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The National Presbyterian Church

Probing Questions
World Religions: Aren't All Religions the Same?

Micah 4:1-5; Luke 7:1-15; Philippians 2:1-11; Acts 4:12; Leviticus 1:1-9

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In our sermons through the fall, we are looking together at different questions that people are asking about Christian faith and about religion in general. These questions may or may not be the questions, which are burning on your hearts, but we know that they are questions that many people are asking who are out there in society around about us. And we know this because of surveys that have been taken, and these questions arise on the surveys as questions that are bothering people. And we know this as well because of books that have made it all the way to the top of the New York Times Bestseller List, and some of these topics are part and parcel with those books as well. So, people are wrestling with these questions – questions about God's existence, about the Bible whether it can be trusted, about the uniqueness of Jesus, about theological words like predestination or salvation or redemption or the Apocalypse. And this Sunday we come to a question close to the top of the list for many people: the question about world religions. **How are we to think about different religions of the world?** How are we to think about our own religion in this world in a world in which there are many religions around about us? Especially when some of them, which used to be far away, are now, as it were, on our doorstep.

As I begin to think with you through this particular question, I need to begin with a caveat or a disclaimer, a little fine print. Maybe every sermon should begin this way. But with this one in particular and this series in particular it's actually very important for you to know that in some ways it's sheer arrogance to think that in 15 or 20 minutes I can deal or anybody can deal with a topic such as this, so huge as these particular topics. Indeed, many of these questions are topics, which have taken up the time, consumed the time of theologians of many centuries, and are the subject of seminars and classes at universities and seminaries which last for a whole semester. And here we are with just 20 minutes to think about these huge topics. So what I need to say as I begin is that I have no illusions about – though maybe God will help this happen – but I have no illusions about my giving the “final definitive word” on these particular subjects. If that happens, wonderful. If it doesn't, wonderful, too. What I do hope will happen, though, is this:

- That first of all in asking the question I hope that some of you may feel liberated – because I know from my experience as a pastor that there are some people who ask questions inside

themselves. And they wonder, "Is anybody else asking this question? Am I doubting my faith if I ask this question? If I don't know the answer to this, is there something wrong with me?" What I want to say right from the outset is that if you have questions and you don't know the answers, join the club. You are in line with Job in the ancient book in the Old Testament. You are in line with the Psalmists in many of the Psalms. When we ask our questions, and we come to that place of doubt, we are at a wonderful place where God can take us and move us on. If we have no doubts we'll never grow. If we have no questions we'll never grow. Our questions are an important part of how God intersects and interacts with our lives. So I want to say this by way of affirmation to begin with.

- I also want to say that I do hope that there are some answers that are given. Maybe not the final word but a first word or a second word, something that you may agree with and say, "Ah, I thought about that and I'm glad to hear that." Or something you may disagree with, something you haven't thought about that will be a little challenging, and you may have to pray about it. You may have to talk with me about it. You may have to talk with your fellow Christians about it, and I would say "Great, God is taking that word and using it so that we can grow in faith and in our relationship with God and with one another together."

So in these days I trust that God will be at work as we look through these questions together. That's the small print, that's the caveat. Which brings us to the question of the day, which is about world religions. ***How are we to think about all these religions, about us? How are we to think about our own religion in a world in which there are many religions?*** And we know that this is not merely an academic question for the seminary or for the university, it's a very a very practical and important question for us today.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, while it may be true that the greatest slaughters of the 20th Century were not religiously caused, but tended to be caused by secular ideologies (and people don't speak about that enough), while we know that to be true, what we also know to be true is this, that in our world just now the conflicts between people of different religious backgrounds is downright dangerous and precarious. The last decades have shown this and the last few days (with the death of the American ambassador in Libya) have shown this as well. The struggle between different religions, between different religious values, between different religious cultures has the power to destabilize not only our lives but the whole wide world and its peace.

