

Sermon Preached by Maureen Smith May 7, 2006 **No Other Name**

Thirty years ago I had an adult conversion experience and became a Christian. My mother always hated it when I said that, because she thought I always was a Christian. And it's true that we went to church when I was a child, a Congregational church, and I believed in God.

But somewhere along the way, I started to doubt. I decided there was no way to know if there was a God or not, so I called myself an agnostic. I always thought the question of whether there was a God was an important question, but I thought it was a question that couldn't possibly be answered.

Then for some reason, when I was in my 30s, the question became urgent. It wasn't that there was any crisis in my life, and I didn't have any Christian friends who were trying to convert me, but I began to search on my own for this answer that seemed so out of reach.

I read the Bible from start to finish. I read the literature of other religions, especially the literature of mysticism. I came to believe that all the great religions of the world were true, that they were different expressions of the same reality.

Then it hit me that if all the great religions were true, one of the true religions was Christianity, and it had some unique claims to make in the person of Christ. Not only that, but even if there were many paths to God, I needed to choose one and follow it, and since my own background was Christian, and I lived in a more or less Christian culture, it made sense that I should choose to be Christian.

I was being very logical about all of this. I told my decision to a friend who was a serious Christian, and I thought she'd be happy. She said, That's fine, and now I'll pray for the day when you accept Jesus as your Savior. I thought, Whoa, I don't want to go that far. People like me don't talk like that.

She suggested that I read a book, *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom, so I bought a copy and started to read it. I don't know if you know the story of Corrie ten Boom, a Christian woman in the Netherlands whose family hid Jews in their home during World War II. When they were betrayed and caught, she was sent to a concentration camp.

I was almost finished with the book when I had to go somewhere, so I took the book and read it while I was walking down a sidewalk. At the end I was sobbing. Words came out of my mouth that I didn't know I was going to say until I said them: "Please give me that kind of faith. I know I don't have it now. I know it's a scary thing to ask for. I know a big part of me doesn't want it. But please give it to me."

That was the beginning, not the end of my struggle. For the next seven months I fought against this prayer that I had prayed. I thought of all the reasons I didn't want to be a Christian. I was afraid I would turn into a weird person, a boring person, a narrow judgmental person, the kind of person nobody would like.

And there was one question that was huge for me. I had somehow picked up the idea that Christians believed you had to claim the name of Jesus or you'd go to hell, and that whole idea was horrifying to me. I didn't want to believe in that kind of God, a God who would send the majority of the world's people to hell for not following the right religion or saying the right words.

Finally I decided I had to set that question aside. As long as I looked at that question, I'd never be able to make a commitment. Then one night—and I'm skipping over some parts that were important, but I don't want to make this story longer than it already is—I couldn't sleep. I got up to get a drink of water, and

standing in my kitchen, for the second time in this journey, I heard words coming out of my mouth that I never thought I would say. "OK, I accept Jesus as my Savior."

I wondered if I really meant it, if it counted, if anything had really happened. I went to bed and went to sleep. When I woke up in the morning I felt as if a great weight had been lifted from me. It was as if I had walked into sunshine, I was happier than I had ever been.

That feeling of euphoria stayed with me for a few months, and after that I was more or less back to normal, but everything was changed. I've had plenty of ups and downs since then, and doubts and struggles, but I've never turned my back on that commitment.

I want to make it clear that not everyone has to have this kind of experience to be a Christian, but that was my story. I'm remembering a woman I knew years ago, a Methodist minister, who told how she answered when people asked if she had been saved. Yes, she would say. When were you saved? Her response: 2,000 years ago, on the cross.

After my conversion it wasn't long before my big question came back. Did I have to believe everyone who wasn't a Christian was headed for hell? It seemed as wrong to me, as horrifying and unacceptable, as it had before. It still does. Sometimes this question has felt to me like the signature on my soul, and I have truly felt I have been closest to the heart of God when I have refused to believe we have the kind of God who would be sending most of the people of the world to hell.

All of this came rushing back to my mind when I read the text from Acts, and especially the verse: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name...by which we must be saved."

What do we do with verses like this in our pluralistic time, when we have friends and neighbors and even family members of other faiths? At least for me, this question keeps returning.

