

Is Jesus the Only Way?

John 14:1-14

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa



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A funny thing happened on the way to this sermon. I had originally planned to preach this morning on the topic of prayer, focusing on verses 13-14 of John 14: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

I was going to explore how this passage, when lifted and taken out of its context, has been misused and even abused by a currently-rampant "name-it-and-claim-it" approach to prayer. But since I believe so strongly in the power of prayer I didn't want this particular focus to be my first sermon on prayer here at College Hill.

So instead, I've decided to take on something that's even more controversial. You may remember that I warned you on my first Sunday with you (Easter Sunday) that I wasn't afraid to take risks from the pulpit. But even with that disclaimer, you may want to tighten your seat belts, because today's sermon may be quite a bumpy ride for some. Yet it may be a breath of fresh air for others.

So let's take a good close look at verse 6 of John 14: "**Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'**"

How are we to understand these words? **Is Jesus Christ the only way to salvation, and is Christianity therefore the only true religion?** Has the God, as the Creator of the entire universe, chosen to be known in only this one way? Or is God truthfully and adequately known in other religions as well, such that Christianity is not the only way to God?

Here's a visual that may help. **Picture God at the top of a mountain.** If you want to reach God you have to pick a path in order to climb the mountain. Some Christians believe that there is one and only one path up that mountain (only one way to God). Others believe that there are a several paths on different sides of that mountain – a variety of ways that lead to the presence of God.

This is a very controversial issue that deeply divides fundamentalist and evangelically conservative Christians from moderate to liberal progressive Christians.

The far right comes at this passage from a literal, face-value, reading and interpretation: **Jesus is the one and only way to God, period!** There is no other path to salvation but to become a Christian and profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Eternal life in heaven is the promise to those who give assent to this belief,

and eternal damnation in hell to all the rest. Case closed. It may not always be put quite that bluntly, but that is the overall message.

On the other end of the theological spectrum, an ever-growing number of mainline Christians find this narrow interpretation deeply troubling because of how it has been used as the classic “proof text” for **Christian exclusivism** – turning these words into a weapon with which to bludgeon one’s perceived religious opponents into theological submission.

In increasingly heated debates, the one side uses these words as a litmus test for Christian faith, as a rallying cry of Christian triumphalism, **proof positive that Christians have the corner on God and that people of any and all others faiths are ultimately condemned.**

The other side sees these words as embarrassingly exclusionary and narrow-minded, pointing to this perspective as evidence of the problems inherent in asserting Christian faith claims in a pluralistic world.

You may want to pause for a moment at this point to reflect upon where you find yourself along this particular theological spectrum.

I have been reflecting upon this for decades. And I’m not embarrassed to say that I have found myself siding with both sides at different points in my own journey of faith. I’m also not afraid to confess that **the more I learn about God and experience God, the more I understand God as inclusive, rather than exclusive.**

If some in the Christian community chose to brand me as some kind of heretic for siding with this more radical understanding of God’s grace and inclusion, then so be it. But following the lead of a majority of mainline biblical scholars today, I come to this understanding not by ignoring this particular scripture passage in John 14, but by looking at it even closer.

Before we do that, here’s a little background on how this has become such a hot-button issue in the Presbyterian Church. This subject of ‘exclusive Lordship’ was brought up and questioned at a Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference in 2000. When the conservatives got wind of this they demanded the General Assembly Council to address the issue. So the Council released the following statement on August 23, 2000.

First and foremost, we want to clearly acknowledge that the Presbyterian Church (USA) firmly believes that God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We believe that God’s love and grace for us was revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus and that through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor belong to Almighty God...

That statement of faith wasn’t good enough for the conservatives and they have demanded “only Lord and Savior” language ever since. In fact, it spawned a whole new movement in our denomination, called the Confessing Church Movement. If you are interested in learning more about this, please come and see me at another time.

Let's explore now what else "No one comes to the Father except through me," might mean if it is not a categorically exclusive statement. Some suggest that when every person dies, they will come face-to-face with Jesus Christ, regardless of their religious background when they were alive. Therefore, even if someone had never even heard of Jesus, for example, Christ would still be their access point to God.

