

GOD WHO LOOKS ON THE HEART

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: I Samuel 15:34-16:13; II Corinthians 5:16-21; John 14:1-7

It has been a tough summer in the world and a dark period for religion in general. The war between Israel and Hezbollah came out of nowhere and dashed whatever hopes remained for resolving the border issues around Israel. It left Southern Lebanon a pile of rubble.

Terrorists bombed a train in Mumbai and it shook the world. In Britain, a plot to mix chemicals on a plane has changed the way we travel. No more toothpaste or bottled water carried onboard. In Iraq, Sunni and Shiite tensions have brought that nation to the brink of civil war according to General Abizaid, as American troops are killed every day in bombings and roadside attacks.

It's not been a good summer for interfaith relations, either. Many Muslims around the world view Christians as a modern version of the medieval Crusaders, bearers of both an infidel faith and a secular threat to Islam.

Christians and Jews have come to paint Muslims with a similar monochromatic brush imagining anyone who honors Mohammed as God's prophet to be a potential suicide bomber.

Parents who are trying to teach their children tolerance and to have an open mind about others must be having a hard time of it. The tensions in the world and the memory of September 11th, 2001 this weekend compete with our nobler dreams and better hopes that the world might be fair and all its people one.

We Christians are not without some responsibility for the tensions in the world. Some in the Christian family reads the Bible literally and claims that the passage we read today, the words of Jesus, "no one comes to the Father but by me," give us exclusive rights to God and an exclusionary claim on who gets to heaven and whose prayers God hears. Like the old "mirror, mirror on the wall," we ask, "who is it *God* loves most of all?"

A lot of us are live-and-let-live about our faith. Our attitude is that we're all going to the same place anyway, so no matter how you choose to follow God it's okay.

Over the summer, driving to the grandparents for a visit, your kids ask you, from the back seat of the car, "What about all those people of other faiths? Does God love them as much as God loves us?" And of course you say, "Yes," to that question. And when they press it and ask whether all those other people are going to heaven, you start to feel that you're getting into an area above your pay grade.

Funny how some of the most important religious questions get posed in the passenger section of the car by theologians under the age of ten!

I don't need to point out to you that we live in a multi-cultural world, pluralistic and complicated. If nothing else, 9/11 has forced us to think much more seriously about the way we interact with people of other faiths than ours. Just standing on the street corner waiting for the light to change at lunchtime I get a snapshot of the world and its

faiths. I see a Hindu taxi driver, a fruit vendor who is Muslim; a dry cleaner is a Taoist, a computer guy who is a Confucian. The internet shrinks the world to a 17 inch screen and the global setting of business these days in India and China have travelers going to Shanghai and New Delhi even more often than London and Berlin. The Dalai Lama comes to town and the Sheep Meadow in Central Park overflows.

The insularity of the world is gone, and so is the insularity of faith. We ask our religious questions in a context that echoes with a global *ping*. Now, when we hear the words of Jesus in John 14, “no one comes to the Father but by me,” we hear it as more sweeping in nature than we ever have before, and wonder how we are to understand such an absolute claim in a world that expresses its faith in so many different ways?

One way of understanding John 14 is to simply accept it as the last word on the topic. No one comes to God except through Jesus. Many Christians through the centuries have embraced the belief that Christianity is supreme above all other expressions of faith, and quote John 3:36 as proof, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.” Some Presbyterians these days are intent on making sure that all Presbyterians toe that line and have required candidates for ordination in some presbyteries to embrace that standard or be excluded.

The problem with that kind of absolute exclusivity is that, human nature being what it is, it can lead to some very inhumane results.

Take the Crusades for instance! Isn’t that the extreme of what happens when Christians adhere to triumphalism in a pluralistic world? I’ll never forget standing within the walls of the old city of Jerusalem earlier this year not far from the Western Wall, the Wailing Wall as it is known, and being reminded that when the Christians came into the city the human slaughter was such that the streets ran so deep in blood that it reached the knees of the horses.

