

“... except through me.”

John 14:1-11

First Presbyterian Church

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John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Sermon

I remember it like it was yesterday. I must have been nine or ten at the time... it was a Sunday evening and as usual, we had been to church twice that day. I was bathed... ready for bed... when sitting in my Dad’s big recliner I asked my parents: “What happens to people who never hear about Jesus?”

Do they go to heaven?” How many of you remember asking that same question? Though I don’t recall what sparked me to ask, I’d be willing to bet it had something to do with John chapter 14, where Jesus first says those familiar words, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” But then he adds this troubling postscript: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” *“No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

As you know, many folks hear these words and assume Jesus is saying Christianity is the **only way** to God... that in a religiously pluralistic world our religion (Christianity) is the **only religion** that gets to God. Yet, even as a 10-year-old Southern Baptist boy, I was asking: “Is that what Jesus is really saying?”

Well, when you read this passage in context, you find that Jesus is speaking these words on the night before he is crucified. Now just think about that for a moment... think what he might have been thinking... what he might have been feeling. I dare say that the issue of the existence of other world religions was not his primary concern. In fact, on that night there WAS no Christian religion as yet! So, on this is the night before his death... with the cross looming out before him... Jesus’ purpose at this time is not to talk about religious diversity. His purpose is to point out what is happening right then and there... and to help his disciples grasp the unprecedented news that in him... in the incarnate Word... the Son of God... they are coming to know God in a way never before possible.¹

You may remember that John foreshadows this at the very beginning of his Gospel: “No one has ever seen God,” he writes. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”² And it is this core truth that Jesus is trying to communicate to his closest followers when he says quite plainly: I am the Way... I am the Truth... I am the Life... none of you come to my Father except through me. Or to put it a different way: All of you come to the Father through me... All of you come to my Father through my life and death and resurrection... there is no other way, my dearest friends, **no other way** than this. So properly understood, Jesus’ words are not about religious pluralism... and certainly not about Christian exclusivism. Properly understood, Jesus’ words reveal the deepest truth about his way of being God among us. And in so doing, they reveal the deepest truth about our lives his followers. Self-giving is now our way; the cross is now our truth; and resurrection is now our life.

¹ Gail R. O’Day in her commentary on *John* in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume IX, p. 743.

² John 1:18

That being said, you and I are followers of *this* way... of *this* truth... and of *this* life. We *are* Christian – *not* Muslim, *not* Buddhist, *not* Hindu... although we may be a little Jewish. We are this and not that, and so the question for us who live in the most religiously-diverse nation in the world is: “What about all those other religions? What do I say to the mother of my daughter’s Muslim friend? ... how do I relate to my Buddhist customer? ... how about my Jewish next-door neighbor?”

Well, as with any complex question our tendency is to seek the simple answer... and this question is no different.³ Way out on one *extreme* are those who say: “You must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior... you must be baptized in his name... or you will be condemned to eternal separation from God.” There’s an old children’s Sunday school chorus: “One door and only one, and yet the sides are two. I’m on the inside; on which side are you?” A preacher friend says there’s a highly sophisticated theological term for using John 14:6 this way. It’s called a “diddywhacker.” A “diddywhacker” is a “diddy” you take from the Bible and “whack” somebody over the head with it.⁴ According to this answer, all non-Christian religions are at their best untrue, and at their worst demonic.

Then, way out on the other extreme is the answer that all religions say basically the same thing... that all paths basically lead to the same place. You have heard this... may have even said it yourself: “Personally, I’m a Christian. Jesus is my way to God. It was how I was raised... it’s what I know. But I believe other paths are just as valid... they’re just different routes that end up in the same place.”

So, on the extremes we have the conservative answer: “My way or the highway” and the liberal answer: “Every way is a highway.” And to tell you the truth, it would be a whole lot easier if one of these really was THE ANSWER. But alas, we are Presbyterians... and that means at least two things. First, it means that *nothing is ever that simple*... and second, as those who are reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God it means we are forever seeking... forever learning... forever open to God’s continuing revelation.

The truth is our Reformed forbears thought a lot about this matter... and true to form have arrived at a more nuanced and more complicated place... which I appreciate because it is a deeper place. In this deeper place we find ourselves

³ Michael Lindvall in his sermon “kimMy Way Or the Highway” preached April 20, 2008 at Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City.

