

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS

*Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive
Pastor's Paragraph*

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS RELATE TO PEOPLE IN OTHER RELIGIONS?

Last week, I happened to tune into a religious program on my radio that was featuring a preacher who talked about all of the people in other religions who would be punished in the next life because they were not Christians in *this* life. I wondered what he would say about people who lived before there was such a thing as Christianity. And I wondered what he would say about the equally huge number of individuals who, through no fault of their own, never had an *opportunity* to accept or reject Christianity. I cannot speak for God, of course, but it stands to reason that a loving creator would never respond punitively to *any* of the persons I mentioned above.

But what about people in our *own* day who are born and reared in a country in which Christianity is not the prevailing religion? What about countries in which the major religion is Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or one of the other great faiths?

I was brought up in a local church in Columbia in which my Sunday School teacher taught me that anyone who is not a Christian would burn in hell. As a child, I simply accepted whatever I was told by adults whom I assumed were wiser than I, especially since most of them seemed to be genuinely good people. Later, I found that they were teaching me what *they* had been taught but never questioned! By the time I became a teenager, I was not nearly so docile or unquestioning as they. I did not accept the assumption that God would or *could* react in such a vindictive, malicious way. There must be a more rational explanation, I thought, one that is consistent with the God that Jesus himself taught and represented.

By the time I became a graduate student and had the opportunity to explore the issue in greater depth, I was sure that my caring and well-meaning Sunday School teacher unintentionally had led me astray on this issue.

So, what is my viewpoint now?

Over a period of time, and after a great deal of study, I cling tenaciously, not to the prevailing dogmas that I originally was taught, but to the teaching of Jesus concerning the *nature* of God. God, he told us, is love—an indefatigable, caring love that does not end if we miss the mark of God's intention by hurting others, ourselves, or doing something else reprehensible. But where *is* God? Paul taught that the Spirit of God is *within* us—our *true* self; the very *core* of who we are. Not just Christianity believes that, but also Judaism, Vedanta Hinduism, and a number of other world religions.

So, thanks to the intuitive insight of Jesus and Paul, I now choose to begin with the affirmation that we are *all* (that *includes* folks in *other world religions*) made in the image of God who is love. Love does not cause people who 'drop the ball' to burn in hell, but patiently tries to help us get in touch with who we really are at our core, a part of ourselves with which most of us tend not to be consciously in touch. So, since I take the aforementioned teaching of Jesus and Paul seriously, I believe that God wants us, first, to get in touch with our own core divinity (the image of God within us) and, second, to live *into* that inner reality in a way that transforms us outwardly--Our relationships with others that can lead to unprecedented levels of fulfillment for us and all with whom we come in contact. Dogmas such as burning in hell will never accomplish either of those objectives. And condemning other religions will not do so either. What we need to realize, I believe, is that if we *plumb the depths* of each major world religion--that is, go *really* deeply into them, we will discover that the *Source* of *all* of them is God.

The reason that we don't easily see that truth is that the original Source becomes encrusted and covered up by the practices and assumptions of the *culture* in which each religion is embedded. Unfortunately, religions tend often to put inordinate *emphasis* on their cultural accretions! We need to look much more deeply than usual within every great religion in order to avoid seeing *only* culturally conditioned aspects that hide the beauty and value of its original sacred Source.

If the true *Source* of the major world religions and the people in them is *unconditional* Love (Jesus's definition of the God who is Spirit) a love that *never gives up* on us, then the major religions are, to greater or lesser extent, *manifestations* of God. Of course, each one is an *imperfect* manifestation, but a manifestation nevertheless. That means, despite each one's human shortcomings and as yet unrealized potential, the presence of God is there in *some form*.

To borrow a bit of imagery, someone has compared each world religion to a boat on a moving river. Boats that stay in the water long enough tend to develop barnacles that attach themselves to the hull of a vessel and impede its progress. So, what is the solution to *that* problem? A reasonable response, it seems to me, would be to scrape the barnacles off the hull, *not* to destroy the *boat!* Through the teachings of Jesus and some of the other great spiritual leaders, I think that God constantly is trying to scrape off the barnacles of *every* religion, *including* Christianity!