Visions of Baghdad or Beirut on a very bad day come to mind!

And then there were the hijackers of the planes that attacked the World Trade Center towers. As the planes entered the buildings they kept yelling “Allah ó Akbar”, “God is great,” as they murdered 2800 people mercilessly! Nothing about what they did, praised or honored God. Nothing.

What if every faith held to its own priority over all other faiths?

Jews might easily claim priority over Christians. The words of the Torah say, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one.” The prophets railed against competitors with God. And Israel was intolerant against all forms of idolatry. Even today, Jews stumble at our affirmation that God is three persons, blessed Trinity. To Jewish ears that hardly sounds like a belief in one God.

The same exclusivism is echoed in Christianity, as in the text this morning, *I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me*, and in Peter’s sermon before the Council in Jerusalem where he said, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

And then there's Islam. Its foundational confession is the *shahadah* "Allah is the only God and Muhammad is his prophet."

We can see where these exclusive claims lead in a complex and connected world like ours. If every faith claims that their brand of religion is the exclusive and only rightful faith, a mainline to the artery of Ultimate Truth and Absolute Knowledge, then there is not much room to maneuver. All that is left is to arm to the teeth and fight it out, unless of course, your Ultimate Truth is non-violence, a risky proposition in a world armed to the teeth, and manned by recruiting centers overt and clandestine.

Of course, religious exclusiveness is not *all* bad. If the priority your faith claims is priority over the god Mammon, or Money, there's something to be said for that. The love of money, after all, represents a genuine threat to a faithful life. Don't take my word for that, take Jesus' word.

"You cannot serve two masters," Jesus said, "for either you will hate the one, and love the other; or else you will love the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon." Here exclusivity is a virtue, isn't it? There *is* a place to claim Christian priority over consumerism, over laying waste to the environment, and for unmasking the widely accepted illusion that money can make you happy.

So there can be a place for Christian exclusivism, when through it we bring to bear the Word of God in Jesus Christ upon the idolatry of the world and its values.

But when it comes to other religions, I am not sure that God would be pleased with our hard-lining John 14 in a literal sense especially if it were to lead to the violence we see today.

Some scholars say that Jesus never said "No one comes to the Father but by me," that this is a gloss added by later editors to strengthen Christianity's frail beginnings and pump up the volume on the disciples' claim that Jesus was, indeed, the long awaited messiah.

But that's a slippery slope. Pretty soon, you throw out this verse or that, cut out this line or clip that, and you've got a Bible that looks like the moths have been into it. Thomas Jefferson wanted to do that to the Bible, cut out all the passages that he didn't like; and now the Jesus Seminar, a group of Bible critics are casting lots to decide what parts of the Bible they think are authentic and which parts are not. I think of it as Christian taxidermy, keeping the outer shell, while removing all the vital parts.

No, we may struggle with what some scripture says, but we can't just throw out the verses we don't like. Instead, we have to interpret the scriptures in light of themselves and ask what the larger witness of the whole Bible with its sweep and vision says about the human condition and our relationship to God.

The beginning point is with God and understanding how God views us and, therefore, how we should view one another. The clue to that is embedded in that passage from I Samuel today, when Samuel goes to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse, on the lookout for a king to succeed Saul. God had sent him there to look over Jesses' sons because God knew that one of them was his best bet for a king.

Samuel was eager to choose Eliab, the first born, a likely young man, handsome like his brothers, a shepherd in the family business. But no, not Eliab, God said. Instead, God told Samuel what would be the guiding principle in looking for the one to be anointed. “The Lord does not see as mortals see;” God said, “they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” “The Lord looks on the heart,” God said to Samuel. It was David’s heart that was ready, and thus the youngest of Jesse’s sons was chosen to be the anointed one. And therein lies a tale.

There are at least a dozen sermons in that one passage, it’s so rich and lush in its grace and mercy, for it tells us that this a God who knows us through and through and loves us still and all.

