

What Lutherans Believe about Other Religions

5th Sunday after Pentecost | Galatians 5; Luke 9

This summer,
we're exploring your responses
to the sentence: What Lutherans Believe about . . ."
It's not too late to make your suggestion
on a yellow communication card!

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritans,
and Paul's talk about fruits of the flesh
and fruits of the spirit
is a perfect opportunity for us to wrestle with
what Lutherans believe about other religions.

Jesus and the Samaritans

As the curtain rises on our Gospel reading today,
Jesus has just come down from his transfiguration
in front of Peter, James and John.
Jesus and the three disciples were on the mountain,
when Jesus' appearance changed,
and Jesus met with Elijah and Moses.
The three of them spoke of Jesus' "departure" –
literally, his 'exodus' in Greek.
Then, all of a sudden,
a cloud descended on the mountain
and a voice from heaven declared that
Jesus was God's beloved son,
and that the disciples should listen to him.
To the first century listener,
these images evoked other images
where Moses received the 10 commandments
and of another Exodus.

In our reading,
Jesus 'sets his face' to go to Jerusalem.
It's his place of destiny;
the place where he *must* go
in order to complete his purpose, his mission.
Along the way, Jesus and the disciples
enter the territory of the Samaritans,
but they don't receive Jesus at all.

To be sure, there was no love lost

between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus' day. The Jews thought the Samaritans were 'half-bloods' at best, since the community itself was the result of the Assyrian destruction of Israel in 722 BC. When the Assyrians conquered Israel, they carted off a huge percentage of the population. At the same time, the Assyrians repopulated Israel with a large number of people captured elsewhere.

Over time, this new community established a cultic worship center at Mt. Gerazim that was separate from the temple worship site in Jerusalem, where all the "good" Jews went to worship for the holy-days. The Samaritans also held to just the first five books of the Jewish scriptures – the Torah – and not the later writings of the prophets or the wisdom literature. The Jews didn't consider the Samaritans Jews at all, while the Samaritans considered themselves *more* faithful because of their attention to just the Torah. As you can imagine, there was great social and religious friction between these two groups.

So, it's no big surprise that an itinerant Jewish rabbi named Jesus would be snubbed by the Samaritans if they saw he was bound and determined to go to Jerusalem. They had liked his message before; many seemed to be following Jesus. But Jesus had an appointment with destiny, and that appointment could only be kept in one place: Jerusalem. That made the Samaritans uneasy; old prejudices die hard. And as a result, they couldn't accept him.

Jesus and Other Religions

The same is true today, when we declare by faith

that there is only one way
to have one's relationship with God restored,
and that's through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

We find this in four places in the New Testament.
On the night of his betrayal, after washing their feet,
Jesus said to his disciples,

*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.*

John 14:6

Speaking to the religious leaders after Pentecost,
Peter said,

*There is salvation in no one else,
for there is no other name under heaven
given among mortals by which we must be saved.*

Acts 4:12

The Apostle Paul wrote these words to Timothy:

*For there is one God;
there is also one mediator
between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human,
who gave himself a ransom for all.*

1 Timothy 2:5-6

To the Colossians, the Apostle Paul writes,

*For in Jesus all the fullness of God
was pleased to dwell, and through him
God was pleased to reconcile to himself
all things, whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Col 1:19-20

A number of other passages proclaim
how Jesus saves us from our sins;
however, these four passages all speak to what's called
the "scandal of particularity."

Of all the multitude of religions in the world,
Christians believe Jesus is the only way by which
our relationship with God is restored
to the way it was meant to be.

By contending that he is the only route to God,

Jesus and the Church is saying that Christianity is unique, that it cannot be reconciled with any other religion in the world. There are some drastic and irreconcilable theological conflicts between Christianity and all other faith systems. All other religions are spelled "D-O." They are based on people doing something through their struggling and striving, to somehow earn God's good favor. Followers must go on a pilgrimage, give alms to the poor, scrupulously maintain a diet, perform good deeds, chant the right words, use a Tibetan prayer wheel, go through a series of reincarnations, or faithfully follow some other religious drills. These are the attempts of people to reach out to God.

Instead, Christianity is spelled "D-O-N-E" because it's based on what Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross. The Bible teaches us that we are all spiritual rebels and that nobody can do anything to merit heaven, and that Jesus died as our substitute on the cross and offers forgiveness and eternal life to everyone who wants it as a gift of his grace. Christianity, then, is God reaching out to us.

