

FLAWLESS LOGIC

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on World Peace Day, Sunday, September 21, 2014**

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

Shedding Youth to Become an Adult Christian

Today is World Peace Day, and it coincides with the first day of Sunday School for this season. What a perfect lesson with which to start off our Sunday School – the notion of peace, especially in our world as it is now. This sermon will conclude with a significant contribution that our members may make in observation of this day.

Anyone who knows me at all, anyone who has attended at least a handful of worship services in which I have preached knows that essentially I was raised as a Christian. I really didn't have any other options as a kid. In high school I had a Jewish friend, and that was pretty much it as far as interfaith dialogue was concerned for me. About the only thing I knew that was really different was that Marc attended a different "church" than I did, and he spelled his first name with a "c" instead of a "k." I thought, okay, must be a Jewish thing. Whatever.

For both college and seminary, I learned little else than Christianity and more Christianity, albeit at a broader and deeper level while in seminary. My religious horizons, however, had not yet fully expanded. Also, my seminary had a World Religion professor, who was offbeat in the sense that he was the only non-Christian among the professors. Everyone else on the teaching staff was strongly Christian. I never worked up enough nerve to take a class with him.

Expanding Religious Horizons Beyond Christianity

Then, in early adulthood, my interest was somehow sparked, first in Hebrew theology and later when I started reading bits and pieces of the Koran, Sufi poetry, and a little more about Islam. I began reading about the Buddha, and my wife handed me the book entitled "Siddhartha" by Siddhartha Gautama, which I read. And then I learned more about the Hindus in the strange and exotic land of India.

On continuing, probably the most fascinating reading for me was about the Pagans. Perhaps I shouldn't admit that, but the New Age was flowering at this time, and I read many things that would fall into the category of New Age or New Thought. I began to study them all, and in a word, it was a glorious time. I seemed to learn something new with each page. While I didn't stop being a Christian, I felt as though I stopped being a child, and I became an adult Christian because what I was learning greatly expanded my horizons.

We announced a few weeks back that the Wednesday-noon book-study group would be reading “Why Christianity Must Change or Die” by John Shelby Spong, a retired Episcopalian bishop. I began to develop sympathies with the views of Bishop Spong to the effect that the Church has failed miserably to keep abreast of modern science and will stay on that track only at its peril.

From my point of view, Christianity seems to have been at the same time shallow and arrogant, its arrogance matched only by Islam. I get frustrated with Christianity in many ways, and so I began my first feeble efforts at being a reformer, or at least trying my hand at it.

The Fatal Question About Transposing Jesus and the Buddha

The day arrived when all of these feelings became crystallized with one question that was asked of me. It was the day I realized that I wasn’t a run-of-the-mill Christian anymore but really sort of an “outsider” Christian – the stage Spong refers to as being in “exile” from the current practices and thinking of Christianity.

One more word of preface to the question: The Buddha lived six centuries before Jesus, was born and raised in Nepal, and lived into his eighties, when he died of old age. The eighties were much beyond the average life span in that era.

The question asked of me was hypothetical. There’s no single answer to it, but it was this: What would have happened if the Buddha had been born in First-Century Palestine and Jesus had been born in Sixth-Century BCE Nepal? What would have happened? Would the Nepalese have crucified Jesus or killed him in some other way? Would the Romans have become disciples and would have followed the teachings of the Buddha until he died of old age?

The reason the question is important is that it exposes what is going on underneath the asking. What the question aims at beneath the layers is: Was Jesus sent to die? Did God the Father send Jesus in order to die, and so no matter where he landed, was his earthly life going to end before old age caught up with him?

Or was it more the case that both Jesus and the Buddha, being spiritual masters, spiritual teachers, would have lived their lives in radically different environments – one relatively peaceful and benign, and one seriously violent and oppressed? In my heart, I answered the question this way: If the Buddha had been born in First-Century Palestine, I think the Romans would have killed him just as they did Jesus.

Time passed, and I began to read people like Bede Griffiths. He was a Roman Catholic priest who went to India to convert the Hindus. In his later years, Griffiths wrote some of the most beautiful theology I’ve ever come across, which takes Roman Catholic insights and blends them with Hindu insights.

And then I read Thomas Merton, a monk living an hour south of Louisville, who began extensive correspondence with the Zen masters of China, the Sufi masters of Istanbul, the Hesychast masters of Russian Orthodoxy, and the Kabbalah masters of Israel and Eastern Europe. After Merton died in 1968, all of this fascinating correspondence began to be published.

