

“HOW IS CHRISTIANITY DIFFERENT?”

Acts 2:4-12

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12

preached on Pentecost, May 23, 2010

There’s a certain question that I hear much more than I would like. “Aren’t all religions the same? Aren’t we all worshiping the same God? Isn’t Christianity just a different version of the same old thing, based more on the culture of the place you were born than any ultimate truth?” In seminary we talked about civil religion, that interesting mix of patriotism and faith. More recently, the western world has turned toward a more generic spirituality, the proclamation that all expressions of religion are of equal value and equal worth. And when I hear it, I want to scream, “No! Not all religions are the same. Not all are of equal value. We don’t all worship the same God. Christianity is different. And I am prepared to tell you why.”

First of all, Christians worship a personal God. Not personal in the way where everyone gets to choose their very own God. No! The God we worship is a person, one with whom we can interact, with whom we can walk and talk. That in itself is pretty unusual in the world. Most of the eastern religions view God as a force or a presence. It is seen in the Star Wars saga, “May the force be with you.” Taoism, whose symbol is a circle divided by a wavy line, half light, half dark, Taoism views god as this impersonal presence that can be manipulated either for good or evil. Some view god as nothing, and others as everything, that God is in all things, animate and inanimate. There are very few religions that look to a personal God, but we do.

Not only do we have a personal God, but our God is someone who cares about us. Where many religions seek ways to use or manipulate God, to use God for our own purposes, we don’t have to do that because we believe in a God who *“so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”* (John 3:16-17) If we read the Bible in totality, we cannot help but notice that God is constantly looking for ways for deity and humanity to come together. Since we left the Garden of Eden it has always been God calling and humanity walking away. Where many faiths encourage followers to ignore, shun, or even destroy those who think differently, our God instructs us to go to them; to invite them in; to love them as he loves us. We are to forgive and pray for those who would destroy us. That is very unique among religions. We worship a personal God who cares about us and wants to be in a relationship with us. Christianity is not a matter of reciting the right rules and satisfying the appropriate rituals. Our faith is a lifestyle; it is an intimate, personal

relationship with Jesus, the anointed Son of God. We can see that relationship early on, in Genesis 3. The confrontation over that initial human sin happened when the Lord came to walk in the garden with the first couple. Seven generations later, it was said that “*Enoch walked with Lord and then he was no more, for the Lord took him.*” (Genesis 5:24) He called Abraham to follow, and then Jacob was told that God would watch over him, would be with him wherever he went. It is a personal, intimate relationship. But then the Lord took things to the next level.

There is a saying that all politics are local. If you are not concerned about the things that affect the lives of individuals at a very basic, very local level, then any and all political systems are corrupt. And not only political systems, but religious systems as well. God, in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, came to make sure that the Christian faith had a local impact. He left the glories of heaven to experience the trials, tribulations, and temptations of human life. He experienced the cravings of hunger and the fullness of abundance. He was immersed in the joys and sorrows, the birth and death of the human heart. He encountered pride and prejudice, agony and apathy first hand. And he knew the power of simple friendship, of commitment to one another. And what a commitment! Of our relationship, of God’s love and commitment to us Paul wrote, “*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:38) That love, that commitment to an intimate, personal relationship with God is a pretty rare find among the religions of the world.

Have you noticed how Jesus treated other people? He treated people not as groups but as individuals. The Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well told him point blank that his people, the Jews, don’t associate with her people, the Samaritans. Jesus’ reply. “So what?” Critics were regularly complaining about the lowlifes Jesus was hanging around with, even saying that if he was truly sent from God, if he was a prophet, then he would know what those men and women were really like. He would have nothing to do with them then. But Jesus did know them, their life, their faith, their heart. Jesus said that they were people who liked him, who wanted to be with him, who were doing their best to please God. Why shouldn’t he be with them?

