

“Buddhism”

Theme: Christianity and World Religions – Understanding and Loving our Neighbors

Sermon Scripture: Romans 8:18, 28; Philippians 4:6-7

Family Activity for the Week: Design a collage entitled “Loved by God.” Gather a variety of magazines. Also gather markers or crayons. Read Genesis 1:26-28. Discuss how God created each person in God’s image and how God loves us all no matter our gender, race, age or size. Cut out and/or draw pictures of different types of people. Include both male and female and a range of shapes, races, ages, ethnicities, sizes and backgrounds. Also include pictures of your own family and friends! Celebrate that God created and loves every person, and that each person is made in the image of God. Thank God for loving you and all people.

Monday, January 28 – Read Matthew 6:24-34. Buddhism believes that suffering is not caused by external sources but is an internal problem caused when we cling to things. The idea is that we can overcome these attachments through renunciation or dispassion or detachment. Jesus, like the Buddha, saw clearly that we suffer anxiety when we fear losing what we are attached to. Instead of calling for total detachment, Jesus said we can make God’s enduring righteousness and kingdom our primary attachments. He invited us to trust that God really cares for us.

- Jesus made the practical point in verse 27 that worry brings suffering, but seldom does any good. Are there things you spend a lot of time and energy worrying about that never happen? How does worry differ from thinking ahead or taking precaution? In what ways, if any, have you sensed that your commitment to Jesus has reduced the “worry quotient” in your life? What additional worries would you like to ask Jesus to help you lay aside?
- Worry is usually about the past (“I wish...”) or the future (“What if...”). Jesus called us into the present, the only “time” where we can connect with God. This is one point of contact between Christian faith and Buddhism. Most world religions offer some form of mindfulness practice. From the beginning, followers of Jesus practiced mindfulness. How good are you at living “right here, right now”? How will you grow in this vital spiritual practice in the coming year?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you modeled a life of peace and trust. Help me to keep learning how to live a life in which my energy can focus on your purposes rather than my fears. Amen.*

Tuesday, January 29 – Read Psalm 23:1-6. Buddhism is non-theistic. The Buddha said the question of God’s existence is irrelevant for ending human suffering, because he found no help in the religious deities of his day. Christian faith, on the other hand, completely centers on Jesus as our strong, steadfast shepherd. Psalm 23 said poetically that, as the Shepherd of our souls, God guides us through the messiness of our everyday lives.

- King David, who had been a shepherd (cf. 1 Samuel 17:34-36), likely composed Psalm 23. He described God as guiding him (and all God’s children) “in proper paths.” Living in a culture that focuses on our freedom to choose our own path in life, how easy or difficult do you find it to trust God to point to the proper paths for your life? How can confidence that you are on the proper path reduce your anxiety about the future?
- When we think of a shepherd’s work, we can’t help but think of Jesus. Shepherds know the needs of their flock and lead them toward safety. Shepherds walk before their flock and the sheep learn to recognize their voice. Jesus spoke of himself in this way (cf. John 10:11-16). In what ways have you experienced Jesus leading you like a shepherd? Jesus said his “sheep” listen for His voice. How can you listen for Jesus’ voice today?

Prayer: *Loving God, thank you for leading me every day. Even if I struggle to hear your voice, I trust that you’re there as the shepherd of my soul. Help me to see the path you’ve set before me. Amen.*

Wednesday, January 30 – Read Romans 8:18-28. The Buddha focused his teaching on no longer being affected by suffering. Christians have a different view. Suffering was a constant in Paul's life as an apostle (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-29). Paul chose to relate to his suffering in ways that gave him strength and hope. He knew he was not alone or unique in suffering. In today's scripture, Paul wrote that creation suffers, and even the Holy Spirit groans with us. What's more, he said, God can bend even our suffering to serve good purposes.

- Paul is not expressing false optimism that everything ends up good in the end. Verse 28 does not say that all things are good, but that God WORKS for our good in all things. When in your life has God's power brought something good out of what was clearly a bad thing?
- There is mystery and comfort in verse 26: "We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans." When have you faced so much pain that you felt "speechless" before God? How does it touch your heart to read that, at those very hardest times, God's Spirit intercedes on your behalf?