The message of grace - "done" - and the message of working off past wrongs - "do" - are fundamentally incompatible. It wouldn't make sense that both could come from the same God. After all, God isn't schizophrenic. It would be unlikely that a God who embodies love and truth would go to one side of the planet and say, "Psst! Let me tell you how you can become reconciled with me." And then come to another community and give them a diametrically opposite way of doing the same thing. While my head gets this, my heart struggles with this a little. That Jesus is the only path to this God almost smacks of a sort of spiritual arrogance; a "we're better than you are" mentality. I don't like that mentality at all!

It reminds me of some 'bumper sticker wars' in my home town

when I was in high school.
One of the local churches gave their members bumper stickers that read: "I've found it."
Presumably, the 'it' they had found was salvation through Jesus Christ.
A short time later,
the Jewish synagogue in the next town over gave their members bumper stickers that read "We never lost it."

I don't think anyone here today would want to argue that we're better than anyone else because of our faith or what Jesus does for us through his life, death and resurrection.
I know I'm certainly not interested in going down that road.
The last time I checked,
Jesus had some pretty harsh things to say to those who were spiritually arrogant.
We aren't called to judge or condemn others.
Just a few chapters before this morning's reading, Jesus says this in no uncertain terms,

*Do not judge, and you will not be judged;
do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.*

Luke 6:37

How does the Great Commission go in Matthew 28?

*Go, make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of
the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and if they don't convert, kill them!*

Nope . . . been there, done that.
They called *that* particular evangelism effort "the Crusades," and we're dealing with the repercussions of that miserable chapter in our Church's history 800 years later in our modern-day war on terror.

We are called to act on the evidence we've seen and then live our lives according to it.
Perhaps it might help to this about it this way:
When Abby was born,
she developed a very mild case of jaundice.
She had a faint yellowing of her skin and eyes.

Now, jaundice is potentially a devastating disease but it's usually cured pretty easily.
All Karen and I had to do was put Abby in the light, and this stimulated her liver to function properly.

Now, when the doctor told us the treatment we could have responded by saying
"That sounds too simple.
How about if we just scrub her with soap and water and dip her in bleach instead?
If we work really hard at it,
I'm sure we could get her normal coloring back again."

If we'd have said that,
I'm pretty sure the doctor would have insisted,
"No, there's only one way to handle this."
Or, we could have said,
"What if we just ignore the problem and pretend everything is OK?
If we sincerely believe that she's okay, things will work out for the best."
I'm thinking if we'd have tried that,
the doctor might have thought we were crazy.

Would anybody have accused us of being narrow minded if we had trusted that doctor and pursued the only course of treatment that was going to save Abby?
That's not being narrow-minded; that's acting logically on the basis of the evidence.

Now, if I had a doctor that had saved my child's life, I'd be pretty grateful.
I'd probably brag a bit about this doctor to my friends. However, I don't think I'd go around badmouthing all the other doctors in town, or telling my friends that their doctor is a quack and that the only good doctor is *my* doctor.
If I did that, I'd be a jerk, and my friends would have the perfect right to say that to my face.

Which leads us to Paul's words from Galatians.
That you're sitting here today suggests that

you've been grabbed by God in some way.
Your faith experience is likely different from mine
or from the person sitting next to you.
But that's all right; in fact, it's downright delightful
to see just how many different ways God works in the world
to draw people into relationship with him.

Here's the key: rather than getting all bent out of shape
over whether non-Christians will get to heaven
apart from faith in Jesus,
perhaps Paul's admonitions to the Galatians
will trigger some self-reflection on our part.
Here's how Eugene Petersen translates
part of today's reading in *The Message*:

*It is obvious what kind of life
develops out of trying to get your own way all the time:
repetitive, loveless, cheap sex;
a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage;
frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness;
trinket gods; magic-show religion;
paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition;
all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants;
a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved;
divided homes and divided lives;
small-minded and lopsided pursuits;
the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival;
uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions;
ugly parodies of community. I could go on.
This isn't the first time I have warned you,
you know. If you use your freedom this way,
you will not inherit God's kingdom.*

Gal 5:19-21

That's quite a laundry list of vices;
find any of them reflected in your own life? I know I did.
And if we did, then we share the same risk as the Galatians,

*If you use your freedom this way,
you will not inherit God's kingdom.*

Yikes!

For us, then, perhaps the issue is less
what will happen to those who don't know Jesus, than

what will happen to me now that I do know Jesus?

We are called to proclaim Jesus as the one way to God
to whomever is willing to listen.

But we leave the faith and fate

of those who have never heard the gospel,

or who have heard and don't respond,

or who, like the Samaritans, have heard and reject Jesus,

to a God who is equal to the problem.

The church will always be missionary

because it is convinced it possesses in the gospel a peculiar treasure.

A peculiar treasure without which you and I cannot live fully.