

Questions of Faith:
Is Christianity the Only Way?
Acts 17
February 14, 2010

My daughter Connie has been invited to her first Bat Mitzvah. A friend of hers from school is 13 and that's the age young Jewish persons go through this coming of age service.

Given the diversity of this area it's not surprising Connie has friends that are Jewish. I would bet a majority of students going to a Southfield, Birmingham or Bloomfield school end up being invited to at least one Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah Celebration. (Bat Mitzvahs are for girls and Bar Mitzvahs are for boys)

It sure was different when I grew up. Being raised on the east side of Detroit, everyone in my elementary school was Christian. The only question was whether one was Protestant or Catholic. Even when the schools were integrated in the early 70's, the diversity was with race not ethnicity.

I can't recall when I met a Jewish person for the first time, or a Muslim, or a Buddhist or a Hindu. It was probably when I was at Wayne State that I was exposed to the diversity of people.

Even today, if you live in a small town out in the country, you probably will be surrounded by sameness. Live in any metropolitan area however and you will be interacting with all sorts of people. Every one of us here this morning could probably think of a neighbor, a doctor, a coworker, and a schoolmate that is not a Christian.

With such diversity of faiths, the question becomes where do they all fit into our Christian perspective? Is Christianity the only way? Are these good people, condemned by God because they do not have faith in Jesus Christ?

As I finish my Questions of Faith sermon series, I thought it would be helpful to address this issue. Of the questions I received from the congregation, several had this basic concern. Is Christianity it or does God honor other people, other faiths?

Over the years there have been several ways to view this question of world religions. One perspective would be the pluralist perspective. According to this view, all religions are equally valid paths to the Ultimate Reality – a term that we might consider synonymous with God. To put it another way, pluralist believe that religious people around the world are all saying much the same thing but in a different language.

In this day of political correctness, this perspective honors all people. You want to be fair, open-minded and nonjudgmental. I would say this is the most common held belief by people today.

If you learn what each religion believes however, you can't honestly say they are all saying the same thing. For example, Buddhists say there is no God while in Hinduism there are up to 30,000 different Gods. Clearly they are not saying the same thing.

Though one's intentions are good, the pluralist perspective does not sit well with those within a particular faith group. I don't think a Muslim would agree that his faith is the same as a Christian. As a Christian do you feel your religion is saying the same thing as a Buddhist? Probably not!

Another view is the relativist view. This point of view doesn't hold one religion more relevant than another. The opinion here is that everyone can believe what he or she wants to believe. The underlying assumption in this point of view is that religion is a subjective thing. If people want to believe in a God, then they can go ahead and do so.

Carl Marx held this belief. For him, religion was the opiate of the masses. The way to give struggling people hope is to teach them there is a God that cares for them. Fredrick Nietzsche, a late 1800's philosopher took this same line of thought and questioned the existence of God. He is attributed to saying "God is Dead". I saw a t-shirt once where the front said God is Dead – Nietzsche. On the back are the words "Nietzsche is dead – God.

A third way to view other religions is an exclusivist perspective. Those with this view believe Christ is the only way. Bible verses can be quoted which says if you don't give your life to Christ, you are condemned to hell. To the exclusivist, it does not matter whether persons of other faiths are devout, or whether they are earnestly seeking God, or whether they have had a real

opportunity to receive Christ. They believe that unless people accept Christ, God is bound to exclude them from eternal life.

According to the exclusivist perspective Christianity is the only way. But is it? According to most estimates about 1/3 of the people on earth are Christian. Is God going to condemn the other 2/3 of the population? I have a hard time believing that! How then are we to understand Christianity in relationship to other faiths, other beliefs?

I heard an analogy recently that I really liked. Do you all know the story of the blind monks that are trying to describe an elephant? By feel each one describes what the elephant is like. The one touching the trunk says an elephant is long and narrow. The one touching the legs says an elephant is wide and rough. The one touching the tusk says an elephant is smooth.

Each one of those descriptions is correct; they just don't give the full picture. If we can think of God being the elephant, each religion does its best describing the part of God they know, they experience. Given this understanding there is validity in each faith perspective. Each perspective however is only part of the picture.

In our faith we believe Christ is the incarnation of God. If we use my analogy, we would say that Christ is the elephant. By coming to earth in the form of a man, God gave us a full picture of what God is like, and what God expects of us.

In Christ we saw a compassion for all people. In Christ we saw a model for inclusion, not exclusion. It is those characteristic that we are expected to live out.

I believe we have the full understanding of God. I believe God desires every man, woman and child to come to know God through Christ. Just because I believe that, I don't feel superior over other people of other faiths. I believe it does a disservice to Christ to ridicule or put down other faiths. It is only by our love, not our arguing that people will be open to hear about Jesus.

Is Christianity the only way? Only God knows the answer to that question. It's not my job to judge other people. Following the elephant, I – we, are called to love others and share what God has done for us. Amen