

McCabe United Methodist Church

Message: April 28 & 29, 2012

When Christians Get it Wrong (part 4):

“When Speaking of Other Religions”

Acts 17:22-34

Pastor Ray Baker

The book of Acts tells the story of the birth of the Christian Church. In chapter 17 the Apostle Paul is speaking to a group of people in a Jewish meeting house. He is speaking to Jews who were dispersed during a period of exile. There were also people present who was well versed in Greek Philosophy, specifically the Epicurean and Stoic traditions.

In the beginning of chapter 17 the people listening to Paul were turned off by his comments. People made fun of him and called him: in one translation a “know it all” and in another he was referred to as a “babbler.”

Paul was able to regroup and share his message in a way that related to the people of Athens and their cultural context. (This has been the practice of the Christian Church as we have traveled across the globe. If we didn't relate directly to the culture we had limited success in sharing the Gospel.) Paul affirmed their religious nature and reminded the people of their own Alter to the “Un-Known God.” This was the God who: “...made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth...” He also referred to the poets of their country as a way of making connections between the two cultures.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, leaned on a saying he learned from the Moravians:

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in everything charity.

To understand what Wesley considered the essentials in his sermon called: “In The Catholic Spirit.” In this sermon he dedicates a large paragraph on the first page to answering this question. First and foremost the essential belief of the Christian faith is dependent upon our understanding of an all loving God. He quotes the greatest commandment: Love the Lord your God with all you heart, strength, mind and spirit. In addition we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. He goes on to cite numerous other passages that highlight God's loving nature.

To understand what Wesley says about “In everything charity,” we can lean on I Corinthians 13:1 “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” It is our calling to be charitable to people who we agree with and those who disagree.

This is an important issue when working with the young people of our country. The Barna research group discovered young people in our country see the Church as being judgmental, hypocritical, and insensitive. They think an organization which professes to follow an all loving God should be both loving and accepting. They also think we should offer charity to people who do and do not agree with our beliefs.

About 12-14 years ago I traveled to New York City and Washington D.C. with a group of high school students to study about the Middle East. We had the opportunity to visit both Jewish Synagogues and an Islamic Mosque. It was a great experience. While visiting the Mosque we were blessed to have a wonderful guide. This young man was encouraging, engaging, and inviting. During our tour it was time for the Muslim community to gather for a time of prayer. He simply excused himself and knelt pray. We watched respectfully and in a relatively short time he stood up and said: I cut my prayers short since we're together...and I will pray longer the next time.

The youth really enjoyed spending time with people from these different religions. They treated the people they met, and their religions, with great respect. They never questioned the validity of the other religions and never asked if they were "saved". These questions simply weren't issues for the youth. Why? They recognized the major world religions as valid expressions of faith from the people around the world.

Young people today want us, the Christian Church, to enter into conversation with other world religions. Unfortunately, we often shy away from these opportunities. We have the tendency to be exclusive in our approach to religion.

Allow me to ask you some basic questions about the four other major religions in the world. Most Christians can't answer more than one of the following questions. Let's see how we fair with this quiz:

- Jews gather for worship on what day and what time of day? (The Sabbath. Friday evening, because the new day begins at sundown.)
- In what century did Mohammad die? (7th Century, 632 C.E)
- The Hindu sacred text is called? (The Four Vedas)
- When did Buddha live? (500 years before Christ)

When I was in high school someone asked me why I was a Christian? As I thought about it I quickly realized I was a Christian because of my family and because of where I was born. I was born into a Christian family, in ND. What if I had been born in Jerusalem, Bagdad, or New Delhi or China? Would I still be a member of the Christian faith?

I believe that if I had been born in Jerusalem I would be a Jew. If I had been born in Bagdad I would be a Muslim. If I had been born in New Delhi I would be a Hindu. If I had been born in China I would be a Buddhist.

