

Sermon for September 14, 2008

Boscobel & Mt. Zion UMCs

Text: Genesis 11:27-32

Title: "Truth or Consequences"

Introduction: Today we start a new series called, "World Religions and the Gospel Truth". Why? Why would we use up valuable time in a Christian church to talk about other people's religious beliefs? Why would we want to compare our religious beliefs with other people's religious beliefs?

Let me begin to answer by saying this: I believe that, even though Boscobel does not have a Muslim Mosque or a Jewish Synagogue or a Hindu Worship Center, most of us will, before we die, have a co-worker, a family member, a fellow student or a teacher that practices a religion other than Christianity. Why do we care? Because our Bibles tell us that our privilege and our job as servants of Jesus Christ is to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." And to "teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you (Matt. 28:19-20a)." That includes people who practice their faith in different ways than we do!!

In order for us to do that well and not just irritate, annoy and generally put off people of other religions because of our insensitivity and brassiness, we need to learn what other people believe and why. Only then can we understand how to approach them relationally and in a way that is Christ-like. Only then will we have any chance to invite them to get to know Jesus Christ.

I also feel that a study of what other people believe helps us solidify an understanding of what we, as Christians, believe. This will only help us to be able to verbalize our knowledge and experience of the Christian faith. *Wow! Growing in our faith is part of the goal of this series ... Can you believe it!?!?*

Any discussion about World Religions brings up a whole bunch of questions. Maybe there are some questions you would like to ask, but have never had the chance ... *or were scared to?!?* You know the two topics you don't bring up with a stranger, right? Politics and Religion! There is a reason ... you never know what another person is going to say about those topics that will cause you to say, "Hey, wait a minute, right there!"

Well, here is our chance to get some questions about religion answered... Oh, and I will also answer one political question of my choosing. Are you ready for that? Good. Here it is: Coming off the week that we remember the lives of Americans lost because a group of Muslims organized and carried out an attack on our country ... knowing that the Arabs and the Jews are continually fighting in and around the Holy Land (Israel) ... knowing that a couple of years ago there was a major conflict along the borders of India and Pakistan ... the question is; why?

Answer: They are holy wars. It does not have a whole lot to do with oil or money or land or politics. We are dealing with: Muslims vs. Christians, Muslims vs. Jews and Muslims vs. Hindus. ... It has to do with belief systems that are in conflict!

As Christians, we have to understand that. In order to understand those happenings, we have to understand the religious systems involved. In order to be Christ-like with everybody, including those who do not believe the way we do, we have to understand who we are talking to. We have to get answers to the questions we are not sure how to ask...

Let's start answering those questions we have with our Scripture for today...

**READ GENESIS 11:27-32 NOW AND PRAY!**

Now, before we go any further, let me remind you that this series is going to be a preliminary to World Religions 101. There is no way I can go as deep into all the beliefs of each of the religions we will be talking about as I would like to. There just isn't enough time. I encourage you all to do further study as your interest takes you there. I do believe that if we truly study the other religious beliefs of the world, it will strengthen our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and God's only Son.

Questions:

I. #1 = "Why Are There So Many Different Religions?"

**A. Does God Really Exist?**

1. Some people look at the incredible number of different religions and think that is a reason to believe that there is no God. Why? Because if there was a God surely this God would make clear to people the one right path, right?!?
2. Some people look at the multiple religions as reason to believe that God and religion is a human invention.
3. I think a little bit differently. I see the fact that humans have had spiritual thoughts and questions and feelings and experiences throughout history and in every culture in the world as a sign that there must be a God.
4. There has to be some reality when people, who are not connected in any way, have similar desires and thoughts and experiences.
  - a. No matter where in the world you live, when a loved one dies, people have believed that there must be something beyond life here on earth.
  - b. It doesn't matter whether you live in Wisconsin or the West Indies, when we see something beautiful in creation, something inside of us wants to praise the Maker.
  - c. When one spends time alone in prayer ... doesn't matter whether one is Buddhist, Jew, and Muslim or Christian, there is a sense of peace in our whole being.
5. I believe that these common experiences point to the reality of God.

**B. We See Things Differently**

1. Now, Religion aside, we, as humans, often see the same thing differently.

- a. Ever heard of having different witnesses in a trial and they all saw the accident that happened a little bit differently?
- b. Ever gone to a movie with spouse or friends and while talking about the movie, you can't help but wonder if they were in the same movie as you?
2. Why are we surprised when human beings in different parts of the world come up with different solutions for what they need spiritually?
3. As I think about who God is, I believe that God is so far beyond our comprehension that there is no way our thoughts, our words, our music or our art work could possibly capture what God looks like or any depth to who God really is.
  - a. Paul wrote well in I Cor. 13:9, 12, "We know only a little ... Now we see things imperfectly, as if in a poor mirror..."
  - b. The greatness of God compared to the smallness of our human minds does not add up well for us to say we have God figured out.
  - c. I believe that when we actually see God face-to-face, we might be more than a little bit surprised.