And this clash is almost certainly not going to go away any time soon. In large part, because it comes from the fact that the world is shrinking, and shrinking rapidly. It was in the early 1960s that Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase, "global village" to describe the fact that because of technology the world was shrinking, the world was no longer far away, way out there; the world was entering everyone's living room, everyone's daily experience in a way that was unprecedented in the years before.

In our own country, for example, because of immigration, there are mosques and there are temples in cities and towns where there used to only be churches and synagogues. One estimate that I read indicated that in Silicon Valley about 40%

of the businesses, the successful businesses, were either owned or run by those who had declared their religious backgrounds to be Hindu. So, the world has come to us. It is here right where we live in our nation.

But not only that; we, of course, have gone out to the world. Our culture has gone out to the world; western culture, North American culture, which many people assume to be Christian, which should make us shudder just a little bit with some aspects of it. Many people assume that, but it has gone out to the world into homes and into huts.

It's amazing when you go to the developing nation where you see television antennas on the smallest and most unlikely of places. Our culture has gone out into places to homes, and huts in every part of the earth through television and through the web. And while some people accept our culture, our values (what they perceive as Christian faith: some of it may be, some may not be), while some accept it gladly and they find it refreshing and liberating, well there are certainly others who are crying out in anguish and in outrage. And at times in anger, crying out saying, *"You are not us. You're imposing yourselves on us, and we don't like that. We are not the same. We will not be overwhelmed by you. Even though it feels like an onslaught coming into our lives, we are going to resist. We are going to fight back. We are going to preserve our identity at any cost."* That's the cry for many people in the world, and it's not just a cry from people out there somewhere, far away. We may assume more often than not that this is coming loudly from the world of Islam, but it's not just a cry from Islam, or from people far off in the distance. It's a cry from people in here, in our own nation, and within the boundaries of the Christian faith as well; within our own heart, within our own nation. Because there is within our own nation at the moment a crisis of religious identity, a crisis of religious values. If you want to read this, perhaps the most recent book about this, which covers the whole spectrum of the religious scene in the United States is a book called *Bad Religion* by Ross Douthat. In his book, Douthat describes the smorgasbord of religious experiences available within our society, and the changes that are going on, the divisions religiously in our society better than anyone else I've read.

Indeed, the census data from the last census has shown some of this rapid change taking place within our own country, and which is responsible for causing some of the conflicts in our hearts and minds. One of the most significant results of the last census, religiously, was that *those who described themselves with no religious affiliation at all doubled in the last 20 years*. Those who say "I'm not in any religious faith, not Christian, not anything," doubled since 1990. And then, even within the Christian faith, the census showed that while 76% of people still identify themselves as Christians, the complexion and the complexity of what's happening within the Christian household that has changed and is changing rapidly all around us.

- We have far less Protestants percentage-wise than there used to be.
- And while some people would think that the United States is still a Christian nation, the general view is that it is a Protestant Christian nation. However, while there are more

Protestants than Catholics, the percentage of Catholics compared to Protestants is far greater than it used to be.

- Indeed, even the Protestants are more divided than they used to be. The old division was simple and clear: conservative and liberal! And then there were the familiar names of the mainline denominations: Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist. Well, now there are many more independents, and percentage-wise (and this takes many people by surprise) there are far more Pentecostals than there used to be.
- And this is a shift that we see not only within our own nation, but within the world as a whole. Indeed, the whole face of Christianity is changing throughout this world of ours in our nation and beyond. The Pentecostal churches are booming in Africa and in South America. Leaving some of us in the old mainline churches wondering if we have any place left in the Christian spectrum that we see in the world around and about us not only overseas but here at home.

