



SO, DO WE ALL PRAY TO THE SAME GOD?

February 28, 2016, The Third Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 55: 1-9

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Theme: There's but one God whom we understand differently.

Great God, whose perfect truth is beyond any words, forgive us when we imagine that our conception of you could ever contain you fully. May we remember that your ways are indeed higher than our ways, and your thoughts higher than our thoughts. Nevertheless, give us the courage to think about you deeply, even if those thoughts can never be quite high enough. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

We have a Brick Church staff meeting every Wednesday afternoon. We do administrative stuff, pray together in the Chapel, and then your four ministers and the three seminary students plan worship details for the coming Sunday. We go through a first edition of the Sunday bulletin you have in your hands and figure out who's doing what.

When the student ministers saw the title of this sermon, they proposed a wager. How will Lindvall answer the rhetorical question of that title, "So..., *Do We All Pray to the Same God?*" The bet was not over what *they* thought the right answer was; the bet was on how *I* would come down. The losers would buy the winners beer sometime in the next week or two. There were seven of us at the table. I told them that the question I was specifically thinking about was, "Do *Jews, Christians and Muslims* pray to the same God?" Jews, Christians and Muslims represent the three great monotheistic faiths, all tracing their roots back to Abraham. I obviously didn't get to vote. The vote was three to three – a tie. Three of them thought I'd say "yes." Three of them guessed I'd say "no." I then asked the six of them,



“Who’s going to determine whether my answer is a yes or a no?” They decided they’d make that call over the beer.

Last Sunday after church, as I was shaking hands at the back of the sanctuary, somebody coming through the line suggested this sermon topic. I thought to myself, “Hot topic, but one that ought to be addressed.” (Whoever you were, thank you!) Anyway, I tucked the idea away, remembering that it was much the same topic our Woman’s Association had suggested for their Lenten Retreat this week. When I opened my Bible to contemplate a sermon, there it was: the 55th chapter of Isaiah, nine verses that gently open the door to the question of Divine universality.

When this part of the Book of Isaiah was written, times were raw for the Jews of Jerusalem. Food was perhaps scarce, yet in this passage the prophet invites Israel to long for something even more precious than food, namely God. Isaiah calls the people to seek God, to forsake any wicked ways, and to return to God who will, in the prophet’s words, “abundantly pardon.”

And then, at the end of the passage, Isaiah offers familiar but startling words about the nature of the God he calls the people to return to. In verses eight and nine Isaiah has God say this:

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts.
Nor are your ways my ways,’ says the Lord.
‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts.’”*

This is to say, God is big, big and mysterious, transcending puny human minds. God is bigger than mortal thought; God is bigger than theology; God is bigger than any religion.



So, do Jews, Christians, and Muslims pray to the same vastly transcendent and ultimately mysterious God? There are two fairly obvious answers – a “yes” and a “no.” (This will *not* make it clear who’s buying the beer.) First the “yes.” There is *only one* God out there. However you conceive of God, when you pray, there is only one God to be on the receiving end. Jews and Christians and Muslims can all affirm this. We’ll affirm as much this morning when we offer the last line of the Confession of Faith after this sermon.

“Question: ‘Are there more Gods than one?’

Answer: ‘There is but one only, the living and true God.’”

So at an obvious level, yes, there’s only one God. Whom else would you pray to?

But, also obviously, the answer is a “no,” because Jews and Christians and Muslims understand the one God differently. Their definitions of the “true” part of “true God” vary. Jews, for instance, do not believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the One through whom we see God. Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet, but not the Son of God. They don’t believe that He was crucified or that He conquered death for us. Both Jews and Muslims disbelieve the Trinity, an understanding of God central to Christians. So we may all pray to the only God out there, but we conceive of that one God differently. These differences cannot be glossed over; they cannot be homogenized into some vague, undifferentiated Deity, some “Cosmic Muffin,” as a verbally creative friend once described the theological result of soft-headed reductionism.