So, what is *my* view of an ideal response to the other religions of the world? I think we should see them as brothers and sisters in the one great family of God, even if some of *them* may not yet realize it. Moreover, I think all religions should try to learn from one another. What spiritual truth may they have understood that *we* have not yet grasped? And what have *we* discovered that may give greater breadth and depth to *their* perspective?

Occasionally, someone tells me that accepting any religion other than Christianity as being of value is not consistent with the teaching of Jesus. Actually, that is not true. In the report of Jesus's final words in the Gospel of John, he says pointedly to his hearers: "I have sheep that are not of *this* fold." He goes on to say that he will bring *them* with him, *also*. And he ends by praying that *all* of us on our spiritual journey might become "one." I always am thankful it was Jesus who reminded us of that! '

Remembering we are *all* children of God and that our grasp of that reality needs to be embraced even by our wonderfully caring Sunday School teachers, I remain, gratefully,

Your pastor and friend,

John

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM

March, 2020

As usual, our fellowship will gather this month on the 2nd and 4th Sunday. However, if you are a visitor who is planning to join us, we suggest that you call 331-9999 before coming so we can alert you to any unanticipated change in our announced schedule. We look forward to seeing you!

**Sunday, March 8 (Second Sunday of the Month)
10:00 p.m. WE WORSIDP TOGETHER**

Our *State* newspaper recently featured an article asserting that we are now living in a *post-truth* era and that our country is experiencing a crisis marked by an increasing *absence* of integrity. That article was one of several that has appeared in professional journals and other reputable publications. Moreover, National Public Radio, a few weeks ago, presented a 4-hour program dealing with truth and its decreasing availability.

If those assessments are accurate-and they appear to be to *some* extent. The problem is basically a *spiritual* issue. So, does *spiritual* wisdom have anything helpful to say about it? Indeed, it does. So, our pastor's sermon for this Sunday will be felicitously relevant: "MAINTAINING INTEGRITY IN AN OFTEN DUPLICITOV'S WORLD." Our usual informal opportunity to ask questions and share your own comments will take place following worship. (Out by about 12 noon)

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Today is Daylight Saving Time Sunday, so we'll LOSE an hour. Therefore, please remember to set your clock AHEAD one hour before going to bed on Saturday night. Oh, yes: Are you interested in hearing something amazing? Over a period of twenty years, we cannot recall a time in which even one CCMer arrived late on a Daylight Savings Time Sunday! That's an incredible record. Let's keep it up-especially since the sermon on this occasion is one you won't want to miss!

**Sunday, March 22 (Fourth Sunday of the Month)
11:00 a.m. CCM EASTER BRUNCH**

Since we began as a progressive spiritual center in Columbia, meaningful fellowship has been a central feature of our opportunities for togetherness-particularly on special occasions such as Easter. In keeping with that time-honored tradition, we'll again gather for good food and fellowship as we celebrate this significant time of the year.

We've been able to reserve the private dining room at Arabesque, Columbia's most outstanding Middle Eastern/Mediterranean restaurant, located in the Shandon neighborhood at 2930 Divine Street. A particular advantage there is that we'll be able to order from either the lunch menu *or* the extensive dinner menu; so, options abound-from simple but tasty soups, salads, and a variety of delicious wraps to much more exotic gourmet creations.

After we eat, John will give a presentation entitled "*BEFORE EASTER: A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES.*" He will share his understanding of what *really* may have happened before the Easter event-a definitely *untraditional* perspective that, though biblically based, you are not likely to hear anywhere else in Columbia.

Please make your reservation(s) at our worship gathering on March 8th-or by calling John at 331-9999 by Saturday, March 4th. (The restaurant needs an accurate head count in order to prepare adequately for our coming.)

