

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World

Part 3: Bridging Hell

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Scripture: John 14:1-6; John 10:1-5, 16

I. Killer Compassion

Over the course of nearly 25 years of ministry, I have regularly been approached by people in and outside the church who struggle with what they believe to be "the Christian" view of other faiths – that Christianity is the only way to God and there are no others. For many, the question is quite personal. They know a Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Jew who seems to be as connected with God as any Christian, if not more so. Some have not only met such a person, but have fallen in love and are considering marriage. Increasingly, the Buddhist or Hindu they know is a son- or daughter-in-law. Sometimes, that person is not an in-law, but *their own* son or daughter.

Consider the story of Don, whose quandary represents that of many. Some of you know Don from reading my book on the *Phoenix Affirmations*. Don attended a Bible Church down the road from my former church in Scottsdale, Arizona. He showed up in my office one day wanting to discuss his daughter Carrie's salvation. On her eighteenth birthday, Carrie announced that she had converted to Buddhism. Carrie's announcement had a rather chilling effect on the birthday celebration.

Over the next several months, numerous attempts were made by parents, grandparents, and even aunts and uncles to convince Carrie of the error of her ways and return to the fold. Each attempt only created a greater rift between them. At wits end, Don decided to seek the advice of his pastor.

After listening to all the ways in which the family had attempted to lead Carrie back to the fold, and her responses, the pastor advised that Carrie meet with him. After this didn't work, the pastor advised Don that he and the family threaten to disown Carrie – and follow through if she didn't repent and return to Jesus.

"You can't allow Carrie to have a negative influence on your other children," he said. Don had two other children – a fifteen-year-old boy and a twelve-year-old girl. "They're younger than Carrie," the pastor reminded. "She has a lot of influence over them as their older sister. How would you feel if one or both of your remaining children were to lose their salvation as a result of Carrie's mistake? You need to cut her loose if necessary. Besides, showing Carrie a little tough love may just create a big enough crack in Carrie's heart to allow Jesus back in."

Don didn't know what to do. His fatherly compassion made him want to keep Carrie close and show her love and acceptance no matter what her beliefs. Yet compassion for his other two children made him take seriously the course of action his pastor advised. His conflicting sense of compassion was tearing him apart!

A year earlier Don had heard from a friend that I was teaching an eight-week class exploring the relationship between Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and certain Zen Buddhist stories (*koans*). Back then he had considered this class to be further proof of the decline of true Christianity in America and a slide into spiritual relativism. Now, he was curious.

In my office, he started challenging me before he even sat down: "You seem to believe that God can be found in other religions."

"Yes," I said.

"I'd like know how you can justify your belief when Jesus clearly says that *no one* comes unto the Father except through him," he responded. His question sounded more like a statement whose conviction rests more on the forcefulness by which it is uttered than by any underlying surety behind it.

Lowering his eyes and voice slightly he continued, "Right now I've got a very personal reason for hearing you out. Can you *really* be Christian and believe that Christianity isn't the only way?" Of course, behind this question was another, more pressing one: "Will my daughter go to hell if she dies a Buddhist?"

He sat down and we had a very different conversation than he'd had at his Bible Church.

How would you respond to Don if he were sitting across from you, waiting to hear your thoughts on his daughter's salvation?

II. Roe, Roe, Roe Your Boat

Several years ago, our youngest daughter, Maren, was driving home and came across a stray dog wandering in the street. She brought him home, we called the humane society, and they asked if we would want to house the dog either until the owner was located or thirty days had passed, whichever came sooner. The dog seemed friendly enough, so we agreed.

We have had the dog ever since. We call him Roe, as in salmon roe, since our previous dog – a Doberman – was named Keta, after a species of salmon.

Roe isn't nearly as imposing to potential intruders as Keta was, but anyone who knew Keta also knew that all it took was a smile and an outstretched hand to become Keta's "new best friend." Roe has proven himself to be a bigger threat! I'm not saying Roe is unfriendly. He's more discerning. He has been a perfect dog in every respect but one.

Oh, so you want to know the one? Roe is half Bichon Frise and half Jack Russell Terrier. The Jack Russell blood in Roe means that he is a born ratter. As a ratter, Roe can squeeze his way through openings just a little larger than your fist. I've never seen anything quite like it. For those of you who have seen our house on 13th Street, you know we have a solid brick wall out front. But in back, the fences between our property and the alley are wood, with a six-inch gap between the bottom of the fence and the ground - little to block a dog whose back might clear 12 inches if he was wearing heels.

So, when it was clear that we were going to keep Roe, I went straight to Menard's to purchase stone blocks. Placing them under the fences, I declared to Melanie, "There's no way Roe can get out now!" before leaving for the office one day. By the time I opened the garage door, Roe was literally waiting for me outside!

After my *sixth* trip to Menard's, my *sixth* pronouncement to Melanie, and my *sixth humiliation* (Roe's last break-out took 40 seconds longer than his first), I skipped Menard's and went to Pet Smart. There I purchased a PetSafe Invisible Fence.