It may be, of course, no comfort for you to hear that we, even as Presbyterians, have changed over the years, and some of you may be lamenting that fact. You have seen it and you go, "Oh, it's just not like it used to be." Well, it really isn't like it used to be. Go back 100 or 150 years ago, and you would find that if you were a worshipping Presbyterian that you would have no organ or piano. You would sing no hymns, and you would have no choir. You would have no choir because you are the choir, and you would have a person called a "presenter helping you to sing a cappella, and the only things you would be singing would be Psalms. Does that feel like us today? Not exactly. That has changed over a period of time. And pretty close to being one of the fundamental doctrines of the Presbyterian Church back 100 or 150 years ago would be the observance of the Sabbath. Sunday as the Sabbath. I mean you would do nothing on the Sabbath. For those who lived 100 to 150 years ago, Presbyterians looking at us today watching television, going to sports, meeting downstairs after the service, and all of these things, they would say, "Wait a minute. Can you really be Presbyterians? How can you do this and take this name upon you?" So that even within our own household, the changes have happened.

Change is happening all around us. It's happening now. It's happening more rapidly than ever it has before in the shrinking world of ours, in our nation, overseas, in our own religion and in other religions as well. And many people, and perhaps you're among them, many people are truly in pain over this. They have a sense of grief, a sense of loss, a sense of anxiety and they are crying out:

In all of this change, what are we losing that we cannot lose? In all of this change, will we throw out the baby with the bath water so that before we know it something that we desperately need is gone and gone forever? What is peripheral, and not essential? What is secondary and what is primary? What is negotiable and what is non-negotiable?

These are awfully difficult questions to deal with, and people are wrestling with them all the time, painfully wrestling with them... and what makes this wrestling even harder is that some people in our society have already stopped wrestling! They've already reached their conclusion that they are trying to persuade others to accept, that it's time to let it all go, and leave the past behind. They say,

Forget the details of each religion. Forget the dogmas. Forget the diversity of world religions or the diversity within your own religion. All of this should be thrown away. It should be jettisoned so you could get back to the essential core of all religions, which surely is the same for every single one of them. They are all the same. *This is the most common thought about world religions on the street and in, and on, the air today.* Indeed, the argument sometimes comes with a strong addendum, which adds that if you want world peace, then step number one is for religions to drop their differences and become the same. To many people, the great enemy of peace is religion, and if you want world peace, they say, then all the religions need to put to the side those things that seem to be peripheral (by somebody's judgment) and get down to the core, and just get along with each other. Our focus needs to be on what we have in common.

That is a view championed these days by some wonderful people, and I mean that sincerely. Some winsome people, among them the Dalai Lama and author Karen Armstrong, and their following is large and it's growing. And some parts of what they say are really important for all of us to hear. There certainly are times when we do have to think not only about what divides us, but about what unites us, and think seriously about those things. Not just the cup half full but the cup half empty, both of those together. Both of them together. We have to do this in all kinds of areas of our lives.

- If our marriages are falling apart, we tend to focus on all that's wrong, and part of the job of a counselor is to show up what's right within that relationship. And it's hard work to do that especially when you just don't feel like doing it all. In our families when there are struggles we need to think about what binds us together and not what separates us.
- In our businesses, in our churches too, when things turn ugly we need to do this.
- And, I would agree, we have to do it when it comes to people of different religions as well.

This is the point I believe that Jesus is making among some other point in the parable that we read as our scripture reading a few moments ago in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Tenth Chapter of Luke's Gospel. This is a passage, which for many of us here is very familiar. We've heard it perhaps from childhood, but one of the troubles with hearing something from childhood is that we sometimes forget some of the bits and pieces that make the story shocking in its original setting. And this story, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, would surely have been shocking in its original setting.

