

## Understanding Other Faiths: Hinduism

6th Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Psalm 119:105-112

Welborne UMC ~ July 16, 2017

F. Elizabeth Givens

Summertime means vacation for many families in our community who are able to afford going on vacation, and going on vacation means taking a journey. The first thing we have to know when we are taking a journey is, what's the destination—where are we going? Then we have to know how to get there. What direction do we need to go? North, south, east or west, or somewhere in between. Once we know the destination and the direction, we can set out.

Now, if a few of us are going to the Outer Banks for vacation, there are several ways to get there, right? We can choose between a couple of routes—actually, we can choose dozens. We can take 95 south to 460 west. We can take 64 west to 664. If we want we can take 95 south all the way down to Roanoke Rapids and then head west toward Elizabeth City and over to the coast. There are lots of different paths that lead to the same destination.

Following Jesus is a lot like that. Following Jesus—living as a Christian—is a journey. We don't become Christians at some point in our lives—we are always becoming Christians. We are in a process of becoming more Christ-like. We are moving toward what John Wesley and many others call sanctification—the moment when we are made perfect in God. There are different paths for us to get there, but the destination is the same.

Our scripture this morning from Psalm 119 feels a bit like a part of a long and meandering journey. I want to invite you to pull open your Bibles and turn to Psalm 119. It is the longest chapter of the Bible at 176 verses. It is an alphabetic acrostic poem using the Hebrew alphabet, and there are 22 stanzas—one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each of the stanza has eight verses, and each of the eight verses in the stanza begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Our stanza this morning is the eight verses of the letter nun. It begins with a verse that is familiar to many of us, as the author speaks to God and proclaims, “your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” The psalm is praise for God's Word as the ultimate expression of God. In Hebrew terms this was understood to be the law, or Torah. Reading this through the lens of Christ, the Word is also Jesus, the Word become flesh in the world.

The Word is the ultimate expression of God, and the psalmist speaks of a journey or a process of deepening relationship with God's Word. In verse 105 we see that there is a path to follow—and God's Word illuminates the path. There are multiple paths on the journey, the psalmist says. On some of them, we may be wounded. Other times we will encounter the snares of the wicked. But, with the Psalmist, when we give ourselves to be followers of Christ, we will seek to perform God's statutes forever, to the end.

In this characterization, faith becomes a living, breathing process of relationship with God's Word, of seeking to follow God's word towards a destination, sanctification, or living in complete harmony with God's purposes. Most of us, John Wesley argued, do not reach the place of sanctification in our lifetimes, unless it is just before our last breath.

Now, keep that idea in mind of a journey towards living in complete harmony with God as you hear these words from a sacred Hindu text:

Hear, O children of the immortal bliss!  
You are born to be united with the Lord.  
Follow the path of the illuminated ones,  
And be united with the Lord of Life.<sup>1</sup>

Do you see and hear the harmony here, of a journey along an illuminated path whose goal is union with God? These themes of journey, and revelation along the journey, are central to the Hindu tradition.

Hinduism is one of the most ancient of the Asian religions. It is extremely complicated, and is more like a family of traditions all belonging to the same culture—which sounds a little bit like all the different manifestations of the Protestant faith in America—United Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, and we could go on and on.

My first personal exposure to Hinduism occurred during my seminary graduate education in two ways. First, one of my dearest seminary friends was a Roman Catholic layperson named Renee, who was married to a practicing Hindu named Ajit. They are still married today and have raised four beautiful children, and are still negotiating the ins and outs of an interfaith marriage.

My second personal exposure to Hinduism came in the form of one of my beloved professors, Dr. Thomas Thangaraj. Dr. Thangaraj is a Christian from India, and though firmly in the Christian tradition, he was born and raised in a predominantly Hindu culture before coming to America for his education. In India, Christians make up only 3 percent of the population. I always remember Dr. Thangaraj saying that growing up he never had to tell anyone he was a Christian—the fact that, in India in the 1950's and 60's his name was Thomas was all anyone needed to know.

From both of these friends, I was exposed to elements of the beauty of Hindu faith, and how it connects deeply with many of our Christian assumptions about faith. There is much about Hinduism which does seem very foreign to us—for example, reincarnation and the caste system. Instead of focusing on these elements, though, I invite us as we seek to understand one another to focus on our commonalities. As one writer says, "Each of Hinduism's

---

<sup>1</sup> Shvetashvatara Upanishad

philosophies, schools and lineages shares a common purpose: to further the soul's unfoldment to its divine destiny."<sup>2</sup>

As we walk together as citizens of this global world, may we be reminded that both Hindu and Christian pilgrims are on a journey to the divine, to the God who is beyond our knowing on this earth, but who loves us beyond measure. And, may each of us turn to God's Word, for us most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, to illuminate our paths in life, paths that lead always to knowing God more fully and deeply, and living in the way of love.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.himalayanacademy.com/readlearn/basics/four-sects>