Prayer: Lord, teach me this week to trust your love when bad stuff happens in my life, and in the world. Help me, even when I can't fully know the "why" of suffering, to know the "who." You are with me and that gives me hope. Amen

Thursday, January 31 – Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-26. Christians do not believe our life ends in absorption of our life energy back into the universe. We believe Jesus rose from the dead, and promised, "Because I live, you will live too" (John 14:19). 1 Corinthians 15 was the first written witness to Jesus' resurrection. Paul wrote of meeting Jesus alive, and of over 500 other eyewitnesses to that reality (verses 6-7). He said if it weren't true that Jesus overcame death, Christian faith was worthless. Scholar C. H. Dodd wrote, "The Resurrection of Jesus is not a belief that grew up within the church; it is the belief around which the church itself grew up, and the 'given' upon which its faith was based."

- Jewish or Roman authorities could have easily put a stop to early Christian preaching like Paul's by producing Jesus' dead body. They had all the police and military power to find the body. They didn't, because they couldn't—Jesus' tomb was empty. How can Paul's confident appeal to hundreds of still-living eyewitnesses deepen your faith in the reality of Jesus' resurrection? What difference does it make to you that Jesus is alive today?
- "There are two ways to look at human history. One way is to focus on the wars and violence, the squalor, the pain and tragedy and death.... If I take Easter as the starting point, the one incontrovertible fact about how God treats those whom he loves, then human history becomes the contradiction and Easter a preview of ultimate reality. Hope then flows like lava beneath the crust of daily life." Which way do you choose to view history: as an ugly story of violence and pain, or as a sad but time-bounded contradiction to the hope that flows from Jesus' resurrection?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you went where most of us most dread going—the realm of death—and you emerged victorious! Help me claim your victory, and live and die in the calm assurance of your eternal love and life. Amen.

Friday, February 1 – Read Philippians 4:6-7, Acts 5:40-42. It was amazing that in Acts 5, the apostles, after a beating, "left the council rejoicing because they had been regarded as worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the name." Paul wrote Philippians 4 in prison (cf. Philippians 1:13-14). He was not only suffering physical discomfort, but mental uncertainty. The Romans might execute him—or free him (cf. Philippians 1:20-26). Paul's words were not just religious "happy talk." With every reason to be anxious and upset, like the apostles in Acts 4, he instead wrote about prayer and peace from resting in Jesus.

- "The apostles left the council rejoicing because they had been regarded as worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the name." Before Jesus' death, the apostles had squabbled about which of them should be greatest. How had they come to understand and live into God's priorities more clearly? How can you open your heart to God's peace-giving power, as the apostles had?
- What did Paul say results from presenting your requests to God in prayer? Do you ever wish he'd said, "Bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions—and God will make everything come out the way you want"? What made the gift of God's peace more precious for the condemned apostle than any other gift? In what ways does our wish for total understanding, to figure everything out logically, at times rob us of peace?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to walk every day in your peace. Keep my heart safe in your hands. Amen.

Saturday, February 2 – Read Matthew 22:34-40. Most followers of Jesus would affirm the first six pathways of Buddhism as they can help find relief from anxiety and fear by focusing on our desires and thoughts. But underlying all these practices, Christians see a two-fold path laid out by Jesus—love God and love others. We believe we are able to do these two things best when we remember what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We then respond out of that free gift of grace we cannot earn. Matthew, Mark and Luke all recorded what Jesus said about the greatest commandments. One key aspect of this sermon series is that, as followers of Jesus, we can get it wrong if we defend any idea we see as "truth" in ways that keep us from loving God totally, and our loving neighbor (of any faith) as ourselves. In simple terms, the end does not justify the means.

- Jesus said that all the truths we know about what God wants "depend" on the two commands he quoted. How would you explain to someone else what makes these two commands so essential? Can you recall any instance when a belief you held led you to be unloving, maybe even without realizing it at first? Scholar William Barclay wrote that Jesus called us to love God, "not with a nebulous sentimentality, but with that total commitment which issues in devotion to God and practical service of [others]." What are some of the signs that show your commitment to a task at work, to your mate or your kids, or to another important part of your life? In what ways is your commitment to trusting in, loving and serving God adding meaning, joy and peace to your life every day?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, just two commandments—and so sweeping that they can utterly transform my way of life. Keep me focused on living out my love for you and for all the others in my world. Amen.