

CHRISTIANITY 101

“Faith In Of Jesus”

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Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

On the back of my office door hangs a poster of one of my faith heroes, a man known to the world by only one name before Prince, Madonna, and Cher made doing so fashionable. The poster is of a small frail looking man with a gentle smile and simple wire framed glasses; a gentle man who helped lead one of the greatest revolutions of the 20th century. A man we remember simply as Gandhi.

Gandhi was a powerful leader who deeply admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. A missionary by the name of E. Stanley Jones once had the opportunity to meet with Gandhi and he asked him, “Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?”

Gandhi replied, “Oh, I don’t reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It’s just that so many of your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

As a young Hindu practicing law in South Africa Gandhi became attracted to the Christian faith, he studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and he was seriously exploring becoming a Christian. On a Sunday morning he decided that he’d be interested in attending church. As he walked up the front steps of the church where he planned to worship, a white South African elder of the church stepped in front of him and began to

question him about why he was there. He used racial slurs and called Gandhi names. As Gandhi explained that he intended to worship with the congregation that morning the man snarled, “There’s no room for you in this church. Get out of here or I’ll have my assistants throw you down the steps.” In that moment Gandhi decided to adopt what good he found in Christianity, but to never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being a part of the church.

Today we continue our Christianity 101 series and wrestle with the question, “What is a Christian?” According to the American Heritage Dictionary a Christian is “One who professes belief in Jesus as Christ or follows the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus.” I am particularly intrigued by the “or” in this definition, but we’ll come back to that in a few minutes. The “or” in this definition connects together the two different viewpoints we’ve talked about for the last couple of weeks and the ways in which they might answer the question, “What is a Christian?”

For the last three weeks now we’ve been talking about two different ways of looking at the world that exist within Christianity. We have been calling the first of these the dogma/doctrine centered way of viewing the world and the second we’ve been calling the journey/way centered viewpoint. Let’s spend a couple of minutes this morning looking at the question, “What is a Christian?” from the point of view of these two lenses.

If you’ll remember from a couple of weeks ago, people who live in the dogma/doctrine centered worldview, tend to think that faith and life are about following the rules and meeting the obligations set before us as humans. Many people who live within this worldview would answer the question, “What is a Christian” with something having to do with being saved or getting into heaven. For many persons who live within

this worldview the purpose of being a Christian is to make sure that we can get into heaven when we die. For some Christians who operate this way Jesus is minimized to something almost like a genie who grants wishes and makes sure that we're taken care of. These people are primarily focused on having *faith in Jesus* – to save us, to help God forgive us, to make sure that we can get to heaven.

Persons living within the way/journey centered viewpoint of the world tend to have a different set of priorities and concerns. Generally these persons are more concerned with relationships, with growing and learning, than they are a strict set of rules. These persons tend to emphasize the journey aspect of their faith journey. People who operate with this worldview would likely answer the question “What is a Christian?” with something like this – it is about transformation of my life, of the lives of others, and of the world around me. Persons who understand the world in this way, Christianity is about learning to have and to live the *faith of Jesus*.

When Jesus was teaching and preaching in and around Galilee there really wasn't anything that could be called a Christian. He had followers yes, but they were Jewish men and women who had an appreciation for Jesus' understanding and teaching of Judaism. The scripture passage I selected for this morning comes from that Jewish community and is one of my favorite passages in scripture for its clear portrayal of Jesus' priorities.

Matthew 22:34-40 *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, '“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your*

mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

In these verses we see that Jesus is concerned about people connecting with God with their heart, with their soul, and with their mind, and that he is concerned about people’s actions reflecting the connections that they have. When asked which commandment was the greatest, what the most significant aspect of faith was, Jesus said nothing about the afterlife. Rather he spoke in ways that were very specific to what our day to day living should look like. Jesus would have his followers grow in relationship with God and live that relationship by serving others who are in need.