**C. *How God Allows Us to Learn***

1. I think that when we talk about religious differences, it has to do, in part, with how God allows us to learn...
2. In some ways, it's kind of like our kids learning patterns.
  - a. They are not born with all the information they need for life ... they, as we, learn it gradually ... as we are ready and capable of thinking that way and understanding.
  - b. I don't think Lily (my almost 2 year-old) is quite ready for the Science classes my freshman in high school is taking.
3. Think about the history of our religion ... we also continue to grow in our understanding of God and I believe that God lets us know things when we are ready for them.
  - a. Abraham's Dad, Terah, believed that there was way more than one God ... a polytheist ... more than one God.
  - b. Somehow God revealed God's self to Abraham in a way that caused Abraham's descendents to believe that there was just One God (monotheism).
  - c. Later, Moses received a little more specific direction than Abraham had when it came to ethics and morals.
  - d. It appears that God is willing to reveal God's self to humanity a little bit at a time over time.

- e. It's like God doesn't mind us going through a little trial and error stuff to learn about Who God is.
4. As a parent, I understand that. While working on homework, our daughters will often ask Sarah and/or me how to spell a word.
- a. My initial reaction is to just spell it, so they will leave me alone ... or so that I will look smart to them.
  - b. Then I realize that me just answering is not going to help my daughter learn. Instead, I start giving them hints ... "how do you think it's spelled?" ... "Sound it out...", "Where's the dictionary?", etc.
  - c. What I'm doing is helping my daughter not just know it and write it down, but how to learn and teach herself some of the things she will need to know in life. It also means she might make some mistakes along the way.
5. I think God deals with us in similar ways. About 3800 years ago, most humans were 'polytheists' (more than one God) and people believed that different gods did different things ... some created, some interacted, some brought justice, some healed, some did other miracles.
- a. Well, around that time, God decided to give Abraham a little hint (like I give my daughters).
  - b. We call these hints, "special revelation". These are ways that God used to help guide humans in their quest to know God.
  - c. Examples of "special revelation" = The Law, The prophets, God's history with the children of Israel, The Bible, and especially through God's Son, Jesus Christ!
  - d. This hint or 'special revelation' to Abraham. God essentially told Abraham, "Listen, Abe, I know that all of your ancestors believed that there were a bunch of different Gods, but all of those other gods were really just Me and all the different ways that I interact with people. So, I'm telling you that there is just ONE GOD ... it's Me! If you believe me and live like it, I will make a great nation of you and your offspring."
  - e. Was God mad at those people? No, God was understanding that they needed a hint to learn more.
6. About 600 years later, God gave another hint. This one was for Moses. God took Moses up a mountain and said, "Moses, I have a plan for humanity." God gave Moses the 10 Commandments and a bunch of other laws and said, "Moses, go back and teach My people these things, so they know without a shadow of doubt what is right and what is wrong."

7. Then there were more hints through the Old Testament Prophets.
8. Finally, God revealed God's self like never before when God sent Jesus the Son. Our knowing Jesus Christ gives us a true look at Who God is and what God expects of us!
  - a. This is the measure we Christians use to judge all else in this world.
  - b. As we look at other religions, Jesus Christ will be what we truly compare with whatever the other World Religions say.

So, those are some reasons why there are so many different religions...

II. #2 = "How Should Christians View Other Religions?"

A. **Five Major Religions**

1. First, let's talk about the Five Major Religions that we will be addressing during this worship series. Let's start with some numbers, considering we have approximately 6 billion people in the world...
  - a. 2 Billion (About 1/3) are Christians.
  - b. 1.3 Billion Muslim (1/5 of world population).
  - c. 900 Million Hindus
  - d. 360 Million Buddhists
  - e. Judaism = approximately 14 Million
  - f. Total for these 5 religions = 4.5 Billion ... more than 2/3 of the world population.
2. In the U.S., 77% of the population claim to be Christian and 15% have no religious claims.
  - a. 1.3% of U.S. populations = Judaism
  - b. .5% is Muslim, .5% is Buddhist, .5% is Hindu
3. BUT, over the past 10-12 years, here are the U.S. growth percentages...
  - a. Christianity = 5%
  - b. Islam/Muslim = 110%
  - c. Buddhism = 170%
  - d. Hinduism = 237%
4. Why am I telling you this? 2/3 of the world's population is not Christian. So, perhaps billions of people are living lives faithful to their beliefs about their god or gods.
  - a. You know, as Christians we believe that God knows each person, while they are still in the womb (Psalm 139). So, God probably knows each person by name, knows their stories and their prayers ... even if not addressing God by name.