A couple of weeks ago I went to a powerful program at Luther Seminary on Luther and the Jews. How many people here know that Martin Luther, near the end of his life, wrote hateful words against the Jews? Drive them out of your towns, he said. Burn their houses down. And centuries later the Nazis picked up Luther's words and used them in horrifying ways. They specifically said they were putting Luther's wishes into action. Hitler wasn't a Christian, and Martin Luther wouldn't have been a Nazi, but still, tragically, this is part of our heritage.

The 6 million Jews who were killed in the Holocaust were killed, in effect, for not being Christian, although it was a racial issue and the Jews who converted to Christianity were killed just as much.

This winter I heard a series of talks by Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese Christian, and I was struck by these words: "Christian piety has fallen into the error of replacing the crucified Christ with a crucifying Christ. This shows 'the cruelty of righteous people.'"

He told of the first missionary who came to Japan, Francis Xavier in the 16th century. When people heard the gospel story, many of them were drawn to it, but they had a question. What about our grandparents, who never heard this, and who have already died? What happened to them?

At first Francis Xavier thought there was only one answer he could honestly give. Their grandparents must be in hell. The people were heartbroken and horrified. They didn't want anything to do with such a

religion. As Francis Xavier reflected on this, he came to believe—sincerely—that he had given the wrong answer. He started to talk about the joy of knowing Jesus without presenting him as a ticket out of hell.

Recently a friend of mine told me she doesn't believe in sending missionaries to other cultures because we shouldn't be imposing our belief system on others. I told her I'm often uncomfortable with this myself, but I have friends who are missionaries, and I understand why they want to tell people about Jesus and the joy they have found in following him.

I must not have said it quite that way, because my friend thought it over and said, "I guess it's OK if it's sort of like, Thank you for choosing Northwest Airlines."

That doesn't quite do it for us as Christians, does it? How do we find the right balance, between saying we have the answer and everyone who doesn't have the same answer is headed for hell, and presenting Jesus along the lines of one airline we might prefer because that's where we get our frequent flyer miles?

This question—or the question raised by our text, whether there is any other way except through Jesus by which people can be saved—has been getting a lot of attention in our time.

Essentially there are three possible answers. One is the exclusive view. This is the view I fought against when I was young and don't like any better today—people have to accept Christ or they go to hell. The second is inclusive, which takes different forms but somehow finds a way of enlarging the circle of Christianity to include more people, maybe even all people. Maybe people are Christians without knowing it, or they would want to be if they knew about it, or they get chances after death, or Jesus saves people even if they don't claim his name. The third way is pluralistic, which says there are different paths to God that can be true and valid for different people in different cultures.

I go back and forth between the second and the third. There are some strengths and some problems with each. But for now, let's say that it is up to Jesus to decide who is saved.

Who is this Jesus who is doing the deciding? Kosuke Koyama said something else that seems important to me here. Christians have a problem, he said, and it's one we inherited, as shown in the Apostles Creed. Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate. When we go from born of the virgin Mary to suffered under Pontius Pilate, we're jumping over a lot. We'd have more to talk about with people if we looked more at how Jesus lived, what he did, what he taught, how much he loved.

I want you to think about some people we've talked about and some other people I'm going to tell you about, and I have a feeling you'll all be able to think of some people of your own.

Think about those grandparents in Japan who died before the first Christian missionary ever appeared on the scene.

Think about my dad, a good man, who certainly knew about Christianity—who was brought up Catholic—but who in his adult years was never quite able to believe. I tried and tried to persuade him, I prayed and prayed, but as far as I know he died still not believing.

Think about the Jews who were killed in the Holocaust. Think about my Jewish friends today, think about my Muslim friends, think about the Hindus—I can think of three—who are family to members of this church, think about my Buddhist friends. Think about my dear Tibetan friends, good people, caring and giving and peaceloving, honest and hardworking, who follow the Dalai Lama.

Then think about Jesus, and what we know about how he lived and what he taught. Think about how he was Jewish himself, how he ate with outcasts and sinners, how he said he had other sheep who are not of this fold, how he taught us to love our enemy and turn the other cheek, how he said on the cross about those who were crucifying him, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Think about the Japanese grandparents, think about the victims of the Holocaust, think about my dad, think about my friends, think about the people you know, and think about Jesus. If it is up to Jesus, do you think he would turn these people away?

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