

Apr 20—Is Jesus the only way or one of many?

In my sermons I always like to reference what's going on in the world, in our culture and media, as well as personal interests. I thought it was interesting that right after I finished the sermon series on faith and science... endeavoring to show that there is no conflict between the two... that they answer different questions and offer different ways of knowing... that science and theology are best when working together. You got Ben Stein coming out with his movie Expelled on Intelligent Design... which has as its basic premise... science is godless... and the creation story is literal. And I wonder which of the two messages will have the greatest hearing. And the current sermon series on Amazing Grace and how exclusive are the exclusive claims of Christianity... coming at a time when we have the Tibetan Buddhist Dali Lama in town, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Imams, rabbis, 15 other faith expressions all talking about compassion. Pope Benedict is in the country for the first time and one of his first stops was to a Jewish Synagogue to wish them a happy Passover. What is going on, all these spiritual leaders talking together, acknowledging and respecting one another, and each in their own way loving God. It is in that context we approach the huge theological question: are their many roads into the Kingdom of God in which Christianity is one... or is Jesus the only way and without accepting him as Lord, its an eternity in hell fire damnation, which would apply to the majority of the human race. As I said last week, and that message should be on tv tonight at 7 on channel 3. Or you can read a transcript at our website, flchurch.com click on sermons. How you understand and experience God's grace will color every relationship you have, with God, his Son Jesus, with every person you meet, how you read the Bible and how you see yourself. And the first thing that we have to settle on in each of our own personal theology... our understanding of God, is what is he like. What is the character of God... that I get from the Bible, from the teachings of the church, and my own personal experience.

Last week I suggested from reading many passages in the Old Testament, that from the beginning God was a God of grace and love and desires that every person born be included in the family. We also acknowledged that many in the ancient faith community experienced and interpreted events in their culture as the demonstration of an angry, wrathful, vengeful. And that is in there. A real fear of God smiting them. Or a joyful expectation of God smiting there enemies. You can't get around the fact that many parts of the Bible present very different pictures and experiences with God. So what do you do with that, other than picking and choosing what you like best? Martin Luther gave us some advise: he said you let Scripture interpret Scripture. You let what it says here, inform what may be going on over here. Because even though the depiction of God can vary, we understand God himself to be very consistent. We know that God is and was

the same God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. That is the heart of the Christian faith. Along with the witness of the New Testament. Like we read in I John 4:7 Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God... because God is love. I John 4:7

So what do we learn from Jesus and the theologians of the new testament about what God is like and his desire for the salvation of everyone?

To the Roman officer, who probably believed in a number of greek gods and fanciful superstitions, who came to Jesus to have his servant healed:

Matthew 8:11 (TEV) He said to the crowd:

I assure you that many will come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of heaven.

Right after that incident he tells the story of the shepherd who goes out searching for the one lost sheep, leaving the 99 behind he concluding with the words: Matthew 18:14 (TEV)

In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost.

Mark 11:17 (NIV) After throwing the money changers out of the temple, he taught them: "Is it not written: " 'My house will be called

a house of prayer for all nations"? It wasn't the private little money making enterprise of corporate religion.

Luke 19:10 (NIV)

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Who again are the lost... those who don't believe. Those who don't get it. Those who don't understand grace. Those who have no idea that God is love.

For God so loved the world he gave his only Son... (we all know verse 16 but 17 goes on to say) God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

John 3:16-17

John 12:32 (TEV)

When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me."

And from the metaphor we started with a couple of weeks ago, where Jesus said, I am the door to the sheep pen... he adds:

John 10:16 (NIV)

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. (He is saying that metaphor of God being our Good Shepherd, the familiar psalm of David they all knew by heart... The Lord is my shepherd... that Shepherding extends to everybody. God will be the shepherd of all his creation.

We will get to the Apostle Paul later but he gets even more specific about God's intention to save all people because his whole mission and ministry is to reach those outside the traditional borders of the Jewish faith.

I spent this time going through all these bible verses to make it clear that God's vision and intention is most certainly to include everybody in his family. And I don't think there is any question or controversy about that whatsoever. God's grace extends to all people, no matter who they are or what they have done. Most of you who I have been hearing from on this agree: you intuitively sense that God forgives and includes everyone.