- b. If that's true, we need to decide how we are going to view other religions. Will our response reveal the character of Jesus Christ ... our God in the flesh?!?
- c. I believe that as we approach the different religious beliefs of the world, we will have at least 3 perspectives on how on how to do that...

**B. #1 = The Pluralist Perspective**

1. The Pluralist Perspective is considered a contemporary/post-modern approach to religious beliefs. A Pluralist would say, "All religions are separate but equal paths to God/Ultimate Reality."
  - a. The belief is that all these different religions are essentially saying the same thing to the same or similar God figure or truth, but in different languages.
  - b. This is very open-minded, fair and non-judgmental, which seems to many to be very Christian. "Wouldn't Jesus be fair and open-minded?"
  - c. A pluralist might say something like, "Your truth is true for you and my truth is true for me ... Why can't we be friends?!?"
2. Two reasons to struggle with this perspective or at least look at it more seriously...
  - a. 1<sup>st</sup> = I don't think that this view really honors the belief systems we are talking about. Most Muslims would probably not feel good about or honored by hearing that their faith is different but equal to the Hindu faith. They would feel that you obviously did not understand their faith then. If we understood, we would not believe that Islam and Hinduism were "equally valid paths to Ultimate Reality."
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> = It does not take the time to look carefully at the different beliefs and set levels of logic and validity. "I'm okay; you're okay" does not take time to understand which is closer to the truth than others. If one faith says there are many gods and another says there is only one, these cannot be reconciled by pluralism. Twice within the last 30 years we have watched while religious leaders led their followers to mass suicide ... "I'm okay; you're okay"?
  - c. I like being fair and respecting other people's beliefs, but I don't think pluralism is fair to anyone ... self included.

**C. #2 = The Exclusivist Perspective**

1. The Christian that subscribes to the Exclusivist Perspective, might say, “Anyone who does not accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord will be condemned to hell.” It does not matter if one is devout in their faith, if it’s not Christianity, it doesn’t matter...
2. A more forgiving Exclusivist might say that if people have not had a chance to hear about Jesus Christ, then God will judge them according to what they could know.
3. According to this perspective, 2/3 of the world population will not experience salvation ... they have not received Jesus as Lord!
4. Only problem with this ... it’s not real consistent with whom we know Jesus to be. Most of us did not study all of the world religions and choose Christianity ... it was chosen for us. So, because 2/3 of the world was not born into OUR society, they cannot be saved?!? Where is God’s GRACE in that?
5. Yes, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) But, He also said that he came to seek out and save the lost ... don’t forget the thief on the cross next to Jesus ... think GRACE and we’ll come back to this next week.

**D. #3 = *The Inclusivist Perspective***

1. This perspective believes that God is everywhere and at work among all people even if they have not heard the Good News of Jesus Christ.
2. The Inclusivist Christian believes that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God: God in person. They believe that Jesus life, death and resurrection are the good news for all people!
3. The Inclusivist also believes that God may be involved with non-Christians too (Wesley called this PREVENIENT GRACE). Maybe God works through other religious beliefs and gives those people hints as to Who God is, just like us.
4. Maybe God sees what’s in peoples hearts and how they conduct themselves and how they attempt to serve God in their lives, whether they’ve heard the name of Jesus or not. Maybe that service is a demonstration of the faith they do have.
5. The idea that God has mercy and love for people who are outside of the Christian Faith ... God’s willingness to speak to them in religious terms that they understand right now is what I see from our Scripture for next week ...

...I’ll tell you all about that next week in Part II of “Truth or Consequences”!

Let’s Pray!

- III. #3 = “How Is God at Work in Other Religions?”
  - A. The Wise Guys
  - B. God’s Not As Small As We Suppose
  
- IV. #4 = “What Is the Fate of Those Who Earnestly Pursue God Through Other Religions?”
  - A. An Understanding of Biblical Grace
  - B. “No One Comes to the Father except by Me.”
  - C. Got a Problem with That?
  - D. Then, Why Preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

A special thanks to Rev. Adam Hamilton and his staff for the sermon series and book on World Religions, *Christianity and World Religions*. I am using this book as my main source of outline and information for this sermon series.