So Jesus tells this story about a man who is beaten up and left for dead at the side of the road. He's going down the hill and it is a hill down to the Dead Sea from Jerusalem down to Jericho. Going down the hill from Jerusalem to Jericho he is set upon by thieves and robbers who beat him up, take everything he has, leaves him half dead there on the ground. And two people walk by, and they are coming down from Jerusalem. They've been in church. They've been in the temple in Jerusalem, and they're coming down the desert road, and what do they do? They pass by on the other side. A priest and a Levite. The priest is a minister and the Levite is actually a part of the choir there in the temple. These are the holy people. These are the good people. These are the good guys. And Jesus is saying actually they're not. They are not the good guys. These are the people who should be theologically correct; these are the people who should be

on our side. The people should be those who represent our faith at the best. But Jesus says they're not. They're not representing the faith at its best at all. Jesus puts them in the position of being the bad guys.

And then he makes it worse by saying somebody else comes along, and he's a Samaritan. And what you need to know about Samaritans is this, that they were people of another religion. Not a far off religion, more like cousins to the Jewish people, but sometimes cousins fight harder than anybody else. And those Samaritans, well, they have no allegiance to the city of Jerusalem at all. This may not mean much to us, but if you think of the tension surrounding Jerusalem in our day and age, well it was like that back then. And to have no allegiance to Jerusalem to not care what was going on there that was a fighting position to take. And the Samaritans couldn't care less about Jerusalem.

They couldn't care less about the words of the prophets that we have in our Old Testament. And they could not care less about the possibility that a Messiah would come who was descended from the Tribe of David, as Jesus was. They couldn't care less about those things. They were of a different religion. They thought in a different way. They were outsiders. They were heretics. Jesus puts this heretic at the center of this story and says this is the one who does what's right. And not only does what's right, but in a remarkable way, he actually looks like Jesus, the author of our salvation.

What does he do? He stops by somebody who is looking as if they're dead. He picks them up. He cares for them, binds them up. He quenches their thirst, carries them in his arms, and takes them to a place where there can be healing. He pays whatever the cost to set this person back on his feet. Isn't this what Jesus does for us? Doesn't he meet us, as it were, when we're in the ditch, and not pass us by, but meets us there and bring us life when all we thought we had was death.

This is the story that Jesus told, and it is a story, which would have shocked the people who heard it the first time. What are you saying, Jesus? Well, what He's saying is this: *that God is at work in ways beyond our knowing, and if we think we can pin the sovereign God down, then think again.* C.S. Lewis said it like this as he wrote *Mere Christianity* (Chapter 5, p.50) We may know what God is doing with us, but we do not know and we do not need to know all the answers to what God is doing with "them," whoever "they" are. We trust this to God.

What we also know because of the parable is that we need to understand and care for our neighbor, and for you and me, at times this surely means that we owe it to them to find out what we have in common with them, seeking peace through that common understanding as much as possible. Jesus simply refused to focus only on what divided. **But to say that, is a far cry from saying that what we have in common is all that matters.** We have our differences too, and some of these are truly significant. That is, while we have much in common, there are some things which are critical that we do not have in common.

Boston University Professor Stephen Prothero, who is not a Christian (so he doesn't have a Christian agenda in saying this. He describes himself as being

part of the *religiously confused*, not a Christian! p.23) writes this in a book called God is Not One. Dr. Prothero thinks that it is actually naïve and untrue to say that deep down we are all the same. Each religion, he says, is asking and answering different questions about different aspects of human personalities and realities. Sometimes they overlap. Sometimes they do not: they are simply heading in different directions, and when we deny that, he argues, we are denying the truth. This is what he writes (p.3):

[True] the world's religions do converge when it comes to ethics. But they diverge sharply on doctrine, ritual, mythology, experience and lore. These differences may not matter to mystics or philosophers of religion but they matter to ordinary religious people . . . One purpose of the "all the religions are one" mantra is to stop this fighting and this killing. And it is comforting to pretend that the great religions make up one big happy family. But the sentiment, however, well-intentioned, is neither accurate nor ethically responsible.

