

## **Sermon #10: Our Heart and Home: Christianity in an Age of Pluralism**

Acts 2:1-21 and John 14:1-14

It is an old joke, but it is still true.

*Seems this man died and was ushered into heaven, which appeared to be an enormous house. An angel began to escort him down a long hallway past "many rooms".*

*"What's in that room?" the man asked, pointing to a very sombre-looking group of people chanting a Gregorian mass.*

*"That's the Roman Catholic room," said the angel. "Very high church."*

*"What's in that room?" the man asked, pointing to a group of sarong-clad dancers gyrating their hips and occasionally shrieking out loud.*

*"That's the Balinese group," said the angel. "Very lively."*

*"What's in that room?" asked the man, pointing to a group of bald-headed people meditating to the sound of an enormous gong.*

*"That's the Zen group," said the angel. "Very quiet. You would hardly know they were here."*

*Then the angel stopped the man, as they were about to round a corner. "Now, when we get to the next room," said the angel, "I would appreciate it if you would tiptoe past. We mustn't make any sound."*

*"Why's that?" asked the man.*

*"Because in that room there's a bunch of Christian fundamentalists; and they think they're the only ones here."*

What does it mean to find one's home in Christianity when there are so many other houses on the block, so many other rooms in heaven's mansion? Does our allegiance to Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life mean that others are left begging at the doors of heaven?

We live in a world of many faiths. Years ago people could live their entire lives without meeting a person of a faith other than Christianity. Now we share our streets and our shops and our schools with people of a variety of religious backgrounds – and isn't that a blessing! I was amazed while I was in rural Manitoba at the casual assumption that we all believe the same thing. That's not the world I know, and it's not the world most of us live in anymore. I have friends who are Buddhist, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Wiccan, neo-pagans, and Native spiritualists. I've been to school or worked with people who are Jewish, Bahai, Sikh, Hindu, Christian Scientist, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, Unitarian Universalist and about every type of Christian you can come up with.

We used to think that those differences come from the way we were raised. There's a certain truth to that: those raised in a certain faith are likely to look to that faith for answers to spiritual questions. Certain faiths make sense in certain

cultures. But in a world that is increasingly multicultural – where ideas and values cross continents at incredible speed — there's no guarantee that those who were raised Christian will stay Christian. I know people of a variety of ages who have left Christianity behind in order to explore other faiths, especially Eastern religions like Buddhism or post-Christian religions like Goddess-worship. When I talk to people in university, many of them will tell me that their favourite class is World Religions – they're intrigued by the abundant viewpoints out there. I know those were some of my favourite classes as well. I find the various ways we approach faith in God absolutely fascinating!

And yet, still I find my home in Christianity. Why? Why should any of us be Christian when there are so many other options out there? The old answer used to be, "If you're not a Christian, you're going to Hell. " But I don't believe that. A God who would send people to Hell because they don't believe what I believe is not a God I particularly want to worship. After all, we believe in a God whose essence is grace. Is it gracious or merciful to condemn a good Buddhist or a good Muslim simply because they are not Christian? Our own theology argues against such an understanding of God.

The answer that I am Christian because that's what I was taught to be and it's the only option in my town or city, doesn't hold water anymore, either. I know about other faiths, and there are lots of places to worship in Victoria– and yet still, I am here.

You'll remember that when we spoke about the Bible way back near the beginning of this series of sermons we talked about a sacramental understanding of Scripture: that Scripture helps reveal to us the presence and action of God. Marcus Borg sees the enduring religions of the world as sacraments as well – they are ways of revealing the sacred. None are the sole carriers of truth in an absolute sense, but true religion reveals something to us about the divine that is beneath and behind and in all things.

Religions are constructed by humans as response to their experience of the sacred. Each comes from a particular culture and uses the language of that culture to express itself. Like the Spirit coming upon the people at Pentecost and speaking the Gospel in all those different languages, God comes upon people around the world, and they hear God speaking through their own language and cultural norms.