But then the question that quite frankly has plagued me from seminary... did God ever figure out a way to do it... to save the world... or was the best he was able to accomplish a small minority of the human race over the course of history. I guess the question comes down to whether or not God extends his grace to everybody as an unconditional reality or as a possibility if... and throughout history Christians have tended toward the if... we hear again the words to the rich young ruler who asked, what does it take to secure eternal life... if you sell all you have, give the money to the poor and follow me, if you buy indulgences and get yourself out of purgatory, if you live as Jesus lived, if they believe the right doctrine and confess the right creeds about Jesus, if they repent of their sins, if they get baptized, if they get fully immersed, if they are not gay, if they speak in tongues, if they understand the rapture, if they go to the right church... if they are more like me, if you just accept Jesus into their heart, even with their dying breath just say yes, make the decision, call on the name... That is all it takes to be welcomed home... the only criterion needed to pour open the bounty of God's unconditional grace.

Of course we Lutherans rejected the works righteousness idea of earning your way into God's favor, 500 years ago... but we are still left with that one pesky and tricky and very subjective criterion... you gotta believe. That remains for many in orthodox Christianity the one and only condition to salvation. you gotta believe. And all those nones out there, the majority of those Pacific Northwest residents, our own family and friends some of them, who checked none as their religious preference don't fit that faith formula.

I know growing up in the church like many of you, I was always taught, that you have to call on the name, or you don't go. I distinctly remember must have been like 4th grade. It was Lutheran Sunday School curriculum... and it was like the end of the world or the moment of death or something and there was a picture of people flying off to heaven in colors of blues and whites... they were happy and smiling and transparent so you could see their hearts and in there was a picture of Jesus... and on the other side of the split picture there were other people... many more of them... wide path, narrow path sort of thing. They were sort of being dragged backwards to the bottom of the page in colors of red and black. No guy with horns but you got the idea. You got Jesus in you heart you're good to go, you don't you're going the other way. Pretty simple, black and white. That was and continues to be a rather common and orthodox position for many Christians. For God so loved the world that he sent his son... that's the grace... but you go on... that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life. That's the condition. Unconditional grace on the condition that you believe in Jesus. And the Jews have their own exclusive version and so do the Moslems. I read somewhere this week that the only thing the Jews and the Moslems and the Christians can agree on is that God won't save everybody.

This was seeds of compassion week here in Seattle, I know some of you saw the Dali Lama... He appeared with Desmond Tutu at the UW and Anglican archbishop who I got to hear once. It puts frames the problem well when you realize that according to Christian tradition - The Dali Lama would be going to Hell, Desmond Tutu going to heaven. The Dali Lama who speaks and lives more Christ like than any of us... who like Desmond Tutu has committed his life to peace and justice... who lives everyday in the presence of God... but because he does not think about Jesus like Desmond Tutu thinks about Jesus... one has eternity with God and the other with Satan... I will got to tell you right out... I am just not buying that. I got to come out and officially reject that Sunday School lesson I got about some going up and some going down with belief in Jesus being the only criterion.

What about Ghandi, who loved the teachings of Jesus, especially the sermon on the mount, who probably lived more like Jesus than most Christians, but according to the traditional Christian formula, he was a Hindu who saw nothing salvific in the cross... and since you can't earn your way in, which would have been Ghandis only hope as a non Christian, and so is at this moment licking flames... Ghandi? Doesn't fit my experience with God and God's word.

Martin Luther, who built his faith around the revelation that we are saved by grace through faith, said this in the catechism... "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him..." Brother Martin saw even faith itself,

the ability to believe at all, as a gift of God's grace. If that is true, and as Lutherans it is our tradition, how much sense does it make for God to condemn somebody for not possessing a gift that he gives. se to make the one condition of receiving unconditional grace, believing in Jesus Christ, which itself a gift. Yeah but some would say even a gift has to be opened. Grace is offered as a gift, salvation is by grace buy you have to open the gift by faith, by believing. A gift unopened is good for nothing. That even makes some sense... I was always persuaded by the opening of the gift analogy until I experienced some gifts that didn't even have to be opened. They came unwrapped. Gifts that just happened and brought joy and were undeserved and nothing was necessary on my part to be blessed. The giver took care of everything. I just got to enjoy. I think that's the kind of gift God's grace is. That's the kind of salvation I think God showers upon all his children to the ends of the earth. Its not a dangling prize out there if... if... we do something or if we figure out something – that's not grace.