**ANNOUNCEMENTS
- POSSIBLE CANCELATION OF OUR GATHERINGS**

As this edition of our newsletter goes to press, the director of the National Center for Disease Control has announced indications that our country will *not* be able to prevent a coronavirus pandemic. In South Carolina, a number of organizations, business, and other public entities are preparing for possible closure. We have heard that, in Columbia, our public schools are making plans to teach classes on the internet if it becomes necessary to limit large and even small gatherings.

We profoundly hope that a potential pandemic will not limit our gatherings, but we are aware that 'social distancing' may become necessary. At the moment, preemption of our scheduled gatherings between now and Easter does not appear to be likely; but, *always*, the health and well-being of all of us will be our primary consideration. So, dear people, stay tuned.

AN UPDATE ON JOHN'S CONDITION

Thank you for your cards, calls, offers to provide food, transportation, and any other needed services. After John's unanticipated trip to Providence hospital's emergency department by ambulance and his returning home, he has been receiving injections of hyaluronic acid in the hope that it might lessen his pain. He is walking with crutches, a cane, or human assistance, but although his pain has abated somewhat, it continues to be a problem and interferes with his balance. In fact, while attempting to deliver music to our soloist, he fell on her front porch (no one was at home) and was unable to get up. After a while, a neighbor and another gentleman who happened to be walking down the street were able to help him up and assist him in returning to his car. Since he has a fairly high pain tolerance, he is continuing to provide his ministry duties for us. Treatment continues, but it will be at least another month until he discovers whether it will be effective. We'll keep you posted.

A BIG THANK YOU!

After over twenty years with CCM, John's ability to do the necessary *setting up* on Sunday morning before each worship service is now extremely limited, so some of our wonderful CCMers have shown up to help with that simple but important responsibility. Gary Davis, Marti Fritz, Andy Marvin and Jeannie Marvin have done a spectacular and extremely efficient job of providing valuable assistance by arriving an hour before worship and helping in significant ways. It is deeply moving how we at CCM pull together to make a difference whenever the 'chips' are down. A very BIG thank you to each of you whose love and caring make the continuation of our meaningful gatherings a possibility. We couldn't do it without you!

**CCM:
SEEKING TO
MEET THE UNACKNOWLEDGED
SPIRITUAL HUNGER
OF OUR TIMES**

A WORD OF WELCOME

AS FOLLOWERS OF THE PATHWAY OF JESUS,
WE ARE A SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP IN WHICH
WE SEEK TO GROW IN LOVE FOR GOD, SELF, AND
OTHER PEOPLE IN A WAY THAT AFFECTS ALL OF
OUR RELATIONSHIPS, ACTIONS, AND DECISION
MAKING, THEREBY HELPING TO MAKE THE
WORLD A BETTER PLACE IN WHICH TO LIVE.
WE WELCOME WITH OPEN ARMS, MINDS, AND
HEARTS ALL WHO DESIRE TO CONNECT
WITH US.

**WHEREVER YOU ARE, THE DIFFERENCE AT
CCM IS WORTH ANY DISTANCE!**

Our Telephone:

Senior Pastor: (803) 331-9999. Our mobile cell phone is more reliable than our landline phone, because it is on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If no one answers, it usually means that our pastor is in a meeting, in a counseling session, doing regular spiritual mentoring, or is involved in some other form of ministry; but he will return your call as soon as possible, so please be sure to leave a message.

Our Websites:

CommunityChurchMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

or

CommunityChurchOITheMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

Our Mailing Address: P.O. Box 6946, Columbia, S.C. 29260-6946

Our Location: CCM usually gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, and any changes will be noted in our monthly newsletter. Please join us at the gorgeous Seven Oaks Community Center in beautiful Seven Oaks Park, 200 Leisure Lane (between St. Andrews and Piney Grove Roads just off I-26 West). When you enter the spacious parking lot, you'll see the main entrance to our newly renovated building on your right. Once you are inside the Reception Area, our meeting locality is on your left. For updates on our programming, to verify meeting times, to learn about changes in scheduling, or for any pastoral need, please feel free to call 331-9999, night or day.

ALWAYS, WE'RE HERE FOR YOU!