Sunday, April 28, 1991

IS ONE RELIGION AS GOOD AS ANOTHER? (NO. 1 IN A SERIES: SERMONS YOU'VE REQUESTED)

Acts 17:22-31

Today, I am beginning a new sermon series with the overall title—"Sermons You Requested." A few weeks ago, I invited the members and friends of this congregation to let me know what topics, issues, or questions you wanted future sermons to address. The response has been gratifying. If you have not yet made your request known, you can still do so.

Several people asked questions around the theme of the relationship of the Christian faith to other religions. Some of the questions were: Is one religion as good as another? If so, why do we send missionaries to try to convert people to the Christian faith? If all theistic religions worship the same God, why be Christian? Does God care? Don't all religions have a lot in common? Why then should Christian missionaries go to another country and urge the people to forsake their ancestral faith? Are not all peoples of the earth traveling at their own pace along their own roads to the same destination? These are tough questions!

First, from the very beginning of the Christian faith, after the resurrection of Jesus, his followers have always believed that the good news of God's love for all people and all of creation is meant to be shared with others. When you have good news, you want everyone to hear it. The early church also remembered that Jesus told them, "Go and make disciples of all nations," in other words, tell everyone about God's love for all people. Additionally, it has always been at the center of the Christian Church's message that we are not only to tell people of God's love, but we are also to live out that love in acts of mercy and justice.

We need to confess, however, that we have made — and still make — mistakes in how we tell and live out the good news of God's love. Frequently, in the past and present, the church has become identified with colonial powers and seemed more interested in transplanting a culture than in sharing the good news of God.

In the historical novel Hawaii by James Michener, for example, the story points out that some of the early missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands from New England seemed to believe that individuals had to become New England Congregationalists in habit and custom before they could become Christians, even to the point of dressing like New Englanders of that period. And not only that, some of the early missionaries ended up almost owning the islands. Later, it was said, "The missionaries came to Hawaii to do good, and they did right well." Frequently, the missionaries did not turn over the church to the new Christians of that country but insisted on keeping control.

We also have to confess that, in the past and present, there has been — and still is — a large amount of gross intolerance on the part of many who claim to be Christian, to the point of classifying all non-Christian religions as equally bad. We have not always tried to understand the background and basis of faith in other religions but have instead said that all are worthless and their adherents are condemned to hell forever. Perhaps some of you can remember sermons whose logical conclusion was that Socrates, Plato, Moses, Elijah, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, and Mahatma Gandhi were all in hell.

And some who claim to follow Jesus go on to say that unless you interpret the message of Jesus in exactly the same way as they do, you're wrong, and God will cast you into the outer darkness.

Then there are those who swing to the opposite extreme and like to say that all religions are equal or that any religion is better than none. I've heard people say, "It doesn't matter what kind of religion you have as long as you are sincere and follow it." Suppose there's a religion that believes in child sacrifice and that to placate an angry god, children must be killed. Can you honestly then say, "It doesn't make any difference what kind of religion you have as long as you are sincere and follow it"? Not all religion is good, and some can be very bad. One's religious faith can be lyrical, lovely, and humane. Religious faith can also be wicked and damaging to the human spirit, even among those of us who call ourselves Christian. A study of history reveals the evil that religion can do — the Crusades, the ritual sacrifice of human beings, witch hunts, the Inquisition, the burning at the stake of heretics, and religious wars. Religion has been used to justify slavery, declare one race of human beings superior to another, and to reduce women to second-class status.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote: "What disastrous results religion can produce in human character — bigots, fanatics, hypocrites, narrow-minded, self-righteous, opinionated, intolerant. The very word 'bigot' is a condensation of 'by God.'"

On the other hand, it was followers of Jesus who started some of the first schools, colleges, and universities. Christian people organized the first hospitals, orphanages, homes for the longer-living, and more. Religious faith has inspired great art, magnificent music, given meaning to life, comforted the suffering, and offered courage for the living and dignity in dying. It does make a difference what a person believes — what one's religious faith is. One religion is not as good as another.

Here, then, are several guidelines that help distinguish good religion from bad religion, and these can also be applied within a religious faith. They can help us decide between a good kind of Christian faith and a not-so-good Christian faith. These guidelines come straight from the ministry and teachings of Jesus.

Good religion enlarges the human spirit. Bad religion shrinks the human spirit. Good religion helps to turn us into loving, generous, life-affirming, joyous people.

Good religion is not afraid of questions or doubt. Good religion knows it does not have all the answers. Good religion does not suppress human curiosity. Bad religion tells you it has all the answers and that all you need to do is obey the rules.

A friend told me about going to her minister when she was in late adolescence. As is the case with many young people, she was inquisitive, had lots of questions, and also many doubts. When she began to tell her minister about her questions and doubts, the minister said, "You think too much. You need to suppress your doubts, forget your questions, and simply have faith." The young woman was shaken by this advice. She wondered to herself, "For what did God give us our minds if not to ask questions and to seek new knowledge?" I repeat, good religion is not afraid of questions or doubt. It is not afraid to explore other fields of knowledge.

