

Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, Part 6: Christian Pluralism

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Niantic Community Church
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Scripture: John 1:1-5; Acts 2:1-13

This Sunday is the last Sunday of our series on the faith of Jesus in a pluralistic world. Today is also Pentecost Sunday, which is commonly understood as the birthday of the Christian Church.

Today happens to be a birthday for me, too. While my physical birthday is in February, I am celebrating my metaphysical birthday today. It is the 42nd anniversary of the experience I preached about a couple months ago, when I and a friend had a profound experience of the Holy Spirit. While the experience happened on May 31, 1981, the 31st was a Sunday that year.

Like the disciples on Pentecost, what my friend and I experienced came on quite suddenly and unforgettably, produced incomprehensible levels of joy without the use of drugs or alcohol, and totally altered the whole course of both our lives. It was a Love so vast as to be boundless, and boundary-less. The experience convinced my friend and I that three things are absolutely true – which I am just as convinced of today as I was back then:

- (1) There really is a God!
- (2) This God is not only aware of us, but far more aware of us than we're aware of us; and
- (3) Because of this awareness – and despite it – this God loves each and every one of us, without a single exception, beyond our wildest imagination. For eternity.

I mention my “metaphysical birthday” not simply because I'm celebrating it today, but because our whole series is a direct outgrowth of this experience and its ongoing reverberations.

Ever since that day, 42 years ago, experiences of love constantly, “trigger” me – but in a good way. When I receive love from others, or merely see love between others – it tends to trigger the memory of the Great Love that came upon me and my friend 42 years ago. This is why there has hardly been a day that I haven't thought about this experience in all these years. I don't actively try to remember. I simply get triggered, each and every day, by the love I experience in people, which I take to be the bit of God I experience in people.

Since all people have the capacity to love, and regularly make use of their capacity, I readily and easily see God in quite a variety of people: “good” people and “bad” people; Christians, Jews, and Muslims; Hindus, Taoists and Buddhists; agnostics and atheists; misfits, rejects, nerds and geeks; gay and straight; cisgender transgender; the faithful and the unfaithful; the insider and the outcast; and everyone in between.

This quiet – and sometimes not-so-quiet – awareness of God's presence in such a diverse range of people made it readily apparent, even as a youth in 1981, that people who claim that Christians are the only ones who can connect with God, or are the only ones saved by God, are making naïve claims at best, and blasphemous ones at worst. Some Christians have simply been so thoroughly trained not to recognize God's presence in other people that they don't

see what is clearly in front of them. Yet others – especially Christian leaders – seem to believe that if they recognize that God can be found in non-Christians, no one will want any more to be Christian. That’s a pretty dismal understanding of the faith – as if Christianity is such a lame religion that you have to convince people that no other legitimate path exists and that all other paths lead to hell just to keep them within the Christian fold.

Of course, people are leaving Christianity currently – in droves. Not because Christianity has nothing to offer, but because so many Christians have been claiming that God is entirely absent from places and peoples where God is absolutely present. They are tired of blind leaders creating blind followers. So they’re leaving before they themselves go blind.

By the way, I should note that, when the Holy Spirit paid such a dramatic visit on me and my friend in 1981, there was no hint that we were encountering “The Christian God,” or even a God who wanted us to be Christian. After the experience, however, both my friend and I chose to remain within the Christian fold quite precisely because we found that Christianity had so much to offer us, and helped us interpret our experience so readily.

I chose to remain a Christian not simply because I grew up as a Christian and knew the Christian story fairly well, but mostly because the God I saw revealed in Jesus seemed like the exact kind of God that my friend and I had encountered. While there are stories about other spiritual figures in other religions that move me quite deeply, I have never found any need to trade the Christian story for any other. It’s the grandest story I know.

