

Sermon for Sunday, July 31, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"IF RELIGION WERE ON SALE, WHAT BRAND IS A BUY?"

St. John 12:20-36

Text: "So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida and Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'" St. John 12:21

If religion were on sale, which brand would be the best buy? Would it be Christianity? Or maybe Christianity isn't a bargain after all. Maybe one religion is just as good as another. After all, the so-called Golden Rule is found in every major religion in the world. There are a lot of religions in the world today, such as Shintoism, Buddhism, Judaism, Mohammadism just to mention several. Is there anything that makes Christianity different from any of them? If so, what would make Christianity a good, bargain basement buy? Is it the Christian moral code? Is it the teachings of Jesus? Is it the fact that Jesus was a very good man? I would like to suggest this morning that if you are shopping for something to believe in - if you are looking for something to which you can commit your life - there are two things that make Christianity stand out and make it the one religion worth paying for with your life. These two things have nothing to do with moral codes or the teachings of Jesus as such, nor even the fact that he was a very good man who loved children and went about doing good.

The first unique thing about the Christian faith that distinguishes it from any other religion is that it offers us a presence. Jesus makes us a unique offer and a unique promise. He says, "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth." He says, "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you." And isn't that what we really need? We don't so much need teachings as we need a teacher; we don't so much need rules as we need a ruler; we don't so much need principles as we need a presence. All the religions of the world have their "oughts", their "shalls", and their "shall nots". But only the Christian faith offers us the promise of a presence, a presence who will come and help us do and be what we ought to be.

The opening scene in the Italian film "La Dolce Vita" opens with a helicopter flying slowly through the sky not very high above the ground. Hanging down from the aircraft in a kind of halter is the life-size statue of a man dressed in robes with his arms outstretched so that he looks almost as if he is flying by himself, especially when every once in a while the camera cuts out the helicopter and all you can see is the statue itself with the rope around it. It flies over a field where some men are working in tractors and causes a great deal of excitement. The men wave their hats and hop around and yell, and then one of them recognizes who it is a statue of and shouts, "Hey, it's Jesus!" Then some of them start running along under the plane, waving and calling to the figure.

But the helicopter keeps on going, and after a while it reaches the outskirts of Rome, where it passes over a building on the roof of which there is a swimming pool surrounded by a number of girls in bikinis, basking in the sun. Naturally, the girls look up and start waving, too. As the pilots get a good look at the girls, the helicopter comes circling back to hover over the pool and the flyers try to get the telephone numbers of the girls. Most audiences at this point begin to laugh at the incongruity of the whole thing. There is the sacred statue dangling from the sky, on the one hand, and the profane young Italians and the bosomy young bathing beauties on the other hand - one made of stone - so remote, so out of place there in the sky on the end of its rope - the other made of flesh, so bursting with life.

But again the helicopter continues on its way and the great dome of St. Peter's looms up from below, and for the first time the camera starts to zoom in on the statue itself with its arms stretched out, until for a moment the screen is almost filled with just the bearded face of Jesus. And at that moment there is no laughter. Nobody laughs because there is something about that face, for a few seconds there on the screen, that makes for silence. And for just a moment we all catch a glimpse of a face that we may never have seen before, but a face we know we belong to.

That is what Christianity has to offer us that no other religion can offer - a presence that comes to us in the middle of life; a face we catch a glimpse of and we know we belong to him. He brings a power that comes into our hearts and our lives that enables us to live for the one who died for us.

Sometimes Christianity seems old fashioned and as out of place as an antique statue in the sky. But then we catch a glimpse of his face in the midst of real life. Suddenly we know that we belong to Him - that He is really what life is all about - and we know his presence has come to meet us where we really live. And that, above all, is what we need - someone who comes to help us; someone who comes to share our trials and tribulations and temptations and who helps us deal with them. Isn't that what you really want in your life?

The second unique thing that Christianity offers us that we find in no other bargain basement religion is that it meets our deepest need for forgiveness. You know, the older we grow and the more spiritually sensitive we become, the more deeply aware we are that we are not what we ought to be. Few if any of us this morning can look back on our lives and say that we have always done the best thing or the right thing. Not many of us can say we have been what we ought to have been or even what we wanted to be.

