

WGUMC January 31, 2016 "Jesus for Hindus"
Luke 9:1-6

What do Jane Goodall, Burning Man, Pope Francis and Rodney King all have in common? They have all expressed hope for the unity of all people and harmony with all living things. Underneath all of our differences and divisions, there is something in the human spirit that is longing for the Power of Oneness, and so we go looking for it. Some of us look in nature, some in art and music, and others in alternative communities, such as Burning Man. In the alternative community known as the Church, oneness looks like this: "There is one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

[Eph 4:1-6]

But Christianity is not the only religion that speaks of Oneness. Hinduism is a much older religion and it is founded on a principle of unity called *Brahman*. Brahman is the Sanskrit name for ultimate reality. Hindus also refer to it as the

Absolute or the Divine or God. Even though there are many gods and goddesses worshipped in Hinduism, they are actually different aspects or manifestations of this one divine reality that is above all and through all and in all things. That's why we can't call Hindus polytheistic; all their gods are one God.

But even talking about Hinduism in this way is difficult because it is more of a family of religious philosophies and practices than one religion. There is no official body of clergy, no canon of scripture, no creed, and no community that can authoritatively define what Hinduism is. Of course, Christianity has all those things, and so it would seem that Hinduism and Christianity wouldn't have much in common. But the more you dig into the various schools of thought in Hinduism, the more you find that there are some striking parallels with Christianity.

Hindus do have a sort of Trinity, because they have three main gods: *Brahma*, the Creator; *Vishnu*, the Protector; and *Shiva*, the Destroyer. And in Hinduism, as in Christianity, God

takes on human form. One of their sacred texts, the *Bhagavad Gita*, says that when things get bad enough here on earth, God manifests himself in the form of an *avatar* and comes down to eradicate evil and restore right conduct (*dharma*). [BG 4:7-8]

Krishna was the eighth and ultimate avatar of the God Vishnu. There are many stories and legends about him and some of them remind us of the story of Jesus. For instance, Krishna's birth came about by divine conception, and as an infant, his life was threatened by a tyrant king. But he survived childhood to embark on a divine mission to save people from their sins and show them the path of righteousness. In the end, he met a violent death. Today, many Hindus worship him.

So it's not hard to imagine how a Hindu might see Jesus. The director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies tells a story about an Indian friend of his who moved to England when he was seven. On the first day in his new school, the teacher invited him to share with the class about a Hindu Saint. (No

separation of church and state in England!) So this boy began to tell the story of his favorite saint, Ishu, who was born in a cow barn, was visited by three holy men, performed many miracles, including walking on water, and delivered a sermon on a mountain. He loved that story and was quite upset when the teacher said that that was her Lord and her story, not his.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religions/Hinduism/beliefs/jesus_1.shtml]

The Oxford Centre director explains that many Hindus don't see Jesus as Christian. That's because what defines Jesus is not his affiliation with a religious community. Membership in a group is not where Hindus get their identity. What defines Hindus is their individual practice. For them, the important thing is not what you believe but how you behave. Are you humble, tolerant, and nonviolent? Are you disciplined in mind and body? Are you aware of others' suffering and are you willing to give up your own comfort to help them? [*ibid.*]

Hindus look at the practice of Jesus and see that he is all these things and more. So some Hindus see him as an *Avatar*,

sent by God to do God's will on earth, to save people from their sins and restore righteousness. Others see him as a *Sadhu*, or Hindu saint and that is how the world's most famous Hindu regarded him.

