

Sermon Series: *Burning Questions for 21st Century Christians*
Sermon II. “Who Will Be Saved? A Theology of World Religions”

Text: John 3:1-17

The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church

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“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” John 3:17

“The huge white dome of a mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo, Ohio. You can see it as you drive by on the interstate highway. A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. A Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery with a hint of a Southeast Asian roofline is set in the farmlands south of Minneapolis, Minnesota.”ⁱⁱ

These images provide the opening to the book, *A New Religious America* written by Harvard Divinity School Professor Diana Eck and published in 2001. The decade since has provided us with hundreds of additional images to prove her key point: the religious landscape of America has changed. Even in recent weeks one of the most pervasive and polarizing stories to dominate the news cycle involves religious, as well as political, differences around the proposed construction of a Muslim community center and prayer room near Ground Zero in New York City.

While many of *us* may have grown up in an exclusively Christian environment, almost no one born in the 21st Century United States will have that experience. Professor Eck was right nine years ago and she is even more right today—we live in a new Religious America. The burning question for followers of Jesus Christ in such a time and place is how to respond in a way that honors our particular faith and is true to the gospel that we proclaim.

And, for an answer this question, we Christians turn to the witness of scripture, where we hear God speaking most clearly. In scripture, we find a multiplicity of voices and perspectives on the question of interfaith relationships and conversations. Because, while it is tempting to view religious diversity as a uniquely 21st Century challenge, the truth is that pluralism was a reality when our scriptures were written. For example, each of Paul’s letters was written to a small, minority religious movement in a world of many religions. The gospels predate the conversion of Constantine and the beginning of Christianity’s role as a normative imperial religion. The Bible assumes religious pluralism, and they witness to the love and justice of Jesus Christ in a context of diversity.

Take the third chapter of John’s Gospel and Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, who is described as a leader of the Jews. The passage is almost exclusively remembered for the popularity of one verse, John 3:16, now as common at most sporting events as hot dogs and nachos. This morning, it is the context of the quote that most interests us. John sets the scene: Nicodemus, a Pharisee or Jewish legal expert, comes to Jesus under the cover

of night. Nicodemus has heard of Jesus, both his teachings and the miracles he has performed. He wants to know more about the divine source of Jesus' power and message. What follows is a dialogue that borders on the comical, that more resembles two unrelated speeches. Nicodemus asks Jesus about himself; Jesus responds with words about the kingdom of God. Jesus speaks metaphorically of the importance of being born from above, Nicodemus responds with the very concrete and confused question about anatomical impossibility—you can't reenter the womb, can you? When Jesus explains his statement, Nicodemus is further baffled, throwing up his hands with the question: "How can these things be?" It is this question that provokes an extended response from Jesus, describing the gospel message in its most basic form: God sent the Son into the world for salvation, not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. As happens so often in John's gospel, Nicodemus is given no opportunity to respond, and the narrative moves forward. Jesus has spoken the gospel word, and he and his disciples depart for the Judean countryside, leaving the Pharisee behind. It is not exactly a model for effective and meaningful interfaith dialogue!

How **do** people of faith respond to religious pluralism—especially in an era of interfaith families, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces? A generation ago, the British philosopher of religion John Hick outlined two polar-opposites reactions. It is helpful to describe and contrast them.

The first is *Exclusivism*, simply the belief that one particular tradition teaches the only universal truth and constitutes the one path to salvation. Examples of exclusivism can be found in almost every religion. Certainly there is a sizable and vocal element of exclusivists within the Christian faith. One right answer, one path to God, one way to be saved. Mine.

The second response is *Explicit Pluralism*. This is John Hicks' own position, and he describes it as "the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions...and corresponding different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate." ⁱⁱ At first, this perspective may seem quite attractive to open-minded, enlightened religious thinkers; many paths up the same mountain, as some have said. But I find within this perspective at least one major cause for skepticism. This self-described radically inclusive viewpoint strikes me as quite exclusive of those who passionately profess a particular religious faith. By pointing to a "God above all gods" or a "religion above all religions" this position essentially ridicules as simplistic and childish those who do not honor this "ultimate God." There is a kind of fundamentalism in this meta-religion that does not respect real differences in our faith traditions. For those of us who are devoted followers of Jesus Christ, and for devotees of other faiths, Hick's perspective begins to sound too disinterested, distant, and cold.

It will not surprise you to learn that I believe there is a "third way" that represents a scripturally and theologically sound response to religious plurality that is also practical for 21st Century Christians. First, a disclaimer. This is not my original proposal but comes from Reformed theologian Douglas John Hall. As an alternative to both exclusivism and explicit pluralism, Hall offers *confessionalism*.ⁱⁱⁱ This is the notion that interfaith dialogue happens most powerfully and transformatively not on an intellectual level (with debate-style point-counterpoint argumentation) but on an experiential level. In other words, the best way to engage with neighbors, friends, and colleagues from different faith traditions and convictions, is *not* to argue the relative merit of one's religion. Instead, we are to give

witness, testimony, to the power of God at work in our lives. For Christians, this means sharing the love of Jesus Christ and the impact that it has had us. And it means listening as others share their testimonies.

