

“Christianity: What Do We Believe?”

John 3:16

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We have heard about two Muslim extremists who killed 17 people for the purpose of “avenging their prophet Muhamad” in Paris, France. The reason was simply that the satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* had carried a cartoon of the prophet Muhamad. What followed the shooting was amazing. Up to 1.6 million people have taken to the streets of the French capital and more than 40 world leaders joined the start of the Paris march, linking arms in an act of solidarity. They demonstrated messages of condolence, free expression and protest the killings. The marchers chanted the slogan "Je Suis Charlie" -- I am Charlie. This slogan “I am Charlie” supports the spirit of liberty and equality. When I watched this tragic news on TV, I asked myself. What was wrong in the terrorists’ understanding of God? The terrorists would have killed people in their full honor and respect for their prophet Muhamad. The world cannot see the goodness of God from their religion, only the spirit of evil. I wish millions of people could march honoring God and people’s lives, shouting “I am a Muslim” or “I am a Christian”, or “We are children of God” together. Maybe it is just a dream.

Evil does not exist by itself. Evil is the absence of God. Evil becomes more active when God’s love is not present in our hearts. As St. Augustine describes, it’s like the cold that comes when there is no heat or the darkness that comes when there is no light. Unfortunately, the world seems to be getting colder and darker because of the power of evil. The more the world is disconnecting from God, the stronger evil becomes. How can Christians brighten darkness and bring warmth back to a cold world? What does Christianity teach us about God? The next four Sundays, I will be focusing on the basics of our Christian faith and we hope to learn more about our God and Jesus Christ.

Let us revisit our Scripture reading. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (NRSV) This is how much **God loved the world**. This is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have **a whole and lasting life**. He came to help, to put the world right again. If you are asked to pick two important words, what would you pick and choose to explain God’s purpose? My choice is love and life. The whole purpose of Jesus’ ministry is to assure his followers to know that God is love.

God loves everyone. Where there is love, a new life will begin there! This is all about Christianity!

If you turn your hymnal to page 880, you will see the “Affirmations of Faith” with The Nicene Creed and the Apostle’s Creed. These are Christian faith statements that all Christian churches agreed upon. We understand the Nicene Creed from a viewpoint of God’s love in this way. Creator God made us in his image of love. The Holy Spirit always awakens us and guides us to be in touch with the love of God. Jesus Christ showed us unlimited love through his life, ministry, death and resurrection. Invisible God is clearly manifested through Jesus Christ, the man and the visible divine. Jesus’ suffering and death did not only show us how powerful evil is, but the event of resurrection also revealed how God’s love is stronger than the power of evil. Truly God is love. His love is not a passive love, but an active love to reach us all and embrace everyone regardless of who they are.

Some of you may question the Old Testament God. The Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann helps us understand the Old Testament Bible and the New Testament Gospel. He argues, “It’s not a matter of obeying the Bible — it’s about obeying the gospel. The gospel is about God’s saving love that wants to restore all of humanity to full communion.” Jesus’ ministry was a spiritual renewal to change people’s understandings of God. When Israel’s religious leaders were trying to protect and keep their own God, Jesus wanted to liberate God from Judaism for everyone. Jesus’ message was bold to challenge the stereotype, cultural boundary and even Moses’ law: He embraced an adulterous woman despite her act against Moses’ law. Jesus was willing to talk to Samaritans even though they were regarded as sinners. Jesus had dinner with a tax collector and healed the sick for those who were isolated from the society. Jesus’ message was straightforward, “God accepts and loves everyone.”

If you are not a Christian yet, you may feel uncomfortable about the term “sin” or to define yourself as a “sinner”. It is a pretty hard theological concept to comprehend as it is, but it is different from legal crime. The word “sin” is only used for our relationship with God. In the Old Testament, “sin” means “transgression” which means, "to step across" or "to go beyond a set boundary or limit." This concept can be compared to an athletic playing field. When a player crosses over a boundary line, the player is supposed to stay within the limit of that area. In the New Testament, the word, “sin” means, "to miss the mark" using a sports analogy from archery, when you fired at a target and missed the bull's eye, the scorekeeper yelled, 'Sin!' It meant, 'You are off the mark.' This view of sin includes the concept of our going in one direction but straying off course. We want to continue in the direction we intend to go, with the result being that we don't reach the goal.

Here I bring a ‘mirror’ to explain the meaning of sin. The mirror helps us to check our physical appearance. In a similar way, the word, “sin” helps us to reflect our broken relationship with God. We all have a holy desire to understand others and be humble. We want to show more appreciation and love others. We know these are important values in our lives. However, we also realize that there are times when we are filled with self-pride and take others for granted and we take advantage of others. This is the human condition! We have to pray to God earnestly for His assistance. When we realize who we are and ask for God’s forgiveness, acceptance, renewal and restoration, Jesus Christ came to save us.

The goal of our Christian faith is to experience God’s love, forgiveness and restore our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. These are God’s gifts! It is God’s grace! And the goal of grace is not just to save us from ourselves; it is to enable us to enter into a deeper relationship with God so that we are able to love God and our neighbor increasingly. Christians are called to be completely renewed in the image of God, to be made perfect in love.

A good comparison for our faith journey is like a sculptor’s chipping away at an enormous block of stone. For example, a sculptor was asked what he was sculpting, and the sculptor replies, "An elephant." The other man then asks, "How do you sculpt an elephant?" The sculptor considers the question, then says: "It's really very simple. You just chip away anything that doesn't look like an elephant." Our goal is with God's help, and His Grace, to chip away everything that isn't like God. I hope that we all journey together to be like Jesus and to be like God in our daily lives staying in the love of God, removing more of our sins, and bringing a light to our dark world. Amen.