Gandhi grew up in British-ruled India and trained as a lawyer in England, so he was around a lot of Christians. He once thought that to be a Christian meant "to have a brandy bottle in one hand and beef in the other." [Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me*, compiled by R.K. Prabhu, 1959, p.12] But encountering real followers of Jesus and reading the Sermon on the Mount changed his mind. As he said, "it went straight to my heart." [*ibid.*, p.2] He found in Jesus' sermon the whole of Christianity. "It is that sermon which has endeared Jesus to me." [*ibid.*, p.13]

For Gandhi, Jesus didn't preach a new religion, but a new life, calling us all to repentance. Again, practice was paramount. One of Gandhi's favorite Gospel passages is "Not everyone who

says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does* the will of my Father in heaven." [Mt 7:21, *ibid.*, p.10]

For Gandhi, as for most Hindus, your religion isn't just a part of you; it's your whole life. Jesus' willingness to give it all, to suffer and die for Truth makes him a Hindu saint. If we could learn anything from the Hindu Jesus it would be that sacrificing oneself for God is an essential part of the good life. Hindus are better at it than Christians, according to Gandhi, and I think he's probably right.

Here in the West, our biggest obstacle to following Jesus has always been our own ego. In India, the soul or self is one with the Universal Soul (Brahman). To recognize that is to be liberated from the fears, cravings and conflicts that cause us so much suffering. But in the West, our Soul is not one with anything. Instead, it stands alone. We consider it not one but Number One. Here we major in Self-Preservation not Self-

Sacrifice. And because we try so hard to gain our life, we end up losing it in a thousand ways. Rarely do we risk losing our life for Christ in order to save it. [Mark 8:36]

In our reading today from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sent out his disciples telling them to take nothing for their journey. And with nothing but the truth of God to guard them, they went through the villages bringing the good news of the kingdom and curing diseases everywhere.

I don't know about you but that's not how I prepare for a journey. Just ask Hank. I pretty much take all of my belongings with me because I never know what I might need. But the Hindu Jesus tells me that a little self-denial will do a lot more for me than any of my stuff.

What are you taking on your life journey? All your worldly belongings? I bet if you were to photograph them, the pictures would fill volumes. Contrast that with Gandhi's belongings. A bowl, a plate, some utensils, a pocket watch, a pair of glasses,

a prayer book, some sandals and a walking stick. That's about it. So here's the truth of it: while Christians believe Jesus to be the Son of God, we don't follow him all that closely. While Gandhi did not believe Jesus was the only son of God, you could argue that he was tailgating him all the time, because this is what he had to say about him:

What, then, does Jesus mean to me? To me, He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had. To His believers, He was God's only begotten son. Could the fact that I do or do not accept this belief make Jesus have any more or less influence in my life? Is all the grandeur of His teaching and of His doctrine to be forbidden to me? I cannot believe so. To me it implies a spiritual birth. My interpretation, in other words, is that in Jesus' own life is the key of His nearness to God; that He expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see Him and recognize Him as the son of God. But I do believe that something of this spirit that Jesus exemplified in the highest measure, in its most profound human sense, does exist. I must believe this; if I did not believe it I should be a sceptic [sic]; and to be a sceptic is to live a life that is empty and lacks moral content. Or, what is the same thing, to condemn the entire human race to a negative end. [*What Jesus Means to Me*, p.8-9]

Gandhi felt that Jesus "came as near to perfection as possible." Within all people, he said, is the spark of divinity and one day it will burst forth into full flower. For him, Jesus was an example of that flowering. He wrote:

I refuse to believe that there now exists or has ever existed a person that has not made use of [Jesus'] example to lessen his sins, even though he may have done so without realizing it. The lives of all have, in some greater or lesser degree, been changed by His presence, His actions, and the words spoken by His divine voice. And because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded I believe that He belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a God inherited from their ancestors. [*ibid.*, p.9]

I think Gandhi has a point about Jesus. He doesn't belong just to Christians. If you look at Gandhi's life you'll see that he did exactly what Jesus told his disciples to do: he denied himself, he took up his cross and he followed Jesus. [Matthew 16:24] We need the Hindu Jesus to teach us to do the same. So if you are attracted to the principle of oneness in Hinduism, let me give you this hope. It lies in the words of Jesus when he

said, "I am the good shepherd...I have sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." [John 10:14,16] And where does that shepherd lead all of us? To the "one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." *Namaste.*