The Christian faith is uncompromisingly centered in Jesus Christ. As a Christian, I trust in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior – no other. Jesus Christ is the one through whom I encounter God. His words, his life, his death, his resurrection have come to be the center of my very being. At the core of Christian faith is a trust that Jesus Christ is God’s defining word. He’s not one witness among many; he is the One.

Likewise, the affirmation of the Trinity, so impossible to my Jewish and Muslim friends, is for Christians no theological footnote. Jews and Muslims do affirm that God loves – loves us and the world – but only Christianity affirms that God



actually *is* love. We believe that God's inside as it were; God's very "self," God's "nature," is loving relationship. This belief is imbedded in the ancient doctrine of the Trinity. Trinity teaches that the ultimate reality of the universe, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, is a God who *is* relationship, a God who *is* communion, a God who *is* love. Trinity insists that God is not some abstract, cold and distant divine unity. Trinity insists that God is not some impossibly demanding law-giver. Rather, God is love itself. God is communion. God is relationship. This really matters, and it's different from the way my Jewish and Muslim friends understand God.

So "yes," there is only one God and we all pray to that one God. But "no," the three great monotheistic religions do conceive of the one God differently; and you can't paste over these differences. So the big question hanging over this sermon, the who-buys-the-beer question, comes down to this: "Are the differing conceptions of God held by Judaism, Christianity and Islam still *similar enough* to say that we pray to the same God? Do the three great monotheisms have *enough in common* to say that we worship the same God? Currently, this question is poisoned by a minority of extremists in all three traditions – the likes of ISIS, and radical Jewish West Bank settlers, and venomous Christian fundamentalists. Such noisy voices at the far edges can lead us to forget that the mainstream of all three faiths *do* share a great deal.

Here are some voices who have said we share a great deal:

Pope Gregory VII, in 1076, wrote a letter to a Muslim leader. In that letter, written twenty years before the First Crusade, Gregory said, "*We believe in and confess one God, admittedly in a different way...*"

President George W. Bush said this in an interview on Al Arabiya television not long after 9/11, "*I believe there is a universal God. I believe the God the Muslim prays to is the same God that I pray to. After all, we all came from Abraham.*"

Rick Warren, the evangelical mega-church pastor from California was invited to offer the invocation at President Obama's first inauguration. A conservative Protestant, this was Warren's prayer on January 20, 2009: "*Almighty God, our*



Father, everything we see and everything we can't see exists because of you alone. It all comes from you. It all belongs to you. It all exists for your glory! History is your story. The Scripture tells us, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!' and you are the compassionate and merciful one toward everyone you have made."

There's not a thing in that prayer a Christian can't agree with. Yet people who listened closely knew Warren's prayer managed to reference Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith. The first part of the prayer paraphrases Paul's Letter to the Romans in the New Testament – Christian; the second part is the *shema* – the classic bottom line of Jewish belief; the last phrase is adapted from the prayer that Muslims recite five times a day.

Warren's prayer hints that the "who-buys-the-beer" question of my sermon title is maybe not exactly the right question. Any answer to the "same God" question will always lie in a theological thicket between the "yes" and "no." "Yes," there is only one God. "No," we understand the one God differently. But *how* differently?

I have a hunch that the better question is suggested by the question of prayer. Rick Warren's thoughtful inauguration invocation is a hint. Another hint is offered by an awkward episode that unfolded back in 1980 when a leader of the Southern Baptist Convention declared that he wouldn't pray with Jews because, he said, "*God doesn't hear the prayers of a Jew.*" He doubtless would have said the same of Muslims.

I totally disagree with him, but ironically, I think he was answering the right question. I think the better question is this, "*As a Christian, do I think God hears the prayers of Jews and Muslims?*"

It's utterly impossible for me, a Christian who's staked his life on a God of love, to imagine that the God who Isaiah says is higher than human thought, could ever say, "*I won't listen to your prayers because your thoughts about me are not quite*



accurate.” Everything I believe as a Christian makes such a thing impossible to imagine.

So who’s buying the beer?

I think I will.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.