Spiritual/Theological Insights from World Religions

And so on this World Peace Day, there is method in my madness, and I'll explain it toward the end of this sermon. But on this special day, I would like to offer to Christianity a few spiritual/theological insights from some of the major world religions:

From Islam: Islam has devotion down cold. If there's one problem that Christianity has really big-time, it's nominal Christians. The notion of Christ, the notion of church, the notion of the gospel have almost nothing to do with their away-from-church lives, but if they answer a survey, they will say they're Christian. For the most part, there's nothing Christian about their lives. Not so in Islam. There is a rigidly entrenched devotional practice ensuring that the Koran, Allah, and the notion of spirituality are part of their lives five times a day, no matter what.

Another thing about Islam is that it enjoys the world's most romantic love poetry. If you're planning a wedding, if you want to read something that will bring a tear to your eye with its beauty, read Sufi love poetry. It is the world's best.

From Judaism: One thing Jews do that I wish Christians would learn is that they tolerate a certain wideness of belief. If you have a problem with this or that aspect of Judaism, it's okay. Not so for Christians. If you believe something a little bit different, you're on the verge of having a problem. You're a heretic of one stripe or another.

Another matter having to do with Judaism: When the Dalai Lama got kicked out of Tibet because the Chinese overran that country, one of the things the Dalai did within a year of setting up camp in India is that he traveled to Israel and asked the Jewish leaders there, How do you live in exile? They knew how: Been there, done that. They taught the Dalai Lama, who in turn taught other Tibetans how to live with authenticity in exile.

From the Pagans: One belief the Pagans have done beautifully is that they have healed the split between spirit and matter, between heaven and earth. Their motto, "As Above, So Below," implies that there is an intrinsic linkage between what is heavenly and spiritual and what is earthly and full of matter and physicality. One's not good and the other's bad. Far from it, they're both good, and they're linked.

From the Hindus: Christianity has a notion of monotheism, one God. Yet it has a Trinity, and it wrestles with the idea of the multiplicity of God. How can God be everywhere, and pantheism is bad, and no, it's one or three but something like that

anyway. Hindus have that solved; they've got it figured out. There is one God. They're accused of polytheism, but it's not true. There is but one God in their pantheon.

The Hindus have a trinity – Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva – but then it keeps going and it keeps going, all the way to what is called the Atman, the spark of divinity that is found in each human being. From Brahma, their equivalent of God the Father, to the Atman, it is all tied together. It's never separate; it's always connected.

From Buddhism: Kindness, gentleness, compassion, simplicity. Let these virtues rule your life always, in relation to all sentient beings as well as to the insentient universe. Not just to other Buddhists. Not just to other people. To animals and plants. To the earth, the soil, the air, to all things – kindness, gentleness, compassion, simplicity.

From the New Age: New-Age adherents probably have a bad reputation for flakiness, but believe it or not, they are the ones who have entertained the notion that maybe science has something to do with faith. They adopted the best of what the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Jews have to offer, but then they added science. They said, What about energy? What about this “flow of life” that is in a human being? And the New Agers actively brought science into the conversation despite their reputation.

Asking “So What?” Leads to Flawless Logic

Going through all these different religions, the congregation has been very polite, and I thank you. Now here comes the “So what?” question. Hans Küng, a marvellous Roman Catholic theologian, was “silenced” by the Vatican about 25 years ago. He was no longer allowed to teach at a Catholic university, so he was hired by a secular university and continued to teach theology. Küng is famous for this quote from 25 years ago: “There can be no peace between nations until there is peace between religions, and there can be no peace between religions without dialogue.”

So on this World Peace Day, I offer that sentence to you as perfect, flawless logic. I find no flaw in it. There will not be peace in our world until there is peace between religions, and there will be no peace between religions without dialogue. Not monologue. Not me telling you what's what or vice versa. Not proselytizing. Dialogue. Conversation. Back-and-forth discussion through which we learn from each other, leading to peace.

That's a big “So what”! That's how what happens in this tiny congregation – dialogue, learning each from the other, whatever form the other takes – leads to understanding, which leads to conversation, which leads to nations rejecting war as a drastic solution to their differences.

It is our contribution to world peace. It is a big “So what”!

Amen.