Yet to be clear, I have found it necessary to correct, or clarify, parts of the Christian story, at least as it is conceived in popular imagination. Especially, the part where people understand Jesus to be saying “It’s my way or the Hell way” in John 14:6, where he tells his disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

In our series, we’ve found several ways of understanding this statement that reflect a loving God’s will and intent for the world a lot more closely. To sum them up briefly:

- When Jesus said, “I am the way the truth and the life,” he was talking about a Way of Life that connects us to God, not simply belief in a person. It is a Way of Life that reflects Love of God, Love of Neighbor, Love of Self, and the giving and receiving of Grace. As such this Way of Life is also found in other religions.
- In John 14:6, Jesus is speaking to his closest disciples, not anyone else. He wasn’t talking to Buddhists, Hindus, and so on. To his closest followers, Jesus was saying that if you are a follower of his, then your role model and teacher of the Way of Life that connects you to God is Jesus, not others.
- The fact that others may be on different paths, with different role models, yet ultimately be on the very path that Jesus teaches and embodies is made clear elsewhere in John’s Gospel. For instance, when Jesus says, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold.” (John 10:16)
- For these reasons, it is inappropriate and harmful for a Christian to claim that their faith is the “only” one that can connect a person to God. Yet, as the apostle Paul shows us, it is perfectly appropriate for a Christian to consider their faith to be the “best” way that connects them with God, especially if this is a personal statement, not one that is meant as a universal truth for everyone.

- As Paul shows, the distinctiveness of Christianity is not in its exclusivity as if it were the “M” in the series 3 3 3 M 3. Rather, Christianity’s distinctiveness comes through its inclusivity, like being the “abcde” in the series a ab abc abcd abcde. A God who knows pain akin to that of a Parent losing an Only Child on a Cross, and knows the joy that awaits at an Empty Tomb knows the fullest extent of the human experience. This God is not just an “abcde” kind of God, but one who knows and has experienced every letter of the human alphabet.

This morning I want to add one final way of understanding John 14:6. Once again, the interpretation I’m about to give does not rule out the ones we’ve covered so far, but adds even more evidence that the exclusivist interpretation is incorrect.

When Jesus says in John 14:6 that “no one comes to the father except *through* me,” we must not only interpret it in light of John 10:16, where he speaks about other sheep that are not of his fold, but in light of what John says about Jesus in the very first chapter of his Gospel.

While all the Gospels claim that Jesus is not just a man but the very Messiah of God, John’s Gospel takes this claim one step further. John claims that Jesus is not just man and Messiah, but is the physical embodiment of God’s Logos, or Divine Word. God’s Word, says John, “was with God,” at the very beginning of things. “All things came into being *through* him, and without him not one thing came into being.” (John 1:1-3)

Whether or not you believe this to be true is beside the point. What we’re trying to understand is what *John* believes. It is John’s Gospel where we come closest to some notion of Jesus having not only a human nature, but a Divine one. According to John, Jesus is not God, but God’s Word *through whom* all things came into being, and apart from whom not one thing came into being.

The Jesus of John 14 is the same Jesus who is in John 1. Which means that when Jesus says, “no one comes to the father except *through* me,” he is not making a point about who can and cannot connect with God. He’s saying that all people are *already* connected. They’re already connected because, as God’s Word, through whom all things were created, Christ has already connected *all things* to God. Everything in all of Creation is connected to God through Christ, according to John. No one connects with God except through Christ because, apart from Christ, no one has even been created, let alone connected.

To say that Christ is God’s Word made flesh is the same as saying that Christ is God’s Love made flesh. Wherever you find Love, you find God. The more you find love, the more you find God. The less you find love, the less you find God – yet you still find God even in the smallest glimmer of love. Because all things were created as an expression of God’s Love.

You can imagine how 14:6 would have been of comfort to his disciples, whom Jesus had just told that he would be passing on. They were deeply troubled at the news. In response, Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:5)

That’s when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father except through me.” If we re-word this statement to reflect the idea that Jesus is God’s Love

made flesh, what Jesus is also saying, “Love is the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Love.” In other words, Jesus is comforting Thomas and the other disciples, insisting that Jesus may be leaving them physically, but they will still find him readily after he is one. An experience of Love is an experience of Christ Jesus. Because all things came into being through him.

