

“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.

Let’s Talk About Interfaith Dialogue

January 6th is Epiphany, when we traditionally celebrate the arrival of the wise men who came from the east to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews. I love this holiday because of the challenge it offers us. One of the few things we can know with some certainty about these men (we don’t even know how many of them there were! We know there were three *gifts*, but Matthew does not specify the number of men who brought them) is that they were not Jews. They certainly were not Christians, a term that would not be invented for a few decades yet. But here they are, in our nativity scenes, witnessing the arrival of the Son of God as a human baby. And given that they returned to their home country after presenting their gifts, somehow I doubt they would know anything about Jesus’ message in order to convert.

That brings us to what I love about Epiphany: It invites us to talk about interfaith relationships. So, let’s do that! First, I need to clear up the difference between interfaith and ecumenical. Ecumenical dialogue is between different factions of the same religion. When we collaborate with the church next door, that’s ecumenical. Interfaith dialogue is between people of different religions. When we as a church collaborate with a synagogue or a mosque, that would be interfaith cooperation.

So the question is, *how* do we approach people who practice different religions? If we believe that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life,” then aren’t we obliged to do our best to make sure everybody else knows that so they can be saved, too?

I can offer a short answer, but if you want a comprehensive one, you’re gonna have to take a systematic theology class. The super-short answer is, no. As Christians, we are obliged to love our neighbors as ourselves, which means loving them as they can understand and receive love (because of course we want the kind of love we can understand and receive!) If you’d like a slightly longer and headier answer, read on:

It’s possible salvation is limited to those who know about and profess faith in Jesus. It’s also possible salvation is more universal than that. It’s also possible our faith is one of many different ways God has connected with people in our world. We cannot know for sure how God interacts with people of other faiths. It seems to me, from my interactions with deeply faithful people of different traditions, that they are certainly onto something life-giving, and since I believe only God is the source of life, that is enough for me. We *do* know that God loves all people. So as we interact with those who believe differently from us, let’s be respectful, curious, and of course, authentic about our own faith experience.

For a deeper (but still very approachable) reflection on the rationale and value of interfaith dialogue, I invite you to read [Carl McColman’s article](#) on the topic.

Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at virginiag@smokyhillumc.org.