Over the last few weeks I spent some time researching the ways in which others (both people and churches) have answered the question, “What is a Christian.” One of the most helpful answers that I came across was on the webpage for The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS. This church is an enormous church in suburban Kansas City that is not yet 20 years old. In many ways they operate as a corporation and so much of how they’re structured is very formalized and they use lots of bullet points. Their answer to the question “What is a Christian” reflects this, but includes lots of great information and is right in line with Jesus’ priorities as laid out in Matthew.

The Church of the Resurrection understands Christians to be people that are all on a journey together. And they proclaim that their journey is threefold - to know, love and serve God. Each of these three areas breaks down further into five specific tasks.

Knowing God with Your Head

- Understand basic beliefs
- Working knowledge of the Bible
- United Methodist distinctives
- Ability to think theologically about moral issues
- Know, in broad terms, God's will

Loving God with Your Heart

- Faith in God
- Heart yielded to God
- Practice the spiritual disciplines
- Demonstrate the fruit of the spirit
- Actively involved in a small group

Serving God with Your Hands

- Loving those surrounding you
- Ministry in the church
- Tithing
- Serving the community and world
- Loving and serving others

These are big tasks and high ideals! And I have no doubt that even though the church put them in a nice orderly format on their website, most of their members and friends don't live up to each of these fifteen different expectations. Nonetheless, knowing God with your head, loving God with your heart and serving God with your hands are wonderful ideals to which Christians can strive as they journey through life.

As you heard and thought about these three different lists of things I imagine that some of them appealed to you more than others. It's likely that some of them didn't even appeal to you much at all. And this is fine! Admittedly some of us are wired more for one of these ways of living than others. Some of us are wired to use our head on everything – to rationalize, analyze, and think critically about every little detail of life and faith. Some of us are wired more to follow our hearts – to let the hurts and the needs of

the world speak to us on emotional levels and to respond emotionally to a need for God as individuals and as communities. And some of us are wired to connect more to God through our hands – to be in mission, to serve, to actively working to bring an end to the suffering and pain of others. While at times seeming quite different, each of these three parts of the journey are about living in relationship. Being a Christian is, at its core, about being in relationship with God and with others.

But questions still remain. What does it mean to be in these relationships? Why are we in these relationships? And then we come full circle - What is a Christian? Persons who tend to operate in the dogma/doctrine worldview might say that the whole point is to get into heaven, that we do things for God and for one another so we can be rewarded and go to heaven. Persons who tend to operate in the journey/way worldview might say the whole point is to work for the transformation of ourselves, of our neighbors and of the world.

And the reality is that both of these answers can be true. I originally titled my sermon for this morning “Faith of Jesus,” but had the word “in” crossed out before the word “of.” My intention was to signify that we are not to be consumed by simply having faith in Jesus. As I reflect on it more now though I have come to understand that it is not inappropriate to have faith in Jesus; Faith in Jesus to somehow help us reunite with God when we die, but also faith in Jesus to give us the strength and the tools that we need in this life.

Both of these viewpoints are appropriate ways of understanding God’s work in the world. The key to remember though is that those who hold one viewpoint should not and cannot assume that everyone else should share the same viewpoint. There is room

for diversity in the Christian tradition. And so, at its core, to be a Christian means to live life seeking to have the faith of Jesus, not simply faith in Jesus.

If you remember the definition of Christian I shared earlier, “One who professes belief in Jesus as Christ or follows the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus.” The fact that the crafters of the dictionary used the word “or” rather than “and” is troubling for me. Christianity, at its best, doesn’t let us choose whether or not we’re concerned with following the teachings of Jesus. As Christians we are to embrace both the having of *faith in Jesus* and the *faith of Jesus*.

Unfortunately Gandhi’s experience is not unique. Countless others have had experiences similar to the one that Gandhi had with Christians. I imagine that many of them have been turned away from Christianity by the actions of people who call themselves Christians. I am confident though, that if we as Christians can learn to truly live the faith of Jesus, the Church will begin to more closely represent the teaching and the life of Christ and will begin to make the impact in the world to which we’ve been called.