

On Being a Non-Christian

I was reminded by an article I read last week of my very basic knowledge of the Unitarian congregation here in Saskatoon. I can't say that I know their beliefs with any deep kind of knowledge, but I do have a basic sense of their understandings of how the world works, and how it ought to work. And I've had volunteer connections with their ministry leader, with whom I'm quite impressed.

Through their denomination, Unitarians do not consider themselves Christian. In many of their ways, however, I see strong connections with our overtly Christian values and goals. They have a powerful sense of community responsibility, and this comes out in a lot of social justice work, openness to others of differing ways and beliefs, and overall commitment to peace and equity in a host of ways. Are these not equally our Christian values – when we're at our best?

So what does it mean to we insiders for others to not be Christian? To be sure, those values I've named are strongly held within Christianity, no more strongly by anyone than by the Jesus we know in our stories of faith! Yet those same values are shared by a great many people outside Christianity too, including those who claim no religious identity at all.

In most of the ways that count for something in the world, our values are in fact shared by many. Yes, we *do* find much that is true and worthy in the faith stories and teachings of the Bible, in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Yet what arrogance it must appear to outsiders, when we Christians claim to have cornered the market on truth, and *The Truth* particularly! That is one of the major reasons why so many of our friends and neighbours find that their spirituality finds no place within our practices of organized religion, which to them have little meaning at best, and are distasteful or even hurtful at worst.

Contrary to the tenets of ultra-conservative voices of the Christian right, non-Christians are in no more need of saving than we are. Our religion doesn't save us, God does, in any meaningful sense of the word "save". My core belief is that *every* person is a child of God, and *all* are recipients of God's grace, that insistent and unrelenting light of God's love with us all, within us all, and among us all.

Grace, like the presence of the Holy Spirit, is a slippery thing to grasp and hold, and we sometimes toss the word and the notion of grace around too casually. It's important. In fact, it's central to our Christianity, but it's not exclusive to Christianity. For grace to have any depth of meaning, it can only be seen as universal – applying to each and every person on the planet, and perhaps to even any not-yet-known beings on other planets somewhere in the cosmos.

We see the grace of God lived out in the words and deeds of too many people – Christian and non-Christian alike – to even begin to think that it belongs exclusively to us.

In the end, being a Christian, or not being a Christian, cannot be simply learned or explained. It must be experienced, and lived. It's experienced in a host of ways throughout our life's journey; it's lived as we exercise our values in words and actions. We might name that experience and that living as knowing the Christ at our side or following the ways of Jesus. Yet the experience and deeds of many others are so similar in so many of the most important ways, that the line between Christian and non-Christian is less useful, less meaningful and more blurred than we might think.

Indeed, we could have a lot to learn from many who share our community and our world, about being a person of faith, regardless of how that faith is named, or whether it's even named at all.