

Christianity and World Religions: Christianity

Have you ever heard the one about the rabbi, the priest, the imam, the Buddhist monk and the two nuns who went to the Super Bowl together? Well, here -- let's just see how that worked out!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwF3ipuNyfc>

Maybe this commercial shares an important truth. Maybe people with deep differences, people of different faiths, even, can have fun together and enjoy one another's company. Maybe people who are very different can be friends and neighbors. Maybe we can learn from one another. Maybe we can love one another despite what the world seems to be telling us.

This commercial is called, "we are all on the same team." But it was made for 2018's Super Bowl. And everyone wasn't on the same team for last year's Super Bowl. There were two very different teams -- the Philadelphia Eagles and the New England Patriots. And each one fought hard to win -- each side wanted badly to win. But on the other hand, after the game was over the players shook hands and probably told the other team, "Good game." Tom Brady, the losing quarterback even hugged the necks of the Eagles players.

Even though there was fierce competition and strong differences existed between the two teams, the players had a lot in common: they are all NFL players, they love the game of football and they are all doing the best they can at their jobs, they are all Americans, they are all humans. "From that perspective, they are all one team." (Adam Hamilton, 122).

When it comes to world religions, there are so many differences; there are so many different ways to understand and live out our faith. But there are also common threads we can find. Over the last six weeks, we've learned a lot about the faith of our neighbors right here in this community and across the world. Each week we have talked about similarities and differences. And I hope you have learned some things. I hope that you have heard the message that as Christians, the two greatest responsibilities we have are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Today we conclude the sermon series by focusing on Christianity.

O Lord, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

John 3:1-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

Jesus and Nicodemus

3 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him."

3 Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew,[a] it's not possible to see God's kingdom."

4 Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?”

5 Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. **6** Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ **8** God’s Spirit[b] blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?”

10 “Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don’t know these things? **11** I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don’t receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One.[c] **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One[d] be lifted up **15** so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. **16** God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. **17** God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Verse 16 has been considered the gospel message in miniature.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.

This verse is said to sum up the basic belief of who Jesus is to his followers and what the Christian faith is all about. So, first let’s talk about some Christian basics just as we did with the other religions during this series.

Christianity didn’t begin as its own separate religion, but instead, grew out of Judaism. It has even been described as a renewal movement that sprang out of Judaism with the earliest Christians seeing the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as a fulfillment of the teachings of the Jewish people. For example, in 2 Samuel 7:16 the prophet Nathan told King David that his throne would last forever. The prophets gave hope to the Jewish people that although they faced exile and desperate times, one day God would send a King, a Messiah - an anointed one- who would deliver them from exile and save them. So around the time that Jesus was born, many people were waiting, praying and hoping that this King would arrive to liberate them. They imagined that this Messiah would arrive in the form of a great warrior who would militarily remove the occupying Romans from Jerusalem, restore the kingdom of the line of David, and lead the people during a time of peace.

However, this Messiah Jesus looked nothing like a mighty, military warrior. And it turns out that neither the Jewish religious leaders nor the Roman authorities were willing to hear the message Jesus was speaking. Even though he was a descendant of King David, this Messiah was born into poverty rather than royalty. He was born in the backwater village of Nazareth to a humble carpenter named Joseph and a teenage peasant girl named Mary. When he was born they named him Yeshua in Aramaic - which means “salvation.” We know him as Jesus. We Christians see him as the long-awaited Messiah - God with us, God made man, and our salvation.

His story is recorded in the gospels, the good news, of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew 9:35-36 sums up his life's work in this way:

35 Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.

36 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Although Jesus preached to thousands, he called 12 to follow him and to learn his ways and to carry on his ministry. Jesus ate with sinners whom others shunned. He healed lepers and sat down for meals with the most vulnerable and disrespected people in his society. He routinely challenged the religious leaders who thought they had it all figured out. He regularly broke their interpretation of God's law and focused on the overarching theme of God's healing and loving nature for all God's children. We believe Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, and so we see Christians see Jesus as literally the embodiment of who God truly is **and** the example of how God calls us humans to live showing God's love toward our neighbors.

