

Most of you know that in December, I asked people to give me their hard questions of faith. Linda Hodge asked the question that is the sermon topic this morning. This is her question: Are persons of other faiths saved? Not persons of other Christian faiths, but persons of other world faiths. Are they saved? Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one can come to the father except by me." So does that mean that there is no salvation apart from accepting Jesus Christ?

That's the question, and I invite you to wrestle with me, to journey with me as we get some of our thinking straight and consider some answers that might be new to you.

Christianity has always been aware of other faiths in the world. It has always known other faiths in the world around it. But in our time, there has been a new awareness of the spiritual and moral power of the other great world faiths.

Christianity's new awareness challenges the traditional assumption of the unique superiority of the Christian gospel, faith, and tradition.

In the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a transition from an understanding by theologians that Christianity is the one and only true religion, to an understanding that Christianity is one true religion, among others. That is an enormous change.

When I speak of the great world faiths, I am referring to traditions that are over 1,000 years old, have produced profound scriptures, great saints and thinkers, and have provided foundations of civilization for many millions of people. There are many other faiths, but this morning I'm just going to talk about whether people in the great world faiths can be saved.

As I said, Christians have always been aware of other religions, but now there is a new kind of awareness. In the past 50 years there has been a large scale immigration of East to West – millions of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists are living in the major cities of the West. Los Angeles has the third largest Jewish community in the world, the biggest Buddhist temple in North America, and large Muslim and Sikh communities, along with Sikh and Taoist communities.

Christians have become neighbors with people of different faiths. And they go to weddings, and birthdays, and share celebrations, know each others' families, the children learn together. They have discovered that while there are fascinating cultural differences, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and others in general don't seem to be less truthful, honest, loving, compassionate in their family and community relationships than Christians. They don't seem to be less good citizens or less religiously committed than Christians. They're not better human beings morally and spiritually than Christians are, but they aren't worse, either.

The great world religions and their saints each offer contexts of salvation. In each faith and its saints, we come to know that there is a saving human transformation from self-centeredness to a new orientation that is centered in the divine or the transcendent. Civilizations in which these religious paths have been expressed have been on a par with Christendom in terms of moral and spiritual fruits.

Now, as we talk about where salvation can be found, there is something very important, but so obvious that it is easy to overlook. For 99% of the world's people, the religion to which we adhere is selected by the accident

of birth. A baby born into a Muslim family in Pakistan, Egypt, or Indonesia will almost certainly become a Muslim, observant or non-observant. A baby born into a devout Catholic Christian family in Italy or Mexico will almost certainly grow up to be a Catholic Christian, observant or non-observant.

This has enormous significance as we talk about whether people can be saved if they are not Christians. If there is a religious “plus,” a spiritual gain, advantage, or benefit in being Christian rather than Jew, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, then why is only a minority of the human race awarded this religious “plus”? The greater the plus for those born in Christian societies the greater the minus for everyone else and the greater the discrimination between peoples. If we have been born within reach of the gospel, are we God’s chosen people, and do we have greater love bestowed upon us than God has given the rest of the human race? Don’t we believe God loves all of God’s creatures with an equal and unlimited love? Then why would some be favored with unique revelation and others not?

The Catholic Church has traditionally declared that there is no salvation outside the Church. Protestants have traditionally declared that there is no salvation outside a personal faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior.

In the past 30-40 years, a new majority consensus has emerged among Catholic and mainline Protestant theologians. This consensus is known as “Christian Inclusivism.” Inclusivism says that for the Christian, salvation is made possible solely by the atoning death of Jesus. But, salvation is not limited to Christians. Salvation is available to all human beings without restriction. All who are saved are saved by Christ, but this isn’t dependent on their accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior, at least in this life.

There are three basic positions in Inclusivism. You may find yourself along this spectrum.

1. There are people who are not Christian because they have never encountered the gospel, or have encountered it only in inadequate ways. They live good, wise, compassionate lives. They are anonymous Christians, known only to God. This is a very old understanding, which applied to virtuous people living before the time of Christ, but recently has been applied to people living after Christ as well. They live good lives, though they have not embraced the gospel. God knows who they are, and they will be saved.

2. There are people who have never encountered Christ in this life, but they will encounter Christ in the moment of death or after death, and will have the opportunity to respond so that they may receive salvation even if they had not known Christ or responded to him during this life.

The problem is that these positions still regard other faith awakenings as false. The Golden Rule is taught by all the great traditions. Love and compassion are taught by all, as are justice and fair dealing, and concern for the vulnerable in society usually widows and orphans.

Buddhism's Noble Eight-Fold Path to Enlightenment is ethical. The way for the follower on the path is kindness and truthfulness. The seeker of enlightenment must abstain from stealing, dishonesty, cheating, illegitimate sex, intoxication, earning a living by trading in arms, or by killing animals. Each religion has overlapping but not identical moral requirements. We find sayings in all faiths that sound remarkably like something Jesus said, or might have said.

3.) Another way that some Christian scholars and theologians look at other faiths is that the divine Word, the cosmic Christ, or the Holy Spirit is at work

within these other religious histories. God has been savingly present within them, and Christ is real though hidden, so that all faiths carry saving truth, and illuminate right ways to live.

There is a position which goes beyond inclusivism, and that is pluralism. Pluralism is radical. It says that the same God who saves Christians through their response to Christ also saves Jews through their response to Torah, saves Muslims through their response to the Qur'an, Hindus through the vedic revelation, and Buddhists in their response to the Dharma.

Each faith has its strengths, and ways it is superior to others, but not an overall superiority. Our religion creates us in its own image, so that it fits us and we fit it as no other can. There have always been and there always will be individual conversions – a Hindu becomes a Christian, a Christian becomes a Muslim -- but broadly speaking, we do best to live within the religion that has formed us, though with an awareness that the same holds for those who have been formed by different traditions.

One of the saints of Islam said, “The lamps are different, but the Light is the same.”

I want to share with you my perspective on the scripture this morning in which Jesus saying “I am the Way . . . No one comes to the Father except by me.” Jesus says that he is the Way, the Path, the Road to God. We then should ask, If Jesus is the Path, then what does it mean to follow that path? What path is Jesus? We see him seeking out regular times of prayer and saying, “Not my will, but your will.” We see him letting go of all privilege. We see him crossing social boundaries to reach the despised. We see him on his knees washing feet. We see him healing, touching, teaching. We see him on a path that descends, a path that is forgiving the enemy, loving the neighbor, showing compassion, kindness, love, and resistance against those things that oppress and dehumanize others.

No one comes to the Father except by this Path. But this Path can and has been followed by people who have never known Jesus and have never accepted Christianity. I believe in Jesus Christ as our savior, the one who is the liberator of life. I believe in the goodness of God and the freedom of

God to save any one, any where, and any time in any way God jolly well chooses.