So what about Jesus? If everybody is going to get to the big dance, why do we need a savior? Where does Jesus come in?

I want to close with a modern parable... very modern, a couple of weeks ago, spring break. Jeannelynn promised the girls that she would take them to the zoo on Spring Break. They were excited. They learned on Monday that Wednesday would be the day. They got to ancipate for days what they would wear, what animals they would see, where they would go for lunch. Mom had it all planned out although the girls weren't in on most of the details.

The day of the zoo came, and Jeannelynn had coordinated with some other moms and kids to join them and it was just a big party at the zoo. And you'll never imagine that when they got there, to the Point Defiance Zoo, there were already other people there, and they were streaming in all day... other kids and moms and dads and grandpas and grandmas. People were there that Jeannelynn made no arrangements with. There were people there from other places that came on buses and motorcycles and other vans and cars. But nobody in our family knew who they were or where they came from or how they got there... but it didn't seem to matter, everybody had a grand time.

In this parable, the zoo is salvation. Jeanne is in the role of Jesus in this parable. They have the same initials... JC... If the girls were going to the zoo, during spring break, their mother was the only way they were getting there. She needed to make the arrangements, get them dressed, strap them into the car seats, drive them to Tacoma, find their way to the entrance of the zoo, hold their hands across the parking lot, pay for their admission and show them to their favorite parts because she already knows what that will be. She knows them that well, she knows how much they will enjoy the zoo so she would even be willing to put one of them in the car and

make them go against their will if it came to that, and there is always one, because she loves them that much. For the girls the whole experience is pure undeserved grace.

But still they have no way of knowing how all those other people got to the zoo, there were clearly some other ways of getting there, other things had to be worked out for other people... but for my girls, their mom was the only way... her promise was gold, her word was the truth. I have to admit, in my theology, there is room for other ways to heaven... I think God has made arrangements as Jesus said, for the other sheep not of this sheep pen. Who will also hear and know his voice in their own unique cultural context and join the one flock. I don't personally know anything about those other ways to get there. Other ways of knowing and experiencing God. I would have to speculate. Most of it, what I read and hear doesn't even really make sense to me and my experience... But I know Jesus, I know his way, I know for me and my family Jesus is the only way... He is the truth and the life... without Jesus I would be lost... in the dark. God gave Jesus to me as a gift, a promise, a light, a guide, the door, the bread of life, the shepherd, the Saviour, the Son, and through that gift of Jesus, I am secure in my salvation... I trust our relationship. I trust his words. I trust his life. Its only through Jesus that I would really know what God is like. That God is love. That when that day comes, I know like our little girls, that mom is taking me by the hand and taking me to the zoo and I expect to see lots of other people there, from the sheep pen of the Lord Jesus, and those from the other sheep pens, from across the Atlantic, from across the Pacific, across the Mediteranean, and across the street... people who are enjoying the zoo and the gifts of creation and are experiencing the amazing grace of God as their ultimate salvation. Our wonderful, exciting, joyful mission as the people of Jesus, is the privilege of telling all those who might not know it yet that they are going to the zoo, for sure, its been taken care of, mom's going, she knows the way and she has a van, she's already got tickets. Let's all help each other get ready and motivated cause we're going to the same party. Now that's some good news to share.

Next week, in the light of God's Amazing grace, where does Hell fit it... is there one, who is there, what's it for, should we be worried about it, Is Satan actively trying to suck you in... how can we understand that traditional saved language in today's context? I am already looking forward to it and I hope you can come... don't forget Wednesday nights... great classes and bible studies. 7:00, earlier for snacks.

