

EXTENDING GOD'S GRACE

Isaiah 2:1-4
Philippians 2:1-11

First Presbyterian Church of Mason
July 10, 2016

In thinking about this sermon series theme that Bill proposed and that you are dealing with for four or five Sundays this midsummer, my preparation was both long standing and recent. The issue is: How are we Christians to deal with other people and approach and interact with people of those faiths? I think back some 50 years to an elective course at Princeton seminary taught by a visiting Japanese professor – “The Absolute Claim of Christianity” – whether or not Christianity is the one true religion – and whether or not that was a claim we Christians could or should make. As for recent input on our theme, an article in the last *Christian Century* to arrive in our mailbox is titled “God(s) of Abraham: Sibling Rivalry Among Three Faiths.”

In between 50 years ago and last week, I spent many hours this past winter preparing a 3-week course at Lansing First on the relation between Grace and Law, and a 2-week follow-up on the central place of Sharia Law in Islam. So without getting too specific or detailed in the course of one sermon, it is the challenge of Islam that is most on my mind, just as two weeks ago Fred led you through aspects of the encounter with that other of the three religions tracing back to Abraham.

You probably know that both of those other faiths – Judaism and Islam – define a special place for Jesus of Nazareth, without coming anywhere near to accepting the claims we Christians hold. Current day Judaism, for the most part, is glad to point to Jesus the Jew as one in a series of wise and pious rabbis. Likewise, Muslims never tire of reminding Christians that Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an, again, as “one in a series,” of revered prophets. He stands right there along with Abraham, Moses and other Old Testament figures, culminating, of course in Mohammed himself, the last and greatest of prophets, after whom there is and can be no other.

So these two faiths are willing to acknowledge Jesus in passing – a sideward glance, as it were – before moving on to their respective main beliefs. We cannot quibble with them about that. But neither, I would maintain, can we use that weak and offhand “endorsement” of Jesus as either rabbi or prophet as a starting point for interfaith dialogue. That, as we shall see, must come from another direction. Not that we Christians have any reason not to call Jesus rabbi and prophet – but for us there is so much more that we find in and claim about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The power and content of our belief in Jesus is what we have already confessed today in reciting the Apostles’ Creed. But who Jesus was and is - what he did and still does – is expressed even more profoundly in our reading today from Philippians. This passage and the Apostles’ Creed beautifully parallel each other in summarizing what Christians have always held to be true. Set them side-by-side sometime and take time to study them in depth. The Apostles’ Creed took its final form in Rome only several centuries after Jesus. But the Philippians passage is among the earliest testimonies of our faith – earlier than the writing of any of the four Gospels – straight from the pen of Apostle Paul. Some scholars hold that Paul is quoting what was a hymn already circulating in the early Church, which

would mean that someone with insight equal to Paul was already on the scene. Either way, it is clear evidence of how early in church history Jesus was seen as divine.

Paul here gives us in 6 verses a summary of Christmas, the life, death, resurrection, ascension of Jesus and even more. Here we have what Jesus was willing to do – “though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself,” (there is Christmas) – “taking the form of a slave” – (there is his life of servant-hood) – “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” – (there is the ultimate act that saves us all).

And at that lowest of all points (the Apostles Creed parallel has “crucified, dead, and buried, he descended into hell”) what word comes next? *Therefore*. Therefore God! (Some translations at this point have “But God...” Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, when these two words appear, we know that a great reversal in the sad story of human affairs is about to take place.) This “therefore” displays what God is powerful to do – to “highly exalt” Jesus and give him “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

If you take time to unpack these few verses and all they imply, you should find yourself both exhausted and exhilarated. What God the Father is *powerful* to do. What Jesus the Son is *willing* to do. These truths are in the context of what we as Christian believers are *called* to do – in the spirit of humility, which Paul urges at the beginning of our passage. In a sense, it’s all here – a boldness to proclaim this, the content of our faith – acting in tandem with a humility about our part in the faith. This combination, I will claim, is to be our approach to those of other faiths and those of no faith.

