

19 January 2020

My Truth Is Better Than Yours

Amos 9:7; Mark 9:38-41

Today we read two scriptures, first a single verse from the book of the prophet Amos. We read Amos 9, verse 7:

*⁷Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the Lord.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?*

Our second reading comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 38-41:

³⁸John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' ³⁹But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

There's an old joke about a man who dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter welcomes him and takes him around on an orientation tour. Eventually they come to a high brick wall with no windows and gates, and the man hears a murmur of voices on the other side and asks, "Who's over there?" St. Peter hisses, "Sssh! Those are the Baptists. They think they're the only ones here."

As I said, it's an old joke. I've heard it several times in different forms, starring various groups, including Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Mormons. But sometimes a joke contains insight, and this one is based on two absurdities worth drawing attention to. First, there is the absurdity of the very people who have been saved by God's grace turning around and trying to restrict that grace to themselves: "Yes, it's grace, but only for us." What part of "grace" are they not understanding? The second thing is the way St. Peter tiptoes around so as not to disturb their illusion. Apparently, if they found out that God was more gracious than they had thought, they would be disappointed. As if it would ruin heaven for them if they knew that there were Methodists there, too.

The joke's absurdity is that such exclusive, petty attitudes feel totally out of place in heaven, and yet these are precisely the attitudes that most people attribute to Christians. Even among those of us who *know* not all Christians have that attitude, we probably know some who do. So, as we continue this month reflecting on the battered and beleaguered concept of truth, we should spend some time dealing with the idea of *exclusive* truth, the belief that our teaching is not only true but is the *only* truth. In crass terms, our message has often been that only those who are "saved" by our definition and have become a part of our faith go to heaven. For some, this has translated into the rush to get kids sprinkled quick, because apparently magic water is the ticket, and for others, it means to make sure you "accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior" and say the Sinner's Prayer, because for these Christians it's not magic water but magic words. Either way, the message is that only those who follow the correct procedure and become Christian, are eligible for God's love. Atheists, agnostics, and people of other faiths need not apply.

In fact, some, like the people behind the wall in the joke, draw the line even more tightly. It's not just those who have become Christian who qualify, but those who are the right *kind* of Christian. Generally this means those who hold to their group's pet doctrines. A few years ago, in an earlier church, we had a young man who started visiting the church, and after a while he asked if he could talk to me about Methodist doctrine, so we met at a coffee shop for an hour. He really liked our church and felt welcome, but he had this friend who was the pastor of a very conservative church in Minnesota who was warning him against the Methodists. He had a sort of doctrinal checklist from his friend and he wanted to make sure we were really Christians. Yeah, we failed. We didn't line up, so the young man said he couldn't come to our church anymore. His pastor friend had explained why by telling him a story: Once there was a pilot who had been flying from Chicago to Anchorage, but who had set his course just one degree off. Just one degree, but he ended up thousands of miles from his destination. In other words, you have to have every doctrine exactly right, or you might miss salvation completely. The young man repeated that story to me, and all I could say was, "Wow. If that's true, then I hope your friend has it all exactly right."

I'm uncomfortable with the idea that Christianity is the sole vehicle of God's truth and that only Christians are eligible for God's salvation, and I'm guessing some of you are, too. What about someone who lives and dies in an Iban longhouse in Borneo and never hears the name of Jesus? Is she disqualified because of where she was born? What about people who follow their own inherited faith, and become people of peace, compassion, and devotion within Islam or Buddhism or whatever? Are they "lost" while Jerry Falwell, Jr., is "saved"? What about people who were horribly abused as children within the Christian church and who renounce Christianity as soon as they're adults? Do they go to hell as a result? If being a Christian is the sole criterion for acceptance by God, then the answer to all these questions is yes.

