

**Understanding Other Religions from a Christian Perspective** Reading: John 4:5-42 Lent 3/A  
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Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well: “The time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth... God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship [God] must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.” (John 4: Translation from Message Bible)

Today I want to talk about “understanding other religions” from a Christian Perspective; in particular how Jesus saw other religions and how he treated those people in his daily interactions. First of all, Jesus probably never met a Buddhist or a Hindu, and certainly not a Muslim since the religion of Islam did not originate until about 700 years after his life. However, he did interact with Jews, Samaritans, pagans and non-believers. Today’s gospel story details his interaction with a group of Samaritans, people whom most Jews disliked. It seems to me that this story is an invitation to follow Jesus’ example of love, mercy, and inclusivity when dealing with people of other faiths.

Too often, instead of following Jesus, we have made him into a mascot, carrying his banner into war, erecting walls rather than building bridges. We have confused the Christian religion as an exclusive club, privileged members who think that we are the only ones who really know the “word of God.” Many Christians assume that God never spoke God’s word before the birth of Jesus, disregarding God’s revelation to the Jews and the contribution of Buddhism to our world.

We often ignore the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, whose existence is universal, not limited to baptized Christians. We ignore the prologue of the gospel of John which clearly states that the Word of God existed from the beginning, and that all things came into being through this Word. This means that all of creation, all people, and all creatures of the earth are imprinted with the Word of God and that nothing exists without this Word. This Word, this logos, this blueprint is universal, marking all creatures with the indelible ink of the Creator.

The Christian theologian, Leonardo Boff, once said: “The ultimate criterion determining the truth of any and all theology is whether it produces a life of faith, hope, and charity.” The way I look at it, it is this criterion of producing a life of faith, hope, and charity that is the real litmus test when evaluating other religions as being a path to God.

These past few weeks, we at Trinity have been studying the religion of Islam, trying to understand its precepts and theology. We have learned that faithful Muslims pray to God 5 times per day. They give 2.5% of their income to charity and engage in the spiritual discipline of fasting in order to strengthen their compassion for the poor. Muslims go on a life-transforming spiritual pilgrimage at least once in their lives if they are able. When I look at these sacrificial and holy acts, I see the imprint of God written all over the practice of the Islam which produces lives of faith, hope, and charity.

So how did it come to be that Christians felt it was “God’s will” to judge and discriminate against Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and people of other faiths, believing that we are the only ones who know the will of God? How did it come to be that over the centuries, Christians have condemned, killed, tortured, or forced conversion on people of other religions? Is this God’s will? I don’t think so!

I remember being brought up in an Irish-Catholic enclave of Boston during the 1960’s where I was told that Protestants would not enter heaven. Of course I never believed that kind of narrow and exclusive thinking even as a child. And though I doubt this kind of thinking is embraced today, I still see widespread evidence of prejudice and even fear of those who practice their religion differently. Jesus however did not fear those who were different from him. In fact, he broke away from the tribal consciousness of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism and showed God’s love to the marginalized, the Samaritan, and many others who were considered “unclean” by traditional Jewish customs and laws. Let’s take a closer look at today’s gospel.

Jesus is traveling north, from Jerusalem to Galilee, going through the land of Samaria. 700 years earlier, the Assyrians had conquered the region of Samaria and purposely altered its native population. 27,000 Jews were deported while foreign colonists settled the land, resulting in a mixture of people of different religions. While Jews and Samaritans shared a common heritage, they differed from one another in regard to place of worship and legal traditions. The Jews saw the Samaritans as foreigners while the Samaritans maintained that the Jews were not the true bearers of the faith as expounded by Moses. These two very similar groups built a wall between themselves, believing that each had a monopoly on the truth. This wall created distrust and dislike.

It was into this context that Jesus entered Sychar, a town in Samaria, where Jacob's well was located. Being thirsty, he asked a woman for a drink of water. This would have been quite a scandal in those days. After all, a respected rabbi would never talk to a Samaritan nor drink out of the same cup, thus breaking purity codes, cultural codes, and century old prejudices. And to make matters worse, Jesus speaks openly to a strange woman, a real "no-no" in Jewish culture.

Using the metaphor of living water, Jesus tries to open the eyes of the Samaritan woman to a deeper spiritual truth. He wants to communicate that worshipping God is not tied to a particular place of worship or to an elite group of people or to a specific expression of religion. God is spirit. God is truth. And where there is spirit and truth, there God is also. Through these prophetic words, Jesus offers the unnamed woman "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman responds: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty."

The early Christians experienced God in a real and profound way. As time went on, they began to reflect on their experiences, especially the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth and his connection to God. The purpose of this reflection, the purpose of this theology, was to enable them to become merciful, wise, generous, and happy through a lifelong personal involvement in knowing and loving God. They thirsted for God and comported their life style to receive the blessing of eternal life in order to grow into the likeness of Christ, not to judge and exclude others who were different.

Unfortunately, as Christians became more mainstream and were integrated into the Roman Empire, they began to lose their thirst for the living water. They lost the vision of becoming merciful, wise, generous, and happy through a lifelong personal involvement in knowing and loving God. Instead, they became part and parcel of the dominant power system, judging, discriminating, and forcing those who were not part of the Christian circle to convert or else pay the consequences.

Today's gospel story is a reminder that people of different faiths need not remain divided. It not only addresses the 1<sup>st</sup> century conflicts between the Samaritans and the Jews and their preoccupation with creating walls and division, but it also calls us to expand our appreciation for those who worship differently, especially those who worship in spirit and in truth.

Jesus said: "Everyone who drinks of this water will never be thirsty." I love being a Christian. I am committed to my baptismal vows "to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself." I thirst for that peace which passes all understanding, where love overcomes fear. I thirst for a time when my mind will be at rest, no longer wrestling with thoughts of judgement and angst. I thirst for a time when faith, hope, and charity become the cardinal virtues in my life. I thirst for peace on earth. And so for me and my house, we will continue to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, worshipping the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But my worshipping the Holy Trinity does not preclude honoring and respecting people of other religions, learning precepts that will strengthen my own faith.

Both the Samaritan woman at the well and Jesus had something important to share with each other. She offered him well-water to quench his physical thirst and he offered her living-water to quench her spiritual thirst. And so it is with the sharing of religious traditions. Not only does this sharing break to down barriers and strengthen relationships, but it can be life-giving and helps us on our own spiritual journey to become merciful, wise, generous, and happy.

"Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty." (John 4)