My interpretation of this passage is that over the course of the ages, at some point in human history, God will fulfill his own promises; God will guarantee his own glory. “That day will come” as surely as the prophecy of Isaiah 2 (our Old Testament reading) guarantees that the people of all nations will one day stream together in acknowledging the Lord. That day *will* come “when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess.” That is, not only will all humanity be saved, all humanity will *know* it is saved.

If, in the course of time, God will guarantee his own glory, then what is the role we are to play in the unfolding drama? What is left for us to do if God appears to have done it all? Our part is first to *proclaim* the grace of God that has brought this salvation to earth and will perfect it in eternity. Our second command is humbly to *live out* that love of Christ. It is our privilege – our humble privilege as Christians – to respond to the grace of God in both word and in deed. We are those who have received the eternal good news. What we are now given to do is *extend* the Gospel of grace, which God has granted each of us all.

Allow me here to introduce another verse from Paul – a key verse which prompted the sermon title, and which, I believe, may offer inspiration for the evangelism opportunity that you as a congregation are encouraged to take on, sharing the faith with folks of no faith, with those who need their faith revived, and yes, with people of other faiths. Here is the verse: II Corinthians 4:15. “For everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” “To the glory of God” – there’s that affirmation again that triumphantly closes out our Philippians passage. The extension of God’s grace is something Paul was able to witness in his own time, and it proceeds on in ours. The “so that” of this ongoing penetration of grace in our world, Paul says, is the further fulfillment of God’s plan: “so that” more and more people may take part

in what is meant to be universal thanksgiving. We are the people who now give thanks and who know the reason why. To go on doing this day in and day out, in both good and evil times, both to our life's end and on to eternity, is the essence of bowing the knee and confessing with the tongue to which all creation is invited.

How then, are we to approach and speak to those who have not yet heard the invitation? In this privileged task that is ours as Christians, there are two approaches to avoid – tempting roads that have been tried again and again, but that in fact wind up dead ends. The first option is one that in fact appears ever more attractive in our time and place, as we are so often conflicted in matters of politics, race, class and so many other issues. This approach is simply to throw in the towel of truth and seize upon some variation of the theme that after all is said and done, every religion is really aiming for the same thing: “Can’t we all just get along, take a little from here, a little from there, and live at peace?” This, of course, sounds noble, and in fact, is the central belief of the Bahia religion, a nineteenth century offshoot of Islam. Tempting and reasonable as it comes across at first, no major faith, including Christianity, is finally willing and able to go down that path; in a word, to yield up its uniqueness.

The opposite approach is simply to declare in a polemical voice that “my way” is the one and only way. End of discussion. The complex reality of the world today will not allow us to take up such a restrictive attitude. As Christians, we must rather take a stand that is both bold and humble – bold to hold fast to that faith that we have seen is summarized in our Philippians passage; but also humble enough to listen to what and why these other religions sincerely believe. We need to engage with them and ask whether what they are longing to find is in fact already answered and included in the Gospel of grace. We can take seriously in dialogue not only how they conceive of God, but also related issues of how they look upon the human condition and the course of history. As that kind of conversation proceeds, it goes without saying that we can cooperate with any and all other faiths (as well self-defined “humanists” who hold to no defined faith) in working for peace and justice, seeking common solutions in our hurting world.

In one passage of the Qur’an that speaks of Judaism and Christianity, Muslims are instructed to “vie” with these other faiths in doing good deeds. In one of many significant differences, we Christians look first and last to God’s grace and not to our “good deeds” for the saving truth. But we should be willing to take up the challenge of Islam and of any other faith in some form – in order to extend the knowledge and reality of God’s grace and the increase of thanksgiving to Him.

We cannot claim to be intrinsically better people than those of other faiths *because* of our faith. But we hold fast to the belief that it is within our faith, within this church, that we grasp the truth of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ – again our Philippians passage. You hear that Gospel – that good news – week in and week out within this church – from this very pulpit. Invite others here to hear it too. But also outside these walls – be prepared to explain to others of other faiths – or no faith – why you live out your faith, your hope, your love.

Charles Herrick