But what kind of God rejects people based on the circumstances of their birth or what they put down under "religious preference" on surveys? More important for us, does that God bear any resemblance to the God we find in the Bible? In a word, no. Not even in the Old Testament, and certainly not in the person of Jesus Christ. Yes, in the Old Testament, God is sometimes presented in fairly harsh terms, as a strict judge, but at no point is that God's judgment based on whether we believe the right doctrines. Generally God's wrath is reserved for those who oppress the helpless. And yes, in the Hebrew Bible, God takes one people – the Jews – as his "Chosen People," but again never does it imply that God therefore only loves those people. The "Chosen People" are chosen so as to be a light to all nations. Meanwhile, God continues speaking to prophets and kings from other nations, continues to care about the lives and welfare of non-Jews. And every time the Jewish people start to feel smug about their chosenness, God sends a prophet to squelch that smugness. In the verse we read earlier from Amos 9, the prophet is saying, "Yes, God brought Israel up from Egypt! So what? God is also the one who brought the Philistines here from Caphtor! God is also the one who brought the Syrians from Kir! You're no different from any other nation to God." Earlier in the book, Amos says, "The only thing special about you Israelites is that God gave you the Law, but since you're ignoring it and mistreating the poor, that's not helping you!" (Amos 2:6-13). The God of the Hebrew Bible is not an exclusive God, and to this day the Jewish faith maintains that. That is, Jews celebrate God's particular revelation to them through the Law and Prophets, but they never argue that their revelation is God's only revelation.

And then we compare the exclusive God that many Christians imagine to the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Think back to the story we read from Mark 9. One of his disciples, John, comes running over, filled with indignation, because there are some people down the road who are performing healings in Jesus' name, but . . . You won't believe this! *They're not a part of our group!* And Jesus replies, "Okay? . . . And your problem is what?" That's a question worth thinking about. What *is* John's problem? Why does it bother him so much for outsiders also to be doing good in Jesus' name? All I can come up with is that if others can do the same things, that makes our group feel less special. Anyway, John wants those alien healers to be shut down, but Jesus says, "Look, nobody who is helping others in my name is an enemy, so get over it." And then he adds, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Think about that. That is the exact opposite of the way exclusive Christianity thinks. Christianity has for far too long assumed, like John, that whoever is not part of our group is the enemy. Whoever is not a card-carrying Christian church member with a baptism certificate and a salvation story is therefore "lost" and separated from God. But Jesus turns that on its head: "Assume that everyone is with us, especially if they're serving others, unless they are openly and intentionally opposed to us." That, of course, leads to the question: who are those people, the ones *against* Jesus? Well, based on who Jesus specifically denounced, that would be religious hypocrites, legalists who impose unbearable religious rules on people, pettifogging moralists who ignore more important things like compassion and justice, and anyone who places a stumbling block to faith before a child.

What I'm saying – and what I think Jesus says in this passage and throughout his ministry – is that God's truth is bigger than the particular world we were born into, bigger than any world that we can imagine. Furthermore, our acceptance by God has nothing to do with whether we have the correct opinions, whether we're *right*. Again, the message of the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, is that our acceptance by God is based on God's love. Now, of course, we have been granted the free will that allows us to reject that love. We can do that. In the same way, we can try to diminish God's love. We can pretend that God only loves people like us, who belong to our group and share our doctrinal positions. We can hide ourselves in a make-believe heaven behind high walls and tell ourselves that we're the only ones there, if that's what makes us feel special. But God's love is bigger than that and always has been.

I am a Christian, both by heritage and by choice. I have read the scriptures of other faiths, and I have felt God speaking to me through them, but I have always returned to Christ. In him I have found the deepest, most resonant truth of God. Christ is the truth that I will continue to proclaim while I breathe. But I am not such a head-case as to believe that my proclamation of the truth is the only way God can be experienced. I don't get to decide who God can speak to or how, and any God who let me make that call would not be God.

That's the truth.

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A final word: One objection people have to the idea that God is not limited to Christianity is that it seems to make evangelism pointless. If you don't have to be Christian to be saved, why send

missionaries? Here's a thought. What if we stopped telling people about Christ because we're their only hope of escaping eternal torment at the hands of a harsh and vengeful God, and started telling people about Christ because in Christ we have found acceptance and love and meaning, and really, you got to try this. That would be easier, wouldn't it? And furthermore, that would sound like a God worth following.