**Vedas and Visions: The Spiritual Wisdom of Hinduism**
A sermon by Rev. Dr. David Clark
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**Learning to love our neighbors.**

Today, we conclude our sermon series on world religions. We have been operating under the assumption that if we are to fulfill Jesus' command to love our neighbors, then we should gain appreciation for their religious perspectives. When we do this, we have a chance to do our part in overcoming the divisiveness and bigotry that's tearing us apart.

We are looking at similarities and differences with our faith in the hope that studying another faith can sometimes help us see ours more clearly and inspire us to become better Christians. Have you noticed that you appreciate your family more fully after you've hung out with someone else's family for a while?

**The Roots of Hinduism**

Hinduism is the world's third-largest religion, with approximately a billion followers. Coming from India, it is the oldest of the major religions, with roots dating back several thousand years. Unlike other religions, Hinduism isn't traced to a single founder but is the accumulated wisdom evolving through millennia. It's a complex religion with thousands of deities and no central authority or defining text. If you think there are a lot of Christian denominations, you haven't seen anything compared to the varied expressions of Hinduism. Yet, with all this complexity, there are some essentials most Hindus share.

**The Supreme God Brahman**

Although Hinduism recognizes thousands of gods, they believe in one supreme God, Brahman, who is unknowable, eternal, and impersonal. It's not like how we think of God as caring for us, guiding us, and intervening in our lives. Yet it is similar to our concept because they see Brahman as the ultimate reality behind everything, the ground of being for all existence. Brahman is like the ocean, and everything else—all beings, all material, all gods—are mere drops of water in that ocean.

**The human condition.**

Hindus contend humanity's essential problem is ignorance. We are unaware that we are Brahman and all else is Brahman. We operate as disconnected individuals with enormous egos that deny the fundamental reality of life. The rituals and practices of Hinduism are aimed at helping one discover and operate out of one's

true nature. When we do this, we can be released from the endless cycles of birth and death, called *moksha*. Moksha is not heaven; it is a blowing out of the candle of existence.

**Reincarnation and Karma**

Most religions wrestle with the question of life's unfairness. Bad things happen to good people, while good things happen to bad people. Where is justice? Like Buddhism, Hinduism's answers involve karma and reincarnation.

The idea is that we build up karma through our good or bad deeds. That karma affects the soul and determines how you will be born in the next life. If you're a horrible person, you might wind up a dung beetle next time. Do well, and you can get closer to a life that will release you from the wheel of life's suffering. It's not a punishment/reward system distributed by god but the fundamental reality of life. The end vision is not one of heaven or being united with a personal God but of dissipating into the oneness of all reality.

**The Caste System**

Karma is built up based on how well you meet the requirements of your station or role in life, and there are differing expectations based on those stations. The caste system is a traditional social hierarchy in India, deeply rooted in Hindu religious and social practices. It categorizes individuals into four main groups (varnas): Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and landowners), and Shudras (laborers and service providers). Each caste has specific duties (dharma) and responsibilities. The aim is to do the duties ascribed to your caste without expectation of reward. Just do your duty without worrying about the outcome.

Initially, the caste system was fluid, with categories based on occupation and skills rather than rigid hierarchies. Over time, it became more entrenched and hierarchical, solidifying into a system of inherited status where social mobility was restricted.

The concept of untouchables emerged. These were folks who performed "impure" tasks such as handling dead bodies or cleaning latrines. They were relegated to the lowest social status, facing severe discrimination and social ostracism.

In contemporary Indian society, the Indian Constitution prohibits caste-based discrimination. However, the caste system's residue persists, with many still facing prejudice and limited access to opportunities. You will find on dating profiles from websites that people often identify their caste, but many will say caste does not matter in finding a partner.

The kind of distinctions created by the caste system were the kind of things Christianity tried to obliterate. The Bible says in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, but all are one.

**Many Gods**

One of the fun features of Hinduism is that it recognizes thousands of Gods. These gods and goddesses are seen as manifestations of the unknowable supreme God, Brahman. They represent different aspects of the ultimate reality and give people gods they can relate to.

Hinduism has a trinity of three major gods: a creator, a preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. It believes in a cyclical nature of time, like the life cycle of a forest. It believes the world is in an eternal cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction before new creation. It believes humanity is in the final stage before Shiva destroys it all and something new is born.

The major gods appear to people through various incarnations and avatars. In addition to the major gods, Hinduism recognizes numerous minor deities, spirits, and celestial beings, each with specific attributes and roles. These include deities like Ganesha (remover of obstacles), Hanuman (symbol of devotion and strength), and various regional and village gods and goddesses revered locally.

**Sacred Texts**

Christianity is simple, with the Bible as the sacred text. Hinduism is complex, with thousands of sacred texts that guide spiritual practice, philosophy, and daily living. They have epic stories and collections. Many say that a straightforward text that gets to the heart of Hinduism is the Bhagavad Gita, a short text of 700 verses that explains concepts like karma, duty (dharma), and moksha (release). Reading it, you get a sense that much of Hinduism is about adjusting your mindset so you don't chase after worthless desires and live up to your sense of duty, not out of a sense of reward but because it is the right thing to do.

An exciting aspect of these texts is that many have little to do with gods and more to do with practices (such as yoga) that involve clearing the mind, dealing with the ego, aligning your energy and body, and adjusting attitude.

**Worship Practices**

Hindu worship services, called pujas, are diverse and can occur in temples, homes, or sacred sites. A typical puja involves offering flowers, food, incense, and prayers to deities, with rituals designed to invoke the presence of the divine. The central

element of Hindu worship is the murti, or sacred image, treated with great reverence.

Worship may include chanting mantras, singing devotional hymns (bhajans), and reciting sacred texts, usually without sermons, except on holy days. Hindu festivals and holy days involve elaborate rituals, processions, and communal gatherings. Personal worship practices (sadhana) also play a significant role, with individuals performing daily rituals, meditation, and reading scriptures.

**Dharma and Ahimsa**

One of the lovely concepts in Hinduism is ahimsa, which advocates for nonviolence and compassion in all aspects of life. Cows are sacred in Hinduism due to their symbolic representation of life, sustenance, and association with deities. While not all Hindus are vegetarians, vegetarianism is prevalent as it aligns with the principles of ahimsa, promoting a lifestyle of nonharm and respect for all living beings.

This concept of ahimsa was central to Gandhi's non-violent campaign for Indian independence from Great Britain. Gandhi claimed Jesus' Sermon on the Mount inspired him to apply ahimsa principles to the struggle for liberation. He famously said he would have been a Christian if it weren't for the horrible ways Christians behave. For him, studying another religion aided his understanding of how to apply his religion.

In an all-things-are-connected sort of way, years later, Martin Luther King Jr. was inspired by Gandhi's commitment to non-violent resistance and made it the focus of the civil rights movement.

Hinduism's concept of ahimsa and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount complement each other in a way that finds a Hindu and Baptist preacher melding them together to change the world. That's the power of what we've been talking about in this sermon series. The Hindu emphasis on Ahimsa reminds us to apply the words of Jesus in our lives.

When we study other religions, we may be reminded of something in our religion that we've overlooked, or find new ways to apply it. I hope this series has given you some information and deeper appreciation of your neighbors. Someone who watched the Buddhism sermon texted me: "Buddhists are kinda cool. I assumed they were weird. My bad." May we all strive to find something cool about all of our neighbors. Amen.