Good religion always points beyond itself. In other words, it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The purpose of the Christian Church is the increase among people of the love of God

and neighbor, not to increase among people the love of religion itself. Good religion seeks to be open to people with all kinds of problems and is there to serve, not to be served.
Bad religion calls attention to itself; it makes religiousness or piety the goal of its endeavors and it always ends up trivializing religious faith. Bad religion is mostly concerned with a lot of little, silly rules and regulations. It seeks power over people instead of empowering people.

Good religion is inclusive; bad religion tends to be exclusive. Good religion encourages people to become humble, forgiving, accepting, loving individuals. Good religion practices unconditional love. Bad religion, on the other hand, leads its followers to become self-righteous, judgmental, dogmatic, know-it-all people who are convinced that they, and they only, have all the right answers.
In speaking about good religion, St. Paul wrote, “The fruit (or the effect) of good religion is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” “By their fruits you will know them,” said Jesus.

Good religion is inclusive in that it proclaims that God’s love is continually and freely given to all who accept it. God’s love cannot be bought or earned. Good religion teaches that God loves you and God loves me, and that God loves every living creature — the retarded child, the criminal on death row, the patient in the mental hospital, the starving beggar on the street, the rich, the poor — all are loved by God and all are welcome at God’s banquet.

These guidelines help us to understand how we as Christians are to relate to people of other religions. They remind us that we as Christians, according to our own faith, do not have a monopoly on God’s love. God does not love Christians more than pagans, atheists, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or Jews.

One way of describing the difference between Christians and non-Christians is that Christians are those who know of God’s love for all people and all of creation, whereas those who are not Christians may not know this.

To put it another way, we who are Christians believe that the love of God as revealed in Jesus is the source of whatever truth, goodness, beauty, and holiness there is in human experience. Part of our mission as Christians is to let others know that God is the ultimate source. Wherever there is a love that cares for the hurt and the helpless, for the true and the good, there the spirit of God as seen in Jesus is present. Again, our mission as followers of Jesus is to let others know this.

When the Apostle Paul, who is often described as the first Christian missionary, went to tell others about God’s unconditional love as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he never put other religions down.

When he was speaking to the people of Athens, for example, he said, “I see how extremely religious you are. You have statues all over the city to many different gods. I also noticed that you have an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ I’m going to tell you about that God.” Then he went on to speak about the one God of all creation who was revealed most especially in Jesus. Paul was inclusive. He told them this one God made all people everywhere.

Paul knew that all religions in one way or another have as one goal the connecting of people to God. Thus, many religions have worked out elaborate systems to bridge the chasm between people and God. Sometimes it has been by sacrifice of one kind or another. The Christian faith

is unique in that it proclaims that God has come among us. God takes the initiative. There is nothing we have to do to earn God's love. It is freely given.

In talking with people of other religions and with those who claim to have no religion, we can admit that God is revealed to people in many different ways, through other religions and through creation itself. God can be revealed to us as we study nature, physics, mathematics, or any other kind of science or field of knowledge. Some people experience God's presence for the first time in doing acts of love or mercy with others or in being the recipient of an act of love or mercy from someone else. In other words, the Christian does not deny that God works in many ways and in many places. In fact, part of our mission as followers of Jesus is to point out to others where God is at work, where God is being revealed.

We also testify to God's love working in the world in the way we treat other people, in the way we reach out to them.

Years ago, I remember meeting Frank Laubach personally. He was a great missionary whose words were the Christian message and whose works showed God's love for all people. He was known all over the world as the apostle of literacy. He and his colleagues taught people all over the world to read. He told of visiting one of the wildest remaining areas on the globe, the immense island of New Guinea. His team had developed lessons in 13 languages for that area. The people on the island had advance news that the literacy team was coming. Dr. Laubach said that as they approached the airfield, they saw thousands of people waiting for them, and when they landed, they crowded in close, wanting to learn right away. In half an hour, they had their charts out and began teaching. They kept teaching morning, noon, and night for a week. It was bedlam, not a school, for everybody wanted to learn first.

At the end of the first week, they had taught 36 to read the first book. On Sunday, they gave those 36 diplomas in a church service and then told them to begin teaching as well.

Later, Dr. Laubach said, the chiefs of the tribes met in solemn council and after the meeting came to tell us what they wanted. They said, "This is the greatest event in our history. You have done more for us than anyone who ever lived. We like your religion because it does so much for us. We want to be Christians. So we have voted to request you to go and baptize everybody right away," (16,000 of them).

As followers of Christ, we have the greatest story ever told to live and to tell. We see a world, a creation, where God is at work, ceaselessly striving to bring about more good to more people in more places and in more ways. In God, we live and move and have our being. We know that God created us and all creatures to live together as sisters and brothers, to live in peace and harmony with one another and with creation. As Christians, it is not our task to destroy other religions but, humbly with God's help, to work to fulfill them. Amen.