All great religions offer wisdom on how to live. They all include creative expressions through music, dance, visual art, poetry, architecture and rituals. If you walk into a Hindu temple, you will find it very different from a Christian church. If you hear the religious poetry of Persian Zoroastrianism, it will sound strange to you after listening to the hymns of J.S. Bach or Fanny Crosby. All religions include some sort of communal expression of the faith – communities in which we learn the practices, teachings and wisdom of that religion. And all religious communities hold within them the potential for human transformation – for significant change and growth in the life of their followers. Any religion that does not bear these characteristics is not likely to endure.

So then, if we take a look at Christianity, we can see it as "our sacrament" – our revelation of who God is and what relationship with the divine is about. It shares things in common with other faiths, but it is also expressed differently because it

is part of a different cultural and linguistic tradition. All enduring faiths speak of a “Way” – a path that will lead to stronger relationship with the Divine and with all of creation; and all enduring faiths share this path of self-giving, “letting go and letting God”, of death and life – the way we find in Jesus, who is our truth, our way, our life. The language used to express that way is different, and the forms of spiritual practice used to guide us in that way are different – and those differences matter. They matter, because religion is not primarily an institution, but a way of life. We find ourselves drawn to The Way in which we feel most at home – and it is likely those external practices – those ways of praying and living and worshipping and speaking together – that will determine whether or not we find our Home in one faith or another. Christianity is my Home – it speaks a language that is familiar; it teaches practices I can identify with; its music is my music; its path is one I can follow; and its founder and foundation has affected my life as no other has. It’s the path that has chosen me, and it’s one I’m passionate about.

Many don’t want to choose one path. Many prefer to think of themselves as “spiritual, but not religious”. I can respect that, but I want to offer such people a thought from Huston Smith, one of the greatest scholars of world religions. He says that religions are to spirituality what schools are to education. Sure, you could go off by yourself and eventually acquire all the knowledge you receive from schools – but it would be terribly hard work, finding books and articles, searching the Internet, figuring things out by yourself without any help from anyone else, weeding out the useful information from the trash. Religions take the wisdom of the centuries and provide us with a treasure trove of practices and teachings that have stood the test of time in helping people to develop a relationship with that “Something more” that most “spiritually-oriented people” are seeking. As Huston Smith also says to those “spiritual seekers” of our time: if you are searching for water, is it not better to dig one well sixty feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep? The spiritual dabbling of our contemporary society seems to me to be like digging a whole bunch of really shallow wells.

I believe with all my heart that Christianity is a wellspring of water for a thirsty world. Think what an encounter with Christ did to those folk who received the Spirit at Pentecost! The power and the energy of faith overtook them and changed their lives. Christian faith can continue to be a mediator of the Holy Spirit today. It can provide for us “A way, a truth, a life” that is in harmony with God. I believe that if we dig deep into the well of our Christian heritage we will find an abundant source of life and hope.

Are you looking for insight into prayer and meditation? Christianity has a long history of mysticism and spiritual practice that can help you. Are you looking for a community to belong to? One of our first callings as Christian people is to love one another and to welcome all. Are you struggling with tough moral decisions? We have 2000 years of teaching on ethical questions. Do you care passionately about the earth and its peoples and need other people around you who share that passion? Justice seeking and stewardship of creation are central Christian teachings. Do you want a place for your children to develop strong principles and values? That’s one of the central tasks of Christian community. Are you looking for a place where it’s safe to ask questions of faith – where different voices are heard and respected? This is what we are about in this emerging Christian tradition.

Those of you who are here are mostly here because Christianity is your home – either it has chosen you, or you have chosen it. Either way, this is a faith that speaks the language of your heart. But what about those others – the three million Canadians, for example, who say they belong to the United Church of Canada? Where are your daughters and sons, your grandchildren, your friends, your spouses, your neighbours? Perhaps they, too, have a need for a place to call home! I urge you today, to be a true spiritual friend to them – to offer to share with them the home that you have found in your faith – the home you have found for your heart. Perhaps in the Christian faith, perhaps even in the Christian faith practiced by the United Church of Canada, they may find their way home. I pray that it is so. Amen.

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I am indebted to Marcus Borg for the thoughts and themes of this sermon series, in particular his book, “The Heart of Christianity”, as well as to Tim Scorer’s workbook, “Experiencing the Heart of Christianity.”