⁴ Patrick Willson served as pastor of the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church in Williamsburg, VA. And is now retired living in New Mexico.

holding two fundamental theological truths in tension. The first truth is that ***Jesus Christ is the center of our faith***. For us... if you want to know what ***God*** is like – look at Christ. If you want to see ***true humanity*** – look at Christ. If you want to know what ***God is up to in the world*** – look at what Christ is up to. This is what Jesus is struggling so hard to get across in John’s Gospel. God is not a generic deity... not a philosophical construct... instead, God is the One whom the disciples walked with... talked with... ate with. God is the One they saw hanging on a cross, saw risen from the dead, and experienced in a very real way in the Holy Spirit. So, for the follower of Jesus, Jesus is the key to all truth about God, ourselves, and the world we live in.⁵

Now, that doesn’t mean all of life’s questions are suddenly answered... not even close. No, it means as Fred Buechner says: “A Christian is one who points to Christ and says: ‘I can’t prove a thing, but there is something about his eyes and his voice. There’s something about the way he carries his head and his hand, the way he carries his cross – the way he carries me.’”⁶ He is not one witness among many; he’s the One.⁷ And at the very core of our faith is the uncompromising trust that Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God-with-us.

OK Whit, I get that... but still I want to know what this means for my relationships with people who are not Christians? Should I tell them this part of who I am? Should I speak about what I believe? Should I share with them what Jesus means to me? Well, yes... absolutely... when the time seems right... when you sense that the Spirit is creating some space for this kind of conversation. We are so hesitant these days to talk about anything that might be divisive... so yes, you should share with them this part of who you are, but you don’t do it to add another notch in your “belt of conversions”. You do it because it is part of who you are. You tell them because it is Jesus who gives your life its meaning and purpose. Christ is at your center... this is the first towering truth.

The second towering truth addresses the question that I had as a 10-year-old boy...the question so many of us have: How do we think about folks who never hear about Jesus? And especially about those who have heard but devote themselves to other religions? I remember Jim Chatham, one of my dearest mentors in ministry, sharing in a sermon that when he was in high school one of the recurring discussion topics in youth group was Rabbi Steinberg...

⁵ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) p. 10.

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) p. 32.

⁷ Lindvall, p. 4

this faithful, generous, wonderful man who worked at the neighborhood synagogue. “Isn’t it unfortunate,” we said, “that a person as good as Rabbi Steinberg will not qualify for heaven because he does not accept Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior.”

Of course, this was their interpretation of John 14:6; an interpretation which was encouraged by particularly zealous Sunday school teacher who said: “Realize it, boys and girls, no matter how good a man he is... no matter how much you like him, he is still destined for the fires of hell.”⁸

Well, eventually it became clear to Jim that this particular reading of Jesus’ words is terribly, terribly dangerous. This is when people go on Crusades... this is when people fly planes into tall buildings in the name of God... and this is when well-meaning, but overzealous Sunday school teachers mislead the children in their class.

Well, thanks be to God that whenever we start to think we speak for God... that we know precisely what God is up to... our theological tradition insists on a second towering truth. It is the sovereignty of God. One commentator says that the “sovereignty of God” is a five dollar theological term that means if God wants to speak through secular philosophy or literature or art, God can do it. If God wants to heal through modern medicine or psychotherapy or alternative medicine, God can. And if God wants to reveal God’s self in other religions, God can do it because God is God. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is our constant reminder that God will not be contained: not in the Bible... not in our theology... not in the church... God simply cannot be contained. And if you can’t remember the five dollar theological word, imagine a child digging hole in the sand and, with her little bucket, busily trying to transfer the ocean into it. We smile at the grandeur of her ambition, but only because we know an ocean cannot be contained in any hole of any size on any beach. Neither can God be fully contained within any religion.”⁹

Friends, if religion is to be a force for good in the world... if religion is to help make this world more peaceful and sane place... we need to always remember two words.¹⁰ The first word is **“humility.”** We’ve already talked about this in

⁸ James O. Chatham in his sermon, “No One Comes Except by Me,” preached at Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY., February 13, 1994.

⁹ Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995) pp. 31-33.

¹⁰ For this conclusion I am indebted to Michael Lindvall.

other ways, but I love how Henri Nouwen says it: “You can be an expert in many things, but you cannot be an expert in God.” And if humility is the first word, then the second word is “*humanity*.” Yes, we are Christians; devotedly and passionately so. Yet, deeper than that we are human beings... created in the image of God... and loved by God beyond our comprehension. I am Christian... another is Muslim... another is atheist... another Hindu... another is a “none of the above.” But we are all human beings... and our faith should never, ever cause us to forget what we all share in common.

You may have heard of Elias Chacour. Among other things, he is well-known for his peacemaking work between Israelis and Arabs. Well, Chacour once said that in HIS world, people are often asked, “What were you born?” One might answer and Israeli... or an Arab... or a Christian. But Chacour said that when someone asks him, “What were you born?” he always answers the same way. He always says, “I was born a baby.” And then he laughs and laughs.