to distrust people who belong to different groups – the more difference, the less trust.

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Did you pay attention to our Old Testament reading from the Book of Deuteronomy today? Did you find it disturbing? It is one of those passages that makes us decide that the real interpretation of the scripture must be different from the one that appears on the page. In this reading from Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites they are entering a land which will become theirs. But right now, other nations live there. The Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites all live there. It is their home. God says the Israelites must, and will, defeat them all.

God says, don't intermarry with them. Break down their altars, smash their religious stones and poles, and burn their idols. You are chosen, God says, and you must destroy the others.

There is no smiley-face version of this scripture. It was the understanding of the faith culture that wrote this scripture that they had been the favored people. They resolved there had been good, God-given reasons for destroying the people who lived in the land they were moving into.

This same understanding was utilized when the European settlers moved across the country now known as the United States of America.

The narrative of the time was this: God tells the settlers they are entering a land which will become theirs. But right now, other nations live there. The Sioux, the Pawnee, the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Navaho, Apache, and Ute all live there. It is their home. God says the settlers must, and will, defeat them all.

If you understand how the West was won, you understand the ancient Hebrews as depicted in Deuteronomy. The Old Testament text ceases to sound so foreign and primitive. It is part of our own history.

But then, we heard the scripture from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is on the move with his disciples and is confronted by a Canaanite woman. She seeks healing for her daughter, and the disciples urge Jesus to simply send her away. But Jesus listens to her and appreciates and honors her faith. He grants her wish because of her great faith. This woman – you note – was a Canaanite. That is one of the tribes destroyed in the reading from Deuteronomy. Jesus' faith was clearly not the same as the faith of the culture that created the Old Testament scriptures. WWJD? We learn he would do something different. He would honor the Canaanite woman's faith.

This understanding of acceptance is extended in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In this, one of the best-known stories in the

Bible, Jesus says the most important law of all is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; (everything you have) and to love your neighbor as yourself."

That "love your neighbor" part sounds good, as long as you're Jewish -- and so is your neighbor. Or if you're a Christian, and so is your neighbor. Or if you're Hare Krishna, and so is your neighbor.

But Jesus goes on to tell a story where the good neighbor is somebody from a completely different, and reviled, group. WWJD? Jesus would honor the faith and actions of a person who does good in the tradition of his or her faith, even if it is not Jesus' faith.

In exactly the same frame of mind, my father used to come home from meetings and activities he went to in the community where I grew up, and he would say to us, "Why is it the best Christians I know ... are Jewish?" He honored all those good works – emblematic of the best works of his Christian faith – done by people he knew. But so many of the people doing those good works were Jewish. My father appreciated what those people had done. He wished more people of his own faith were doing as well.

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And what's with the title of this sermon? Isn't it time I addressed that? The title is *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* I wish I'd thought of that title myself, but I ran into it this week while thinking about this sermon. It's actually the title of a book by Brian McLaren. The full title of his book is: *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World.*

I haven't read the book. All I've done is watch a 6-minute video of McLaren talking about the book and our multi-faith world.

I do have, however, my answer to the question. Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed crossed the road to talk with the people on the other side. They crossed the road to learn from the people on the other side. They crossed the road because they saw other people with their own beliefs and rituals and names for God, and they honored them and their faith.

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Two weeks ago, on Sunday morning, my wife, Alys, and I were in Washington DC for the 911 Unity Walk. This annual walk was first held in 2005 as a way to demonstrate inter-religious cooperation and interest in peace, and youth, and unity. Among the sponsoring groups are interfaith organizations, and many faith groups, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and others.

Each year, the walk begins with a ceremony at the Washington Hebrew Congregation. Then, hundreds of walkers wander down Embassy Row, visiting houses of worship that include the Washington Hebrew Congregation, Embassy Pentecostal Evangelical Church, Annunciation Catholic Church, Sikh Gurdwara, Washington National Cathedral, St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church, Community of Christ, St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral, Soka Gakkai International Buddhist Cultural Center, Embassy of the Vatican, Khalil Gibran Memorial Park, and the Islamic Center of Washington. The walk ends with a ceremony at the Gandhi Memorial.

Alys and I represent the Society of St. Andrew at the walk. SoSA arranges a truckload of potatoes to be delivered. This year, we brought 42,000 pounds of potatoes from Maine. We had 32,000 pounds delivered directly to the Capital Area Food bank – 16 pallets of potatoes in 50-pound bags. Then we had the driver bring his 18-wheeler into the city and onto Massachusetts Avenue. We moved one pallet directly onto the DC Central Kitchen van so they could head back



to their kitchen to cook those potatoes and feed poor people in the city.