Jesus predicted his death, but at the time, his followers couldn't understand. Jesus was arrested during the Passover celebration in Jerusalem just days after teaching and acting in ways that the religious authorities couldn't stand for. He was tried before the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, and found guilty of blasphemy. The next morning he was handed over to the Roman governor Pilate who called for the death sentence--which was carried out by crucifixion. On the day we now call Good Friday, Jesus died on the cross and his broken body was laid in a tomb and sealed up by a large stone. But three days later -- on the day we now call Easter -- the stone was rolled away and Jesus stepped out of the tomb. He appeared to many people after that before ascending into heaven. After the resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit -- the Spirit of God was poured out on the people and the church was born when the disciples went out into the world telling people about Jesus. We believe in one God in three persons - the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Our basic Christian belief is concisely summed up in John 3:16:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.

Those who believe will have eternal life. Jesus lived and died for our forgiveness and for our salvation. But I want you to hear a fuller meaning of the gospel message today, not just the gospel in miniature. Because like any religion, of course you really can't know about it from just one sentence or even one sermon. So I really hope you will know today that **the presence of Jesus on this earth changes not just our eternal lives but our daily earthly lives**. I want you to hear the call to action that the gospel message gives to us Jesus followers. And I think the story where John 3:16 is embedded, the story of the Pharisee Nicodemus, can give us a profound example of the life-changing power of Jesus when we draw near to him.

For Nicodemus there was something about the presence of Jesus that changed his entire life. You see Nicodemus was one of those religious leaders who would have been challenged and even angered by the message of Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a Jewish leader, and he had an impressive resume. He had been set apart and had pledged to spend all his life observing every detail of the Jewish law - all 600 of the laws that had been created to regulate the Jews' obedience to God. But Nicodemus wasn't just an ordinary Pharisee -- he was a leader of the

Pharisees – he was a member of the Sanhedrin – a council of 70 leaders which had authority over all the Jewish people. And interestingly, the Sanhedrin had the duty to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet. (Barclay, p. 123). So, maybe this is what initially piqued Nicodemus’s interest in Jesus – his desire to check Jesus out and see if he was from God or if he was a false prophet.

And, so I can just imagine that Nicodemus is safe and secure with his life. He’s enjoying his prestige and his power. He’s educated; he’s important; he’s powerful; he’s rich. He’s risen to the rank of Sanhedrin. And he’s got this God thing all figured out. He’s got the rules to follow, and as long as he goes by the book, he’s a holy man – he is close to God. But something must be nagging at Nicodemus. There’s something about the presence of Jesus in Jerusalem.

Something feels not quite right in his soul. He’s apparently heard about the miracles of Jesus – maybe he’s even seen Jesus heal the lepers or feed 5,000 people with a few loaves and fish. And he feels a need to find out about Jesus. Nicodemus is drawn to the power of Jesus. But **unless** Nicodemus gives in to this feeling within him, he will never know. And so Nicodemus goes to Jesus.

We read about Nicodemus going to see Jesus at night. We don’t know why Nicodemus goes at night – maybe it’s just a quiet time to talk. But it makes us wonder if Nicodemus went under the cover of darkness so that no one would know he was paying a visit to Jesus. We wonder if Nicodemus was afraid to associate with Jesus. And if you’ve ever studied the book of John, you know that light and darkness are often used as symbols. So it may be written that way as a beautiful symbol of Nicodemus seeking the light of God in the darkness of evil and separation from God that is in the world.

Nevertheless, Nicodemus goes at night, and he says to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” Nicodemus recognized that **unless** God was with Jesus, he couldn’t have been performing the miracles that he had heard about. And this intrigued Nicodemus.

And Jesus said to Nicodemus, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.” And when Nicodemus asks, “How is that possible?” Jesus said: “Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom.”

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that no matter how carefully he obeys the law, something more is required of him. **Unless** he gives his life to God, and gives up control, he will not be reborn. (Dick Donovan). Jesus explains that he is not talking about a physical rebirth, but instead a spiritual rebirth where we become entirely new persons. These words remind us of our own baptismal vows where we become new persons in Christ through the cleansing of our baptismal waters.