Jesus was much more upset with those spiritual leaders who would not interact with those who needed help; he was upset with those who saw their faith only as a set of rules that needed to be kept; a series of rituals that needed to be satisfied. If that is your idea of faith then you don’t need, know, or serve a personal God. Jesus went to the extreme to build a relationship with us. To know what we must go through, what we must endure day by

day, the pleasures and the pains of life. And since he came to walk among us, to be with us, he understands; he can help us, strengthen us, touch us, love us, accept us, so we might be able to find the passion, the peace, and the joy of living in a loving intimate relationship with God in the world. That is pretty rare in most faiths.

He treated us as individuals. And that only makes sense since he created us as individuals. In Acts we read about the birthday of the Church on Pentecost long ago. *“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”* (Acts 2:1-4) Understand that when the Spirit of God touched everyone, they all began to speak, but each one spoke differently. They were all from one culture, all one place, having grown up with the same language, but God comes along and everyone was talking differently. Interesting enough they were all saying the same thing, all praising God, but they were all saying it differently.

These days, in order to join church, youth have to go through Confirmation. They had to be confirmed which means, “to make strong; to strengthen.” We don’t want to change who they are. We only want to strengthen their knowledge and faith about God, about Jesus, about the United Methodist Church. By contrast much of the world, and many religions around the world want to conform rather than confirm. “We all have to go through the same process - look the same, act the same, think the same, talk the same. We must all be similar.” That’s the mind set. But when God touched the disciples, they all talked differently. Pretty unique.

But then again, God deals with us individually. Each one of us has a unique shape for ministry. And each of us has a unique place for ministry. I have talked about these things before. Our PLACE in ministry is defined by five things - our Personality, Learning our Spirit Gifts, our Abilities, Connected with our Passion, and our Experiences. Sometimes I will talk about the five things that SHAPE us - our Spiritual gifts, our Heart, our Abilities, our Personality, and our Experiences. Our SHAPE and PLACE are connected, but no two people are exactly alike. That is because God did not create us all to be the same. We were created to be in relationships with one another. We were created to help and assist one another. That would not be possible if we all are the same, if everyone had the same talents and abilities. He allows us to reach out to one another in love and humility, to say, “I need something that you can provide that I cannot. Will you help me? Will you walk with me?” It is our unique PLACE and SHAPE that both prepare us for particular ministries, and encourage us to build strong, lasting, intimate

relationships. And Christianity is about those strong relationships with God and with one another; the relationships that make life meaningful. But that concept is pretty unique among religions around the world.

There are many aspects within Christianity that are rare among the religions of the world. But there is one thing that we find no where else. That is GRACE. Grace is God's love in action. Grace is when God gives me what I need, not what I deserve. Grace is anything that I desperately need that I don't deserve, that I could never repay but God gives it to me anyway. Grace is the face that God puts on when He looks at my failures, my faults, my mistakes, but does not look away.

Every relationship is built on grace. In every relationship, we have those times when we forgive and forget what another has done. And if we do not forgive and forget, if we are determined to hold on to that grudge, any relationship, every relationship is disrupted and destroyed. In every other religion we must earn our way. We must earn our salvation. Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims, followers of the Eastern religions and nature religions, all have to earn their salvation, work their way back into the good grace of whatever god they are seeking. Even the pantheists, who believe that “god” is in everything, including themselves, have to prove themselves worthy of god, even though they are god, and that doesn't make any sense to me.

But Yahweh, the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, our God is an awesome God who calls to us, welcomes us back, restores us, renews us, refreshes us, forgives us, and continues to love us in spite of who we are and what we have done. Grace gives us the opportunity for life and joy and peace simply because God loves us so much. And that is very unique in the world.

So when you hear that all religions are the same, that we all worship the same god, pause a minute, and remember the powerful love of our personal God, the grace of Jesus Christ that overcomes all sin, all worries and doubts, all our imperfections. Remember that Jesus loves you just because you are you. And that is something you will find no where else outside the loving arms of our God. Receive him into your heart. Receive him into your life once again. And go forth to be confirmed in your faith, to build and strengthen your divine relationship, so God can bless the entire world through your love, through your faith, and through your life. And in your life may it be so. Amen.