

SERMON – 10/18/09

CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS – Buddhism

When the child was born, so the story goes, his father summoned fortunetellers to find out what the future held for his heir.

- The best of the best came... and all were in agreement – this was no usual child!
 - Greatness was his destiny... indeed...
 - But how that greatness was played out, remained in question...
 - If he remained “with the world” ... he would unify India and become her greatest conqueror...
 - If, on the other hand, he forsook the world... he would become not a world conqueror, but a world **redeemer**...
- Faced with his option, his father determined to steer his son toward the former destiny...
 - No effort was spared to keep the prince attached to the world...
 - Three palaces... and 40,000 dancing girls were placed at his disposal.
 - Strict orders were given that no ugliness intrude upon the courtly pleasures...
 - Specifically, the prince was to be shielded from contact with sickness, decrepitude, and even death...
 - When he went riding, runners were to clear the roads of these sights...
- Such was the beginning of the life of Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakyas...
 - He was born around 563BC in what is now Nepal, near the Indian border...
 - His father was a king... though it would be more accurate to think of him today as a wealthy feudal lord.
 - Siddhartha appears to have been exceptionally handsome, for there are numerous references to “the perfection of his visible body.”

- At 16 he married a neighboring princess, Ysodhara, who bore him a son whom they called Rahula.
- But despite his father’s best-laid plans, the prince could not be shielded from the natural effects of disease, decay and death forever...
 - When Siddhartha, in fact, did experience these aspects of life...
 - Once he had perceived the inevitability of bodily pain & passage... then fleshly pleasures lost their charm...
 - Faced with the reality of human suffering, the prince became ridden with anxiety, fear & confusion...
- So at age 29, Siddhartha Gautama deserted his wealth & position... and went on a quest for spiritual truth...
 - But his Hindu faith did not provide for having a personal experience with a knowable, personal God.
 - At the age of 35, he sat under the Bodhi tree (or tree of knowledge) in meditation... and through this process of meditation, became enlightened.
 - It was then that he took on the title of “Buddha,” which literally means “The Enlightened One” or “The Awakened One.”
 - Sometimes, he’s even referred to as “Sakyamuni” – or “the sage of the Sakyas” (referring to the clan he came from).

Welcome to the 2nd week in our on-going sermon series entitled, “Christianity & World Religions.” This week we’re looking at BUDDHISM...

- The goals of this series are 3-fold...
 - First, to help us gain a basic understanding of some of the world’s major religions...
 - Second, to clear up some misconceptions or misunderstandings we may have about these faith traditions...
 - Third, to examine how they compare/contrast to some of the basic tenants of Christianity...

- We are not trying to make the argument of “Why we’re right, and they’re wrong!”
- We are a part of this great big world... and the fact that there are so many different religions historically has led to conflicts...
 - Faith/Religion continues to be a source of distrust, animosity, and even open warfare...
 - The only way to bring peace among the different faiths is mutual understanding based not upon rumors or assumptions... but upon **educated insights** into one another’s faith... as well as relationships built upon trust & respect.
 - That is what we’re trying to accomplish in this series...

Buddhism began some 600 years prior to the coming of Jesus...

- As I prepared for this week’s topic, I kept reading over and over again about how diverse the various groups in Buddhism were...
 - Many stated it was as diverse as the variety of denominations within Christianity... which was surprising to me.
 - However, one author, Sir Norman Anderson, took it one step further...
 - He said that it’s more accurate to draw the comparison between Buddhism and the entire Semitic religious family (Judaism, Christianity & Islam)...
 - Meaning, those three religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity & Islam) all come from the same region... and share certain fundamental truths... yet have had completely different developments in both doctrine and practice...
 - Well, as diverse as these 3 religions are... that’s how diverse Buddhism is WITHIN ITSELF!
- I said this last week, but it bears repeating... with the little bit of time we have together, I’ll only be able to give a very general overview of each of these faith traditions...

- By no means will this be a complete & comprehensive review of Buddhism...
- But I hope by the end of our time together today, you'll begin to understand a little bit more about our Buddhist brothers and sisters...
- We need to begin with what is a rather big difference between Buddhism & Christianity... and that is that **Buddhism makes no claims either for or against the existence of God.**
 - Buddhists, in general, neither confirm nor deny that there is a God.
 - When people asked Buddha himself, 'Are you a god?' he replied, 'No.'
 - 'Are you an angel, then?' 'No.'
 - 'A Saint?' 'No.'
 - 'Then what are you?' they wondered.
 - Sakyamuni replied, 'I am awake.'
- At the risk of sounding oversimplifying, it could be said that the Buddha was a man who had insight into the nature of suffering... and the remedy for it.
 - Which leads us into the next basic tenant of Buddhism... **THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS...**
 - The Buddha taught 4 truths about Life... first, that **LIFE is characterized by SUFFERING...**
 - Both physical & mental suffering can be found everywhere... and is involved in the very nature of life...
 - There are both great sufferings (like we've recently experienced in Samoa & the Philippines)... and smaller sufferings (like losing your job, or a pet, or something else you truly valued, etc.)...
 - Second, **Suffering is caused by our human attachments...**
 - Our attachments are our personal desires for people, ideas, things, possessions, dreams, etc...
 - These deep, inner cravings... which, Buddha said, are rooted in ignorance... and which cannot be satisfied... eventually lead to our suffering...

