

October 4, 2020 (World Communion Sunday) | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Philippians 3:4b–15](#)

TITLE: **Something Bigger Than Ourselves**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Let's start with a big question: Why are there so many religions in the world? Today is World Communion Sunday. We celebrate how all over the world today, Christians are gathering in churches or virtually around a shared meal of bread and wine to tell again the story of Jesus Christ in their own language and their own land. We joyfully picture a communion table big enough for Christians from California to Connecticut, from Bolivia to Beijing, from Sierra Leone to Singapore. But near all those communion tables, churches, and cathedrals are other places of worship and people of other religions like Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Confucianism, and more. If God is God of all the world, why are there so many different religions in the world?

This is a relatively modern question. For most of church history, there were only those who believed in Jesus Christ and those who didn't. The idea was that people outside the church were either to be converted or conquered. The official church dogma was fairly clear on this point: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—Outside the church there is no salvation. This was decreed by Origen in the 3rd century, Augustine in the 4th century, Aquinas in the 13th century, and others. The Catholic church has since moved away from this hard-line approach, but there are still some Catholics and conservative Protestants who believe that the merciful God they worship is literally condemning billions of people as outside of God's plan of salvation. It's sad and it's wrong.

Over the last 500 years, we've traveled and learned about different lands and different religions. And more recently we've welcomed into our communities people of different faiths. We know there are things to commend in other religions as well as things we question or criticize, just as is true for our own religion; there is much to celebrate and much to repent of in Christian church history. In general, our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, or Hindu neighbors are no less truthful, honorable, compassionate and generous than our Christian neighbors. That sentiment was reflected in the Super Bowl commercial we saw a moment ago. Those men and women of different faiths were not only friends, but colleagues rooting for the same team. Each was capable of kindness; each sought what is good, just, and loving for one another and the world around them.

When I was in middle school, I knocked on the door of my pastor and asked him how it was possible that a child born in a village in India was somehow outside of God's love. Now the roles are reversed and I'm in a pastor's office. It is only fair that I offer a brief answer to my own question. First, I do not believe that the child born in India is outside of God's love. God is aware of all life on earth, all people of all lands. By definition, this awareness is marked by a spirit of love and grace—not one of indifference or judgment. So in ways I may not understand, God is at work and in relationship with all people, everywhere.

Second, whatever I have come to know about God is because God accommodated God's grandeur to the limitations of my mortal experience. When Moses was on Mount Sinai, he wanted to see God. But he knew he couldn't take in all of God's grandeur so he hid in a cleft of rock and only glimpsed the hem of God's robe. The Hebrew people could not take in the full wisdom of an omnipotent God, so they were given Ten Commandments to guide them, some Torah laws to nurture their faith, and prophets to remind them ever to seek God's justice. Over time we still didn't fully understand God, so God accommodated Godself by the incarnation of God in Christ—emptying himself, taking on human flesh, healing, teaching, dying in a sinful world, and yet being raised so we too might be people of faith and resurrection hope.

I first heard these bible stories while growing up in Kansas. I heard them in English. I heard them as a white male in America. Yet nothing in the gospel allows me to prioritize my experience over others. My maleness, my whiteness, my English-speaking American-ness is not the norm for how this faith is to be expressed or interpreted. Far from it. Whatever amazing grace allowed me to come to faith in Christ is just as active in others—non-male, non-white, non-American, non-English speakers. It would be idolatry for me to suggest otherwise.

Now go one step further. Scientists speak of light having the qualities of both a particle and a wave. Photons react to their environment both as a measurable particle and an oscillating wave. With light the same reality is present in two different forms. We commonly speak of God in Trinitarian terms—God as Creator, God as Christ the Savior, God as Spirit sustaining life—one reality known in three different ways. If God accommodates Godself so you and I can come to know God, can't that same divine reality be accommodated in different ways in different religions so people around the world can grow into the image of God in their own land? Must the particle of faith found in the bible rule out the wave of faith moving through the Torah, Koran, Upanishads and other faiths?

Now, I need to say that I'm not a universalist. I do see true and distinctive value in the doctrine of God revealed to us in Christ. But in this sermon, I'm trying to take seriously what the apostle Paul described in his letter to the Philippians. Remember Paul was a strict and pious Pharisee, born into the Jewish faith, follower of all the requirements of the law. His call to Christianity didn't mean he hated or renounced his former Jewish faith. God's covenant with Abraham was still very real and very valid. What Paul stepped away from was measuring his self-worth by old categories and old credentials. Circumcision, tribal identity, high marks in bible study and moral behavior—they were no longer what defined him as a righteous person before God. His righteousness came from Christ alone.

We have a lot to learn from Paul. Our race, gender, citizenship papers, college transcripts, bank account balances, Presbyterian perfect attendance pins—they do not stamp us as righteous people before God. Paul had been doing the math all wrong. The things he had in his credit column were actually debits. If for Paul or for us, these things are being used to boost our own ego, to reinforce our own prejudices, or conversely if

they are filling us with self-doubt and anxiety because we don't want to flunk the salvation final exam—then all those supposed positives are actually negatives. Paul regarded them as losses and hindrances in comparison to the surpassing good news of God's love revealed, accommodated, persistently shown to us in Jesus Christ.

Paul struggles a bit in trying to put this in words, but he hits upon a great phrase in verses 8 and 9. He says his ultimate goal, that for which he strives and finds hope, is that he might “gain Christ and be found in him.” If he only said the first words—gain Christ—that would sound like works righteousness, earning our own way into heaven. But it's the second phrase that seals the deal—“be found in him.” We are clearly dealing with something bigger than ourselves. Our goal, our spiritual motivation is to step into, be welcomed into a grace and love and reality that is large enough to embrace the whole world yet personal enough to know us by name and care for us deeply. To gain Christ and be found in him. No more checklists of personal privilege. No more narrow definitions of faith that only reflect what we see in our own mirrors. But instead, trusting that we belong to God—that we are found in Christ the Lord of all, Light of the World, our hope and our peace.

As I said at the beginning, asking about world religions is a big question and people of faith do not always agree on how to answer it. That is why I included verse 15 in today's reading—that tagline Paul added that says, “Let us [strive to] be of the same mind, and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.” God is not done with any of us. The narrow Catholic doctrine that “outside the church there is no salvation” was stepped away from by the writings of Vatican II and by scores of recent Christian thinkers. The potential for vibrant interfaith cooperation has been proven over and over again in recent decades as we have learned from one another, marched side by side for justice, and even cheered for hometown sports teams together.

African American theologian Willie James Jennings has written: “*We live in a reality where the world is always too much for us to hold all at once.*”¹ In a world of interfaith dialogue and global calls to action, we need to be the best Christians possible. We need to be willing to talk honestly with Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim friends about why being found in Christ means all the world to us, even as they talk about how the reality of God has been revealed to them and guides who they are. Talking about your faith to a person of another faith or of no faith is the best way to grow more fully into the image of God you are meant to show forth in the world today. There are ways to do this respectfully, if you trust that the reality of God is too much for any of us to hold all at once. Believe that you are part of something bigger than yourself. It is God-based, God-shaped, and God-designed. Forget what lies behind and press forward to what lies ahead—being ever found in Christ.

AMEN

¹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Eerdmans., 2020, p. 34.