When Adam Hamilton was gathering information from young adults he received these comments from a young college woman:

“My college roommate and I were invited to a party being put on by a Christian group. The party was fun, and when they invited us to their Bible study later that week, we both said sure. The Bible study was anything but fun. Almost from the start, the discussion centered on whether Jews would get to heaven. No one in the group thought they would. In fact, several in the group spoke as though the Jews were responsible for killing Jesus. My friend finally spoke up and told them that she was Jewish. The study went downhill from there. Some were soft sell, some hard sell, but all of them tried to convince my friend to “ask Jesus into her heart.” When we left that evening, I’m not sure who was more upset, her or me. Since that night I haven’t had anything to do with Christians.”
(When Christians Get it Wrong p. 44)

Another young adult who responded to the question about how Christians are perceived was an Army Airborne Ranger, named John. He had the following comments about Christians who push too hard:

“The one thing that will set me and so many other people right on their heels is when Christians are intrusive. It’s when you really start pushing for it, you know. If you are going to [help a nonbeliever find faith] it’s not something they’re going to come to in one conversation, so do not try to convert people in one fell swoop. You might get 1 in 100, but you’re going to drive the other 99 the hell away.”
(When Christians Get it Wrong p. 44)

The United Methodist Church is a big tent. What I mean is...the United Methodist Church has members who are very conservative and very liberal, both politically and theologically. For example, President George W. Bush is a United Methodist and Hillary Rodham Clinton is also a United Methodist. The United Methodist Church is made up of members with differing views. Some people see the Church as exclusive, others as universal, and still others as inclusive.

It is our diversity which makes us strong and it is our diversity which creates family arguments. That is why our General Conference (quadrennial meeting of the world wide United Methodist Church) is such an interesting and animated event.

People who view the Christian Church as exclusive believe there is only one way to receive the gift of God's salvation: Christ and Christ alone. Why? Because the Bible said it...I believe it...and that settles it.

This group may offer a little leeway for children who die before an age of accountability and for people who are developmentally disabled. But for the rest of us it isn't enough to be spiritual, like Native Americans, or to participate in one of the world's major religions. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ.

People with a Universalist view (not to be confused with the Unitarian Church) believe God's love is so great and his forgiveness is so great, and the power of Christ's death on the cross was so great...that Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist, and members of all other religions are also saved. In fact, they believe that "for God so loved the world..." that everyone will be saved by the grace of God.

The final category is people who have an inclusive understanding of the Christian faith. (I belong to this group.) They believe Jesus is "The way, the truth, and the life..." They also believe anyone who seeks God, the divine, may be saved. They understand the only way anyone can be saved is by God's initiative; God's action; God's Love; God's righteousness; God's kindness; and God's mercy.

Adam Hamilton notes an inclusive approach understands a person's desire to know God and to search for God is a sign of loving God. The very act of seeking God is an expression of a person's faith in God. He goes on to report a number of prominent Christian thinkers have accepted the inclusive approach: Justin Martyr (early Christian Church); John Wesley (founder of Methodism), C.S. Lewis (in the "Chronicles of Narnia"), Scott Stott (Evangelical Theologian), Billy Graham (Evangelist), it's the official position of the Roman Catholic Church, and it's generally accepted by most mainline Protestants. (When Christians Get it Wrong p. 52-54)

Adam ends the chapter of his book with this story:

"Ali and his wife, Fay, began attending our church in 1996. Fay was a Christian; Ali was a Muslim....The people in our 7:45 a.m. service knew that Ali was a Muslim, but that did not stop them from welcoming him with open arms, inviting him to Sunday School and to join them in serving. They never pressured him to accept Christ. They listened and showed respect for his faith while humbly sharing their own.

“Four year ago Fay died....But the Sunday after her funeral there he (Ali) was, sitting in his normal seat. Last year Ali moved to Florida to be closer to his son. After his move he sent me an e-mail:

“Adam, I always believed in one God. Now I believe Jesus was the Son of God. I have been a very religious person in my live, but somehow I did not fit any one label. I do not like it when people push their religion on me. You never did. You accepted me as I am.” (When Christians Get it Wrong p. 57)

It matters not if you view the Christian faith as exclusive, universal, or inclusive...the question is will you be content to receive the 1 and chase the 99 away? Or will you look beyond your beliefs to the needs of the person before you? Will you follow the example set forth by the Apostle Paul who used the culture of the people to help him share the Good News of Jesus Christ?

I pray you will offer the young people of our world the gift of grace and give them time to grow in God's love.