- One distinction is that it's the desire for private fulfillment we're talking about here – not general good-will & dreams for all.
- Third, **there is an end to this kind of suffering...**
- When we overcome our attachments... our private desires... then suffering can cease!
- Which, of course, leads to the fourth truth... and that's the **Holy 8-Fold Path** that leads to the cessation of suffering...
- The means by which Buddha taught people to release their attachments/desires... a comprehensive course in disciplined self-improvement...
- A set of directives for 'right living.'
- This course of detachment is frequently known as "The Middle Way" ...
- Very quickly, here's a quick overview of this 8-Fold Path...
 - Right Views (accepting the 4 truths)...
 - Right Aspirations (resolving to achieve the highest goals in life)...
 - Right Speech (in everything you say)...
 - Right Conduct (including charity & non-harm to any living being)...
 - Right Mode of Livelihood (luxury-free & making oneself useful!)...
 - Right Effort (in all that you do)...
 - Right Awareness...
 - And Right Concentration (aka meditation)...
- Buddhism has been called "The most radical system of self-deliverance ever conceived in the world"...
 - And, as Sir Norman Anderson puts it, 'it must not for a moment be imagined that a normal lifetime will suffice to complete these stages' (in the 8-Fold Path)...
 - So like our Hindu brothers and sisters, Buddhist believe in **reincarnation**... the continuing life-and-death cycle where a person returns to earth time & time again – in various forms... working out this pathway to enlightenment.

- Buddhists also talk about **karma**... action/reaction... cause/effect...
 - Good and bad energy in life borne out of our good and bad deeds...
 - But I discovered that it's not a "ledger-sheet mentality" in Buddhism... as if all you need is one more good deed than bad deed, and you'll be okay...
 - No, scholars tell us that good deeds don't "cancel out" our bad deeds...
 - God will bring its reward... and evil will bring its reward... the two operate independently.
 - But Buddhists believe that every calamity ever met with... every event in life (whether favorable or otherwise)... can be explained by karma!
- The goal, of course, is to escape this ongoing cycle of life and death... to escape the system of karma... and that occurs when one reaches **Nirvana**.
 - Now you may remember a few weeks ago when we looked at Hinduism, that they, too, had a concept of Nirvana...
 - But unlike Hinduism, Buddhism doesn't believe that Nirvana is ultimate union with the One True God...
 - Buddhists believe Nirvana is simply the extinguishing of the soul (and the cycle of rebirths)...
 - This is when all suffering, anxiety & fear ultimately end...
 - It is a perfect, passionless happiness...

A couple of weeks ago, I had a chance to visit Aiea Hongpa Hongwanji Mission... our neighbors just up the street from us...

- This particular community grew out of the Plantation days... and was founded in 1899 by Japanese priests...
 - Their particular tradition within Buddhism, Jodo Shinshu, was the first school founded by a layman...
 - Shin Ran was the founder... a tendai monk... who was one of the first to bring the teachings of Buddhism down to the common folk...
 - (Prior to that, only the wealthy could afford time to study Buddhism!)

- Though he began his monastic life at age 9, Shin Ran left ‘the mountain top’ lifestyle at age 29... realizing that all the learning he was doing wasn’t leading to his enlightenment...
- He found a new teacher... and helped the people connect to the power of Buddhism...
- Rev. Art Kauffman is the Buddhist priest at Aiea Hongwanji Mission... and he graciously gave me a tour of their worship space...
 - One of the things Buddhism does really well, he told me, is adapt to the culture in which it resides...
 - So his congregation has pews & an organ, just like many Christian churches...
 - They even conduct services on Sunday mornings, because that’s when most people worship here in the US!
- At the front of their worship space is their shrine...
 - “It’s a misconception,” Rev. Kauffman told me, “that we Buddhists worship Buddha. We don’t. The goal of all Buddhists is to express gratitude to the Buddha for his teachings.”
 - He also said the statues of Buddha are not seen by Buddhists as idols...
 - Having grown up in the Christian Church himself, Rev. Kauffman likened the statues to Christian crucifixes... trying to relate the unrelatable...
 - Incidentally, Buddha himself told people not to make images of him.
 - But Buddhist artists, over time, have attempted to interpret what “enlightenment” might look like... through the various statues of the Buddha.
- **Incense** is another central feature in Buddhist worship...
 - In fact, if you ever have the chance to attend a Buddhist memorial service... (and their tradition is to have quite a few – even after the initial funeral service!)...

- Then you'll not only experience an abundance of incense... but even be invited to burn incense yourself.
- Rev. Kauffman told me this is not an act of worshipping Buddha...
- Incense simply reflects the constantly changing nature of life... as incense changes from a solid... to fire... to smoke... to ash... the Buddhist is reminded that **all of life is impermanent...**
- When I asked Rev. Kauffman what he'd like to share with our congregation... he quoted a poem written on a Bansho bell...
 - “Buddha is not God. He does not create. He does not destroy. Buddha does not judge. He does not reward. He does not punish. He simply offers enlightenment.”
 - Rev. Kauffman also recorded this very short greeting to our congregation... [run video]

We do have our differences... primarily the belief in God, and our understanding that we need a Savior, Jesus, to bring us salvation... it's not our works that save us.

- Nevertheless, our Buddhist brothers and sisters have a wonderful tradition of deep listening & compassion for all...
 - May we be able to learn from them & their witness...
 - Even as we walk the pathway as followers of Jesus.
- Thanks be to God for our neighbors up the street from us! AMEN.