Others, including myself, draw attention to the exact wording in John 14:6. **Notice that the author does not write, "Jesus said, 'No one comes to God except through me,'" but "No one comes to the *Father* except through me."** This choice of words here needs to be taken very seriously. "Father" is the particular understanding of God to whom the disciples have come to recognize in and through the life and death of Jesus. "Father" as opposed to "Yahweh" or "Alla" or other understandings of God.

In John 14:6, then, **Jesus is defining God for his disciples;** and the author of the Gospel of John is defining God for the members of his faith community. So perhaps the real issue in this verse is not whether people outside the Christian church are saved, but whether people inside the church truly understand their distinctiveness as Christians – truly understand God as "Father" as revealed by Jesus.

It is my belief that this passage, then, is about our *Christian* identity, not about salvation exclusively for Christians. In her commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Gail O'Day, preaching professor at Emory University in Atlanta writes:

It is important to try to hear this joyous, world-changing theological affirmation in the first-century context of the Fourth Gospel. This is not, as is the case in the twentieth century, the sweeping claim of a major world religion, but it is the conviction of a religious minority in the ancient Mediterranean world.

What is often labeled as excessively exclusionary would be described more accurately as *particularism*. That is, the claims made in John 14:6 express the particularities of the [author's] knowledge and experience of God, and membership in the faith community for which he writes and which he envisions does indeed hinge on this claim. This claim has distanced them from their prior religious home, and thus it will shape their new one.

The particularism of John 14:6-7 does [in fact] establish boundaries; it says, "This is who we are. We are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ."

The Gospel of John is simply not concerned with the fate, then, of Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists, nor with the superiority or inferiority of

Judaism and Christianity as they are configured in the modern world.

These verses are the confessional celebration of a particular faith community, convinced of the truth and life it has received in the incarnation – the revelation of God in Jesus. The [author's] primary concern was the clarification and celebration of what it means to believe in Jesus.

When one brackets out the questions that contemporary Christians falsely import into these verses, there is nothing outrageous or offensive about the claims made here. Rather, at the heart of Christianity is the affirmation of the decisive revelation of God in the incarnation – in the person of Jesus.

John 14:6 can thus be read as the core claim of Christian identity; what distinguishes Christians from peoples of other faiths is the conviction given expression in John 14:6. **It is, indeed, through Jesus that Christians have access to their God.** [God who is characterized for Christians by Jesus with the term "Father."]

So speaking personally, I too can claim that for **me** *Jesus is the way*, and I choose to follow; *Jesus is the truth*, and I choose to believe; and *Jesus is the life*, with whom I choose to live in union. **I understand this as a joyous exclamation of who I am as a Christian, not an absolute doctrine for all humankind.** Or, as author, theologian and Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg writes:

If we found the decisive revelation of God in the Torah or in the Koran, then we would be Jews or Muslims. **But to be Christian is to affirm, 'Here, in Jesus, I see more clearly than anywhere else what God is like.'** This affirmation can be made with one's whole heart while still affirming that God is also known in other traditions.

This understanding is also stated in ***The 8 Points of Progressive Christianity*** (from an organization called The Center for Progressive Christianity - www.tcpc.org) that I have included as a bulletin insert. I want to briefly mention the first 2 points.

Point 1 affirms that that as Christians we have found an approach to God through the life and teaching of Jesus.

Point 2 goes on, however, to recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.

I encourage you to take this insert home and give it careful reflection, to see where you stand on these issues.

Declaring with absolutely certainty, then, that there is unquestionably no other way to God whatsoever is not what John 14 is all about. Instead, it is our calling, as Christians, to live the way, the truth, and the life that have been made known to us in Jesus.

This is the Good News that we are called to share! For indeed, it is through Jesus Christ that we, as Christians, find our approach and access to God.

What do you believe?

Amen.

Resources:

Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 2001. pg 215-218.

Marcus Borg, *Jesus*, 2006. pg. 222.

Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1995. pg 743-745.

8 Points of Progressive Christianity, (2003), The Center for Progressive Christianity. www.tnpc.org