All this comes to a head on Pentecost Sunday. The disciples are in Jerusalem for a harvest festival that takes place 50 days after Passover called Pentecost. As one of the three major pilgrimage festivals, people from all over the ancient world have come to experience it.

The disciples gather for the celebration as well. Then, just like my experience in 1981, the Spirit suddenly shows up and overwhelms them. If my experience is any guide, what happened to the disciples defies explanation. It defies the ability of mere words to convey. So the explanation we receive in the Book of Acts cannot be taken to be anything more than a dim metaphor for what actually happened.

According to Acts 2, what happened *metaphorically* is that tongues of fire appeared among the disciples and rested on each of them. In other words, God’s wild, fiery love filled them.

Then, the disciples began speaking in other languages, such that people from every nation understood what they were saying, as if spoken in their native tongue.

I don’t know what to make of this story if we are expected to take it literally. But if it is a metaphor for something that is beyond words, the story makes good sense. What is the universal language of humanity? Actually, there are three universal languages: music, math, and love. Given my 1981 experience, I can guess pretty easily which one of these three the story is conveying.

On Pentecost Sunday, love suddenly showed up like a gale force wind. The most powerful and all-encompassing love the disciples had ever experienced in their lives. A love so great that, if you took all the love you’d ever experienced and multiplied it by a thousand, you would not even begin to come close to experiencing the love the disciples were experiencing. (This is what my friend and I experienced.)

This kind of love removes all boundaries. All boundaries between you and me. All boundaries, even between you, me, *and God*. It is a love that forgives every sin. Heals every hurt. Fills every empty place. And connects every person to every other person.

Filled to the point of overflowing with love, the disciples on Pentecost Sunday found that the boundaries between themselves and all other people had completely disappeared. They overflowed with love for all the people around them, moving the people around them to respond to them with love, which triggered the disciples to express all the more love until they were so exuberant that some became convinced they were drunk.

The fact that on Pentecost Sunday, every kind of Jew from every country where Jews had dispersed to was in Jerusalem and experiencing this love tells me not simply that God loves all Jews, but metaphorically that God loves all people. And because God loves all people, then when people respond in love, they convey an experience of the Divine to others.

If you are looking for Christ's ongoing Presence in the world, you will find Christ in anyone who gives and receives love. In "good" people and "bad" people; Christians, Jews, and Muslims; Hindus, Taoists and Buddhists; agnostics and atheists; misfits, rejects, nerds and geeks; gay and straight; cisgender transgender; the faithful and the unfaithful; the insider and the outcast; and everyone in between. Wherever you experience love, you experience God's very Word once again made flesh. Incarnate in your neighbor. Even the neighbor who makes you uncomfortable.

This the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is the Good News of Pentecost. In God's Love, we all find our deepest sense of belonging. Belonging to God, belonging to one another, even belonging to ourselves. And we find the Grace to extend this sense of belonging to those who have not yet found it. We all belong because not one thing has been created apart from God and God's Word of Love.

[A music video by Namoli Brennet, called "We Belong," closes out the reflection.
<https://youtu.be/yAKXi47qPmg>. Thanks to a generous donation from anonymous NCC members, Namoli will be playing a concert at NCC this Fall, tentatively in October!]

Lyrics to "We Belong"

We Belong

*Here's to all the tough girls
And here's to all the sensitive boys
We Belong
Here's to all the rejects
And here's to all the misfits
We Belong*

*And when the same old voices say
That we'd be better off running away
We belong, We belong anyway
And when the same old voices say
That we'd be better off running away
We belong, We belong anyway*

*Here's to all the brains and the geeks
And here's to all the made up freaks, yeah
We Belong*

*And when the same old voices say
That we'd be better off running away
We belong, We belong anyway*

*Here's to all the one hit wonders
Here's to all the mistakes and the blunders
We Belong
Here's to all the fashion don'ts
And here's to all the Friday-night-home-alones
We belong*

*And when the same old voices say
That we'd be better off running away
We belong, We belong anyway*

*Here's to all the outspoken minorities
And here's to those who chose diversity*