To put it another way, what Stephen Prothero is saying is that the divisions in human society and in this world of ours are not just about religion! Indeed, for me one of the non-negotiable doctrines of Christian faith has to do with the sinfulness of humankind. The fact on the one hand that we're glorious, made in the image of God, and on the other hand, we have rebelled against God and we are capable of enormous evil. Which is to say that even if the "all the religions are one" idea were to be correct, and we were to divest ourselves of all the things that people call "peripheral differences," evil would still be there. George Orwell in his book *Animal Farm*, written during World War II, understood that, and he understood it well: change the clothing and tyrants will still rise up in this world of sin.

Clearly, whether it leads to world peace or not, it remains an important, Christ-centered, task to see if what we cling on to is essential or peripheral. Letting go of things that needlessly divide us is obviously a good thing! Finding out what we have in common is clearly a good thing! *But what is also a good thing is to seek to discover and define what it is that we hold on to that we must never let go; to discover what is non-negotiable.*

As I close this morning, I want to mention the one thing that I believe we cannot change or lose as Christians, or we lose everything; we might as well not be here. That one thing has to do not with what I want to believe, but *with what God has done at a certain point in history. It has to do with truth in history.* It doesn't have to do with whether or not I have *all the truth* as a Christian: I don't (my understanding of God is flawed; our understanding is flawed) but it has to do with whether or not at one point in time, in verifiable history, God entered this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; with whether God became incarnate in Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem and Nazareth, grew up to become a man, died on a cross and did so for our sins so that even though we are rebellious sinners our sins could be removed, taken away, and we could live in fellowship with God forever. *Did God do that?* That's a question we need to ask and it's a question we need to answer, and if the answer is "Yes," then this is non-negotiable or we lose everything along the way.

The late British poet laureate John Betjeman put it like this writing about Christmas (it's good to think about Christmas outside of Christmas). He asks this in a wonderful little poem:

*And is it true, and is it true that most tremendous tale of all
seen in a stained glass window's hue, a baby in an ox's stall
The Maker of the stars and sea become a child on earth for me?
And is it true? For if it is, no love that in family dwells,
no caroling in frosty air, nor all the steeple-shaking bells
can with this single truth compare.*

If it's true, then we cannot let it go: we cannot. We hold on to it, not as if "we are right because we know this." Not with arrogance, because in itself it is the prime example of humility of God descending into our world. But we hold onto it as a treasure that we cannot believe we have, and that we must share with the world around about us. If it's true, this is an act of enormous grace by God that we cannot and must not keep to ourselves but share with the world.

Indeed, what we as Christians dare to believe is this:

- If we want peace and surely we do, in this troubled world, and it surely is troubled, with so many changes, so many people, so many religions, so many differences, all coming upon us so that we don't quite know what to do them.
- If we want peace and if we want to be peacemakers in this troubled world (and Jesus calls us to be peacemakers" "blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the Children of God." (Matthew 59),

then there is no better way, no other way to reach this peace but through him who is the Prince of Peace, by honoring Jesus, by humbling ourselves before him; by following him who stooped down into our world and picked us up when we could not pick ourselves up, and carried us with him on the cross so that on that cross our sins could be thrown away into the pit of hell, and our relationship with God could be secured forever. This is what he does for us and when he does it, he says to us, and we need to hear this loudly and clearly: Now, you go out and be that Samaritan to someone else whoever your neighbor is. Not to beat them over the head with what you perceive to be the truth, but to be a Samaritan who reflects the incarnational love of God in their lives as you have received it in your life. This is what we must do as peacemakers in this world and as followers of Jesus, the only incarnate Son of God.

There is much that we do not understand and as Christians we don't need to understand, but we always pursue these things. What is God doing with all those other people? Jesus in a way says, "God will take care of that." God is at work in ways beyond our knowing. God will deal with that. Our business, then, is to deal with the Christ who deals with us, and to give our lives to him more fully now than ever we have before, to be his servants in the world who at one point in time descended to us and by His spirit comes to us today. May God help us to know in this world how to play our part in response to His grace and for His glory and for this peace that He would bring to the world.