One of the most formative experiences of my life was the opportunity to facilitate a House Course at Duke, titled simply “Interfaith Dialogue.” We met once a week for an entire semester. The title set the tone—the course was about dialogue, not simple information gathering. The eighteen students in the course represented six different religions and eighteen different perspectives. Each week, one of the students was responsible for leading the discussion and would assign the reading in advance. Then, for two hours on a Thursday evening, we would talk and we would listen. We would share viewpoints that were radically different and often surprisingly similar. It was a confessional dialogue. We did not try to erase differences or create a new religion with the most persuasive elements of each one represented. We also did not belittle perspectives other than our own.

Late in the semester, a columnist for the Chronicle, our student newspaper, wrote a piece entitled “The Divine Cruelty.” In it, he cited the atrocities and evils committed in the name of religion, concluding that, if there was a God, then he must either be impotent or cruel. I copied the column and brought it to our Thursday evening class. It was my orthodox Jewish classmate who spoke up first, explaining that his theology would never permit him to blame God for human cruelty. The Hindu student echoed that statement, noting that, while none of us believed in a God who condoned senseless violence, nevertheless almost all our religions had been used to justify it. The evangelical Christian across the room described the sinfulness of humanity and our separation from the will of God, Each of us in turn expressed our frustration with those who would dismiss God because of how poorly we humans reflect the divine call to love one another. It was a powerful witness to me of what is possible when community is built and difference is honored.

This morning’s question “Who Will Be Saved?” is the title of a book that Bishop Will Willimon wrote in 2008. As provocative as that question is to 21st Century Christians, Willimon believes that the far more interesting question is “Who Saves?”^{iv} Though my friend the Bishop is a deeply committed Methodist, his observation is right at home within the Presbyterian theological tradition. Our theology, like our worship, begins with God. Our theology, like our worship, is not principally about us and our needs.

This is a hard word for contemporary people, who want to know that we are okay, we are saved, we are the chosen ones. In 1952, J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled “Your God is Too Small.” Each brief chapter takes up an inadequate modern description of God, explaining how it misses the fullness of who God is. One chapter is on the image of “God-in-a-box,” and nearly sixty years later this remains a pervasive perception for many Christians; that God is predictable, within our control.^v That we have the option of carrying Jesus around in a box, or on a leash, and demanding certain responses from God. This is not the Presbyterian picture of a sovereign and majestic God who transcends both our expectations and our demands. If we can put our God in a box, then our God is too small.

In a sermon preached at Duke Chapel, Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor approaches the question of religious plurality from the perspective of God’s majesty: “Ask me about God’s opinion of other ways and I will refer you to God. There are ways that bear

no resemblance to Christ's way, and these ways beg to be opposed—but opposed as Christ himself would oppose them—by offering himself to them, by feeding them, by showing them how God acts.”^{vi} Sounds like testimony to me.

In John's story of Jesus and Nicodemus, we are given no reason to believe that the two will ever be together again. But, at the end of the gospel, they are. It is such a brief and passing moment that you hardly notice it as you read the nineteenth chapter of John. Jesus has been crucified and his body is to be prepared for burial. And then this verse: “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” Was it simple kindness? Utter transformation? Was he motivated by a sense of responsibility, or wonder, or faith? All John gives us is an image of the Pharisee, teacher of the Jewish law lugging one hundred pounds of burial spices up the hill to anoint the one who spoke of a God who loved the world enough to send the only Son for its salvation. Who testified to a gracious God whose will is not condemnation but salvation.

What a witness! In a new religious America, or in the religiously diverse ancient Roman world, Christians are called to testify to the love of God in Jesus Christ, not with smug superiority or self-righteousness—we have had enough of that. We are called to share our faith in the God whose sovereignty and majesty are beyond human comprehension, and whose gracious promises extend to all people. Our engagement with those of other faiths comes as a response to our faith in God and in God's power to work both within and beyond the bounds of the church and our lives.

Perhaps the letter to the Ephesians says it best: “for Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and he has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us.”

May it be so in our community and in our richly diverse world. Amen.

ⁱ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. HarperOne, 2001. p. 1.

ⁱⁱ John Hick, “Religious Pluralism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. Macmillan Publishing, 1987. p. 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas John Hall, “Confessing Christ in the Religiously Pluralistic Context,” in *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World*. Westminster John Knox, 1998. pp. 65-77.

^{iv} William H. Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?* Abingdon Press, 2008. p. 21.

^v J.B. Phillips *Your God is Too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike*. Simon & Schuster, 1952. pp. 37-40.

^{vi} Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Only Way to God,” sermon preached at Duke Chapel, May 2, 1999.