

January 24, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

I'm guessing its time for me to become a football fan. After all, I want to be a winner too. I want to be part of the winning team. Why should I be left out?

So I open my sports section and take my pick. Time to jump on board.

Steelers didn't stand at chance. Cowboys are out, Eagles too -- just a bunch of losers. Boo, hoo, hoo...

The Vikings are to my liking. The Colts got jolt. The Saints might faint. But the Jersey Jets seem best.

Tough to pick.

AFC or NFC?

You want to be a loser?

Not me.

Of course, the NFL and religion have much in common. Let me count the ways

- Disciples and true believers
- Prayers of intercession
- Holy vestments
- Sacred relics (like Nameth)
- Initiation rituals
- Gatorade baptisms
- A temple to worship in
- A collection taken (usually at the office)
- Cheerleaders leading the hymns (aka the choir)
- Liturgical Dance (with every touchdown)
- Sacred meals shared
- And salvation or damnation wrought at the end of the hour

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And curiously, sadly, oddly, this is exactly how many of us look at religions: religion as NFL franchises.

My religion is the winning team. The rest are losers - the Detroit Lions of faith. But you and I? Well now. We are backing the real God. Our God's got game. Those other gods - Allah, Vishnu, All-Glorious, Krishna, Paramatma -- are wimps. Jesus, Jesus is my man. If he can't do it, nobody can.

Well, we'll let Jewish Adonai be a runner up. But no Vince Lombardi Trophy for the others. And you know what Lombardi said: "If winning isn't everything, why do they keep score?"

Of course, where my playful analogy breaks down is that there are not competing, rival Gods; there is but 'One God of All' who goes by many names, whether Yahweh or Allah. How we portray the one God is another matter altogether.

Watch out. I quote from Time Magazine On-line:

*"Why are the Christians claiming Allah?" asks businessman Rahim Ismail, 47, his face contorted in rage and disbelief. He shakes his head and raises his voice while waiting for a taxi along Jalan Tun Razak, a main thoroughfare in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital. "Everybody in the world knows Allah is the Muslim God and belongs to Muslims.*

*The reason for their anger is a recent judgment by Malaysia's high court that the word Allah is not exclusive to Muslims. Judge Lau Bee Lan ruled that others, including Catholics who had been prohibited from using the word in their publications since 2007, can now use the term.*

Winners and losers, right? You don't want to miss out, do you?

**Read John 3: 31-36**

**The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal**

**life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.**

This passage worries my niece along with the attitude tucked up inside it. Which is why she asked, "*I think it is naïve and provincial to assume that this one faith is the only way to have relationship with the Father.*" I mean, how can church promote tolerance when this passage is saying that everyone else is wrong?"

Does she have a point? You hear that last verse especially, and it does sound threatening. You're either on the bus or off it. Not even at the right bus station.

***Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.***

And how is this any different from Rhaim Ismail of Malaysia?

Either jump on board or else. Life or wrath? Winner or loser? Trophy, Superbowl ring, and Disneyland? Or the long lonely walk home, lots of boos, and criticism from ESPN?

So if Katie (and a whole lot of others) think the church naïve and provincial, let's be wise and urbane.

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Time to roll up our sleeves and do some heavy lifting. Time to tackle one of the biggest topics in the game.

It might be helpful to start off by remembering that Christianity doesn't save us. Not an inch God saves us. Our religion cannot save. It is our response to being saved. We are not called to Christianity. We are called to live in the new being, the new life, brought us by God through the Son and awakened in us by Holy Spirit.

We make a very large mistake when we construe all religions as paths that lead us to the discovery of God.

This leads to the popular notion that religion is a buffet. Pick the one that works for you. They're all leading you to the same place.

Are they?

We don't have to join the trendy spiritualized sentiment in saying that all religions are equally sound. There's a lot of religious nonsense out there, some downright dangerous and inhumane. The sole purpose of some religions out there, like Wiccans or Voodoo or even perversions of Christianity, is to manipulate the world to serve your ends, your agenda, your desires. Not all religions or spiritual practices reveal saving knowledge. Some actually reveal damning knowledge.

So, first, I'll follow Jesus' own advice: they will be known by their fruits. If it is of God, it will be shown of God. Look at what their faith produces.

I like Christianity, thank you very much. For when I compare it to everything else I've explored or experimented with, Christianity is the most sensible, most heavenly, most humane way there is.

We make a very large mistake when we construe all religions as paths that lead us to the discovery of God.

They are not.

Religion is not our path to God. Religion is how we respond to God, Allah, Vishnu (whomever) grabbing us and remaking us. Saving us.

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Who then really is the Son?

The Son is, we affirm, what Jesus brings to us, shows us, is:

- Complete unconditional love
- The absence of selfishness
- The surrender of control
- Living utterly unto that which is God
- Is not the Son in the golden rule?

Is not this the way of a fulfilled humanity? Surely this is the way of true fulfilled spiritual living.

How is the sacred essence of reality, which transcends all realities, breaks down all fences, revealed in our existential reality? How is this divine God-ness communicated to us? We name it the Son, the Word, which gives form and meaning to this sacred reality of love, joy, grace, compassion, splendor, hope, life, goodness, beauty, truth.