Remember the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus to ask him what he must do to be saved? As it turned out, he was a very moral young man who had kept the Jewish laws from the days of his youth. Yet, in spite of this, he was deeply aware of some spiritual vacuum, some void, in his life and he said to Jesus, "What lack I yet?" We can certainly sympathize with him. No matter how well we do or how highly the world may think of us, each of us is deeply aware that he lacks something yet.

In our scripture this morning we read that some Greeks came to the disciples of Jesus and said to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus". Now, these Greeks had a great history, a great tradition behind them. Their race had produced men like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Their race had produced the great philosophical systems that are still of significance today such as the Sophists, the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Skeptics. Their history included Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, and Aristotle who gave to science its inductive reasoning, who founded zoology, and whose pupil, Theophrastus was the first scientific botanist. Eratosthenes correctly calculated the diameter of the earth and Galen laid the foundation of physiology with his experiments. Their heritage included Herodotus the historian, Aeschylus and Sophocles the tragedians, and Aristophanes the great comedy writer. Yet, in spite of the philosophical, the scientific, the literary tradition that was theirs, these Greeks had a God-shaped vacuum in their lives. They had a deep, unmet need in their lives and they came to Philip and said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus".

Why? What were they looking for? What was their need? I'm sure they didn't know. They could not have articulated what they did not understand, but in their hearts they knew something was missing in their lives. Jesus knew what it was. He knew

what unique, distinctive thing he had to offer the world and it was forgiveness. So when his disciples told him about the Greeks, he began to speak of his death. He said, "What shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come..." Yes, that is why he came - he came to die for us all, to be the means of our forgiveness. He said that through his death on the cross he would pay for the sins of man and he could be forgiven.

Isn't that what you need this morning? I know it is what I need. You see, if religion is just moral codes of right and wrong, one religion is about as good as another. If religion is just rules about how to live and how to act and how to relate to one another, one religion is about as good as another. But I don't need to be told what is right and wrong, I know more right than I am able to do. I don't need to be told what is moral and immoral, I know more morality than I am able to live now. I don't need any new rules for getting along with others, I have more rules than I can follow now. No, what I desperately need is to be told that in spite of my failures, I am still loved and forgiven. I need to be told that there is a presence in my heart who will help me and even when I still fail, I can be forgiven.

A recent article in Reader's Digest talked about coal mining in Wales and referred to a disaster that happened there some years ago. Perhaps some of you remember that tragic event. Outside a tiny Wales village miners had been building up a slag pile for a hundred years as they mined for coal. One day it began to rain and it rained on and on. Suddenly that mountain of slag began to move. Without warning the little school house of that tiny village was overwhelmed by that moving, deadly mountain. And before it stopped over two tons of sludge had fallen on the little village of Aberfan. When it was all over and the earth-movers and miners had come in to do their gruesome task, 144 people had died, 116 of them children. There were people who asked how God could let such a thing happen or who said they could no longer believe in God. But the people who said these things were not the villagers. Instead, the villagers opened their homes to the visitors, used up their last scrap of food to feed the volunteers who came to help, tore their sheets to strips for bandages, stayed on the tragic scene giving more comfort than they received. They gathered for a mass funeral and the villagers stood and sang over the graves of their children, "Jesus, Lover of my soul..." At the funeral a miner who had lost his only son in the disaster spoke for all the villagers when he said, "Far from sending grief to us, God grieves with us." As he looked at the enormous cross on the hillside above the graveyard, a cross made from flowers sent from all over the world, a light came into his eyes. He said softly, "After all, it was His only Son, too." Yes, that's what God has to offer you - His only Son - His forgiveness. There is no other religion in all the world that offers you that.

If religion were on sale, what brand would you buy? Christianity offers you two things you will find in no other place. It offers you a presence that comes to meet you in the midst of life - a presence that brings you power to help you live for God; and it offers you the one thing you will always need when you fail - it offers you forgiveness. As that miner put it, "After all, it was His only Son, too."

There is so much about religion that seems out of date and irrelevant and out of place in our age as an antique statue is out of place in the sky. But like the Greeks who came to the disciples of Jesus, we sense the need of something in our lives - we sense the need for power to live by, the need for forgiveness - and we say with them, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus".

Do you need that power - do you need that forgiveness? If you do, Christianity is a real bargain - all it will cost is your life. Does that seem too high a price? Then let me ask you this: what would you give in exchange for your soul?