The other 4 pallets – 8,000 pounds of potatoes, we dropped onto the front lawn of Annunciation Catholic Church. That afternoon, a group of Mormon youth, joined by walkers of many other faiths, ripped open the 50-pound bags, piled up the potatoes, and put the potatoes into mesh bags, about 10-pounds per bag. Then a box truck from the Noah's Ark Food Pantry arrived. The volunteers moved 800 bags of potatoes into the food pantry truck – all those bags destined to be handed out to hungry families.

We stayed in place all afternoon, working on the front lawn of the church. The walkers moved from place to place. I was struck by the action of walkers crossing the road. Most of the stops on the walk are on the other side of the street. The people at Annunciation Catholic Church were so pleased that so many people this year crossed the road to see their church. Our presence on the front lawn created lots of activity, and made it more appealing for many people who came and bagged potatoes, and then toured the church.

There were people from Community of Christ – followers of Joseph Smith, yet not Mormon – who came from their place of worship – crossing the street to visit with us and the Catholic Church.

Many people who bagged potatoes with us then crossed to the other side because the Sikh Gurdwara – the Sikh place of worship – is directly across the street, and the Sikhs were dancing and doing demonstrations on how to tie a turban.

Why were people crossing the road as they made their way down Embassy Row? They crossed the road to talk with the people on the other side. They crossed the road to learn from the people on the other side. They crossed the road because they saw other people with

their own beliefs and rituals and names for God, and they honored them and their faith.

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Interreligious experiences make some people nervous. Interreligious activities mean doing things with people of another faith. It often means shaking hands, working side-by-side, listening to each other's music, and standing alongside someone wearing types of clothes you've never worn. You have to lose your fear of the differences between faiths. You have to accept different practices as normal for the other group, just as yours are normal for you.

I've had the privilege and opportunity of joining worship in Plainfield, Indiana, at the mosque attached to the Islamic Society of North America. It was mid-day on a Friday, when the big service is held. The preacher was Imam Mohamed Magid, the president of the Islamic Society, although he serves a Mosque in the DC area.

The Imam speaks at the headquarters Mosque in Indiana only once or twice a year, when they have major meetings. He spoke out of one of his areas of expertise. He spoke of how Muslim men can become better husbands, better fathers, better employees, better leaders, better Muslims, better people. It struck me that the same sermon could have been preached in any synagogue or church, about becoming better Jews, better Christians, better people.

If this sermon were the verse of a fictional hymn, then another verse of that hymn has been written by Mahatma Gandhi:

*I came to the conclusion long ago that all religions were true, and also that all had some error in them, and while I hold by my own religion, I should hold other religions as dear as Hinduism. So we can only pray, if we were Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu; but our innermost prayer*

*should be that a Hindu should become a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian.*

Another verse of that same hymn was written by yet another deep thinker. And he delivered it two weeks ago when, in David Edwards's sermon, he said:

*Our practice of spiritual disciplines is not for the sake of being different from others, or God forbid, thinking we are somehow better. It is only for the goal of becoming more and more awake to God and our authentic selves, and clearer about what we are given to do, and to be, for the sake of the world.*

A few minutes ago, I asked this question: If those who bow in mosques, and those who kneel in temples, and those who pray in churches are all communicating with the same God, then what, really, is the significance of all those differences among all those faiths? Does it really make a difference if that worship happens on Friday, or on Saturday, or on Sunday? Does it really make a difference if prayers are lifted to Allah, or to Yahweh, or to God?

All over the world, people reach for God in every way they know.

- They pray in the way they know how to pray, with the prayers their faith community has passed down to them.
- They sing the hymns and the songs their community has passed down to them.
- They read the holy scriptures their tradition has certified as good and authoritative, and they try to understand their meaning as it applies to their lives.
- They observe rituals and rules designed to bring them closer to God.

The differences are historic. The differences are cultural. The differences are tribal. The differences set one group apart from another.

Does God care how a human being tries to communicate, tries to learn how to do his or her best? I can't believe God creates tiny portals to make communication difficult. We all have prayers. We all have songs. We all have rituals.

We all have struggles. We all have pain. We all need hope.

We are all people, relying on our history, our culture, and our faith to guide us through our lives. We all do our best to reach out to God. God bless us all.