A dozen sermons there, perhaps, but time to say only one thing. And that is that God looks on the heart, our heart, the church’s heart, and every human heart as the seat of good and evil. And while professions of faith are important, equally important is living a life that shows forth justice and mercy, kindness and grace, the grace of God that passes all human understanding.

How is it that the prophet Micah described what God requires of all of us? That we do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

We all know of the folks who stand in church and profess with their lips a faith that they do not live with their lives. Likewise there are those who do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God who have yet to name any name that guides them. And I wonder sometimes if some of them have reached that point described by Jeremiah in which God has placed his word within them, and written it upon their hearts. Only God who looks on the heart would know the answer to that question.

St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians suggests that we no longer regard one another from a human point of view, that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

And what was the nature of Christ’s ministry of reconciliation? He broke down divisions between people, drawing all people to himself. He did not look at people with discrimination, or condescension. Barriers between people fell before him. He was a man who treated women, for example, with extraordinary respect. He restored to health a woman with a hemorrhage; unclean to her own people, but loved by Jesus. He met a Samaritan woman at a well one day, a woman who had been married five times, scorned by others, and spoke to her of eternal things, saying that God would one day be worshipped by all people in Spirit and in truth.

Jesus reached out to tax collectors, to sinners, to Samaritans and Gentiles, centurions and lepers. He never seemed bothered by human distinctions, the divisions, and castes that catch our eye so quickly. He looked upon the heart and saw the love of God in every living soul.

“Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart,” say the words of the old spiritual. “Lord I want to be more loving... more holy... like Jesus...” the song goes on. And don’t we though; want to be more like Jesus, and therefore more Christian, in our heart? More like the One who looks upon the heart, every human heart and sees what the outward appearance does not.

Are Buddhists right and Christians wrong? Are Sikhs, or Hindus, or Jews closest to God? I don't know. How did the Psalmist put it? "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it!" That kind of knowledge is above my pay grade.

I have enough trouble living up to my own Christian commitment, meeting life's challenges today, getting along with other Presbyterians, and abiding by my ordination promise that "in my own life [I will] seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love my neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world." That's a full time job right there.

What I do know is that if ever Christians treat others inhumanely, unmercifully, unjustly, unkindly, then that is not the faith that Jesus taught, and it is not a faith that bears enough of the Truth as to embody the Way, the Truth, or the Life that God has shown us in Jesus Christ.

One thing is for certain. However we understand God; no matter how magnificent and wondrous and mysterious we imagine God to be, as revealed in our sacred texts, God is so much more, so much more magnificent and wondrous and mysterious than any human mind has yet imagined that all of us are wrong to some extent, and right to another. And to say that is to take away nothing from our faith... the witness of the prophets, the voices of scripture, the revelation of God, and the good news of Jesus Christ. It is to take nothing away from that.

My confidence in Jesus Christ is the truth I know in my heart. And because of it, I know as well how I am to live.

I am to treat my brothers and sisters in this world with respect, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God, to honor the desire to lead a life of faithfulness and humility and gratitude in harmony with others, not condemning the faith of others, but respecting the many ways that people seek to touch the face of God.

The rest I'm willing to leave to God. It is knowledge too high for me.

This I do know. Anything that speaks of violence, hatred, warfare, torture, murder, beheading, that robs children or youth or any other living being of their dignity or of their life, done in the name of God is *not about God*. That kind of thing is about frail and sinful humanity; *our* impatience and selfishness, *our* thirst for power, *our* greed, *our* fear of each other and *our* defiance of God. None of it is worthy of God's name or blessing. And all of it is to our shame representing not our *faith*, but our *lack* of it.

I suspect that the God who looks upon our hearts is greater in grace and mercy than we have imagined, regardless of how we reach out our arms in the hope of a holy embrace. Whether we be Christian, Muslim, Jew, or whatever we be, we are meant to seek after the holy in peace, with mutual respect and openness to the ways in which God will be revealed in the many journeys we follow. And to God be the glory. Amen.