And when we become new persons, when we become God’s children, we experience the presence of God – both on this earth and in heaven. And when we experience the presence of God, that changes everything. When we experience new birth, not only do we receive eternal life, but God’s kingdom comes **here**, and we get to live our lives in the joy of the Lord. And we get to live our lives partnering with this Trinitarian God to bring the kingdom into reality on earth.

This experience of being born anew is a gift from God. There is nothing we can do to earn this gift of grace. But we do have to do something to experience this gift of new birth. We have to accept it – we have to receive it. God loves us so much that he gave us minds to think

and freewill to act. God is not going to force us to love him. God is not going to pry our hands open to make us accept this gift. So we **do** have to do something to experience new birth.

Nicodemus must have experienced a new birth. He appears three times in scripture. Each time we see Nicodemus, he seems to have changed. He seems to have been transformed into a new person over a period of time. He goes from a Pharisee seeking answers from Jesus in the dark of the night to a person who boldly follows and serves Jesus in broad daylight, even risking his life to do so.

In John 7, Nicodemus speaks up for Jesus in his last days when the other members of the Sanhedrin are trying to put Jesus on trial for his teachings. (John 7:50). Nicodemus puts himself and his position as an elite leader at risk. And then in John 19, we see Nicodemus appear one more time -- and he is a changed man.

I want to share the last thing we read about Nicodemus. Let me set the stage: Jesus has been crucified. The disciples are hiding in fear. And here is what the scripture says – listen for Nicodemus to appear:

John 19:38-42

Jesus' body is buried

³⁸ After [Jesus was taken down from the cross] Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take away the body of Jesus. Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he feared the Jewish authorities. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and took the body away.

³⁹ Nicodemus, the one who at first had come to Jesus at night, was there too. He brought a mixture of myrrh and aloe, nearly seventy-five pounds in all.^[a] ⁴⁰ Following Jewish burial customs, they took Jesus' body and wrapped it, with the spices, in linen cloths. ⁴¹ There was a garden in the place where Jesus was crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² Because it was the Jewish Preparation Day and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus in it.

***cross slide**

Something had changed radically in Nicodemus' life. He once was a top ranked Pharisee – a slave to the law. He first came in the dark seeking Jesus. And he became a follower of Jesus – a true follower of Jesus – honoring and serving Jesus by tending to his broken body. The last we hear of Nicodemus, he is willing to put his own life at risk and his own position of authority as a member of the Sanhedrin at risk. Nicodemus was a totally different person, and he was openly expressing his love for his Lord. He didn't care who saw him. Nicodemus and Joseph took the battered body of Jesus.

The presence of Jesus in the world changed everything. The presence of Jesus in my life changed everything. I think when we receive and seek out the presence of Jesus in our lives, we too are transformed into new people. You see when we decide to follow Jesus, it is not a one-time commitment. When we open our hands to receive the love of Jesus, it is not strictly for our own personal benefit, it is not simply so that we are granted entry into the kingdom of God after death. When we receive the grace of God, we are supposed to turn around and share the love of God so that God's kingdom comes on earth, too! And I have to believe that part of experiencing God's kingdom on earth happens when we begin to practice listening to people who have different ideas than we do, when we practice loving people who we disagree with,

even people we might consider to be our enemies, and when we do the work to forgive one another just as we are forgiven by our God. You see this is the message of Christ.

So, are we really on the same team? Are people of different faiths on the same team? Not really. But, I think we **are** in the same game. We all live on the same planet. We are all trying to figure our lives out. We love our families, and we want the best for the people we love. Maybe people with deep differences, people of different faiths and cultures can have fun together and enjoy one another's company. Maybe people who are very different can be friends and neighbors. Maybe we can learn from one another. Maybe we can love one another despite what the world seems to be telling us. In fact, that is exactly the message of our Christ.

My prayer is that we would not just believe in Jesus, but that we would live our faith. May we walk out these doors to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. May we walk out these doors looking for tangible ways to love our neighbors -- every one of them.

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