After stringing 200 feet of copper wire down and back along the appropriate fences and placing a small "receiver collar" on Roe, we witnessed a dramatic turnaround in Roe's behavior! While the shock it administered was no greater than the static shock you'd receive after shuffling your feet across the carpet, all it took were two incidents and Roe became a boundary-lover!

What I never expected, however, was that Roe would become a shock collar lover, too. After wearing it for three months, he became so used to it that he would be nervous if you took it off. I could shake his collar from across the room and he'd come running and sit down in front of me, anxiously waiting for me to reattach it!

Human beings are a bit like dogs. We have a tendency to fall in love with the familiar, even when it imprisons us. As Morgan Freeman's character, Red, observed about prison life in the *Shawshank Redemption*, "These walls are funny. First you hate 'em, then you get used to 'em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them. That's institutionalized."

Religion can act like a prison for some. When the boundaries of faith are clearly and rigidly defined, and people are told that any crossing of the boundaries will incur God's wrath, which may ultimately lead to eternal torture in a lake of fire for eternity, that's not only like putting a shock collar around someone's neck – that's a *shock-and-awe* collar! With so much at stake, they stay well within the boundaries. To the extent possible, they will defend the boundaries against crossing by loved ones, too, lest they get zapped for eternity.

This describes Don's situation as he sat in my office trying to decide whether or not to either cut Carrie loose to protect his other children from her influence, or to keep Carrie around, putting his other children at risk of God's wrath if they strayed from the path like she did.

III. The Good Shepherd

So, what did Don and I talk about in my office? We talked about boundaries, of course. Not what *his church* had to say about boundaries, or what *I* had to say about them, but what *Jesus* said.

When Jesus spoke of boundaries, he spoke of sheep and shepherds, gates and sheepfolds. The boundaries of the sheepfold keep the sheep safe from thieves, robbers, and wolves. They are not there to keep the sheep safe from *the shepherd* who might just roast them over an everlasting fire if they get out and get lost.

Within the sheepfold, the sheep live within the love and care of the shepherd. Injuries are inspected and dressed. They have their babies there. The sheepfold is also a place in which the sheep develop a sense of identity as a flock.

If a sheep were to stray from the fold, Jesus does not speak of punishment. He speaks of leaving the ninety-nine sheep behind to go after the one who is lost. You aren't lost if you're under the protection of another sheepfold. No, you're only lost when you're wandering the wide-open pastureland where no protective boundaries exist; where thieves, robbers, and wolves may do what they please. In such encounters, Jesus speaks of laying down his life in the sheep's defense.

Looking back on the conversation I had with Don so long ago, I realize that I could have dealt with his concerns with more than a conversation on the Bible and theology. I would like to have asked Don more questions than I did.

For instance, it would have been helpful to know if he or his family had ever taken the time to really listen to Carrie and get a sense of her spiritual life. Anyone who switches religions is spiritually in motion. They are not living their life passively or stagnantly. Often, they are searching for something that their souls need but find lacking in their present context for whatever reason, real or imagined.

The soul knows, for example, that we are loved beyond what our hearts and minds can fathom. It becomes more and more unhappy, therefore, in contexts where this reality is not being lived out in community with others. The soul knows that it is constantly surrounded by the loving Presence of its Creator who seeks relationship with us regardless of what we have done or failed to do to deserve it. Therefore, it becomes increasingly dissatisfied in contexts where a person's love relationship with the Divine is not actively nurtured or encouraged, and where judgment takes precedent over grace.

This is why, in the Christian fold, the Cross and Empty Tomb are so central. The love, grace, and desire for relationship that these symbols embody serve as beacons for the soul. You could say that the Cross and Empty tomb form the gate of the Christian fold.

Yet, Jesus says, "*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.*" As their shepherd, Jesus says these other sheep recognize the sound of his voice and respond to it. That tells me that the cross-shaped love, grace, and divine relationship that we find in Christianity must take on other manifestations within the folds governed by the Good Shepherd.

I would want to know what Carrie was searching for that she wasn't finding in her particular experience of the Christian fold. Was she finding the love, grace, and transformative relationship offered by the Good Shepherd at her church, in her family, or among her Christian peers? If not, had she searched for these elsewhere in the Christian fold – or was she encouraged to do so?

"Seek and you will find; ask and it will be given to you; knock and the door will be opened to you," says Jesus. (Matt 7:7) If Carrie had sought and not found love, grace, and relationship in the Christian fold, Jesus says he has other folds that recognize the sound of his voice. Therefore, we can be assured that a person can find the needs of their souls met in these other folds, as well.

I did tell Don that no one can know if Carrie is making "the right" choice by leaving the Christian fold and entering the Buddhist one. Carrie herself could not know until she learned what life is like within it. Sometimes the pastures of other sheep look greener from a distance than up close. If she did not find what she was looking for there, perhaps she would look at the fold she left with new eyes and return.

If Carrie were ever to return to Christian faith and claim it as her own, what would bring her back would be the Cross-shaped love of God, her family, and her church, not wrath. If Carrie's parents and their faith community would offer this love, Carrie might find her way home safely if she were not in the right place, and with greater appreciation than ever for her Shepherd.

That wouldn't be so *shocking*, would it?