Where do we differ from other religions?

The cross. A God who brings grace through unconditional love and self-surrender for others. All that the Son is, is summed up in the cross.

Where is the cross present throughout? Where do you find this elsewhere?

Where is Christ operative in other religions and cultures?

Do not those who love the orphan, the poor widows, or the outcast and hurting, love God, whether or not they know the story of Jesus?

How might others join the cross without naming it as such?

Since when do we think God so loved the world that he only sent his Son for Christians?

Is Jesus the savior of the world? Or just of we few, we happy few, we band of brothers?

*Christ is not just the savior of Christians, otherwise he would be a very parochial God. Either he died for the sins of the world or Christ is no savior at all.*

*-- Diogenes Allen*

If he loved the world, then the Son is for all and operative among all. Whether they know it or not. Whether we know it or not.

Which is why I can profess clearly, plainly, and in full concord with the Westminster Confession of Faith that there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel. I just want to be careful that I don't try to put Bob's puny limits on what God means by the Gospel.

Where there is truth, there is God. Who owns truth? Can truth be fenced in like cattle?. God is no parochial, franchise God. God is not just our God. God is God. One teacher proclaims how God's grace through the Son compares with the omnipresent reality of gravity. Gravity is there whether or not it is appreciated as such.

Which is why I can see the Word of God -- as fully expressed in the sacrificial love and suffering of Christ on the cross -- operative throughout other religions. As Jacob, one of the Jewish patriarchs from the Bible, finally perceived:

***"Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it."  
-- Genesis 28: 16b***

How can I limit where and when the Word reveals itself? Do I control gravity? How dare I try to limit how the Holy Spirit may be at work in ways I can never imagine nor guess! The shadow of the cross is very, very long and very, very wide.

*"A mission to a devout people," Allen wrote, "is not a mission to the damned; it is to bring to them something they already partly know..."*

That which is the Christ, that which is the Son - the way of love, selflessness, surrender to the divine -- is the only way; yet that which is the particularity of the Christ is universal.

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***Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life;
whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure
God's wrath.
-- John 3: 36***

Many hear this verse and find it saying that if you don't believe in Jesus you're damned. Reward or retribution? Winner or loser? What's it going to be?

The words in Greek have greater freight than initially presented.

belief: it not a matter of intellect, not something cognitive, but a trusting in, a relying upon.

to have: it means to possess, to hold in your hand

life: the word here is specifically distinguished from the other Greek word for life. That word is 'bio;' this word is 'zoe:' spiritual, fulfilled life

eternal: eternal sadly suggests endlessness, something that which is a very long time; more accurate it to contrast it with something that is for a limited season; eternal is something that is utterly unlimited

disobey: not really, for it makes it sound as if this is a willful rejection, when 'a-paethon' is the source word for 'apathy' and speaks more to those who are unmoved by, unpersuaded by something or someone else more convincing.

see: try instead the word 'behold' or 'experience;' to really see and appreciate and understand something or someone beyond yourself

wrath: more the ogre-like anger that causes suffering in this world.

endure: which sounds like a punishment you must put up with. Better is how this word means 'to remain in, to stay unchanged.'

Yes, our English translation, at a first hearing, can sound like a threat. Consider it instead an invitation.

The premise, sketched out a few verses before, starting with the 'Gospel in Miniature,' otherwise known as verse 3:16, tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his Son that the world might not perish but have everlasting life.

The premise is that our existence means a life perishing, an existence bereft, cut off from the joys and comfort, truth and love of the divine essence, an existence defined by the world with all its hurt, vanity, futility, entropy, decay, separation, loneliness, emptiness, death. In other words: life without God, which leaves an inhuman and inhumane life.

But that which is all divine and good, the only good, wants more for us. Because that which is divine is love, the

divine lovingly seeks us to recreate us, to awaken within us and breathe into our souls the reality of the divine's own selfhood. Our language describes it as our God wanting us to be human, and Christ shows us and brings us true humanity, a new creation. More than having the right words, it is living in the universal Word and this Word in you.

But if we remain unmoved, we remain stuck in this grey and drab, meaningless and sad world.

Try this more accurate, far more dynamic, and far more present tense translation of verse 36 on for size:

Whoever trusts and relies upon the Son possesses unlimited spiritual life; Whoever is apathetically unmoved will not experience spiritual life but remains and stays in the anger of suffering

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Won't you come out and play? One last analogy.

I like mazes. Life often resembles a maze, doesn't it? Stumbling around, looking for the right path?

And religion has used this maze image often. If life is a maze, the object is for you to find the only right way to God. All the rest are dead ends. All the rest leave you lost.

Do you know the secret on how to find your way out of the maze? There is a guaranteed method, tried and true.

Simply hold your hand to the wall and keep going. Keep your hand to the wall. It will always lead you to the prize; it will always lead you out.

So that which might seem like a dead end isn't, if you keep your hand to the wall of the maze.

Friends: God isn't our destination. God, revealed to us in the concreteness of the universal Son, is the wall.