

Is Jesus the Only Way, or Simply Our Way

A reflection on John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:1-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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What is your understanding of the nature and character of God? I realize I ask you that question a lot. But I do so because it makes a difference in how you approach your journey of life and faith.

- How do you connect with God?
- What is your **gate**, so to speak, into God's presence?
- What **path** do you follow?
- Who or what is your **way** to a relationship with God?

The historical and still traditional Christian answer, of course, is Jesus is the gate, the path, and the way. It's not just a modern theological debate, however, to **question whether or not Jesus is the only gate, path, and way to God**. If we pick and choose certain biblical passages of scripture we can find an argument to support either position. We call that '**proof-texting**' the scriptures. And when it comes to cherry-picking a Bible verse to support the belief that Jesus is the *only* way to God, thus the only way to salvation and eternal life, the verse at or near the top of the list is from today's Gospel Reading, John 14:6. Chances are you're familiar with this verse, which is often recited at Christian funeral services. "**Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'**"

Up until the 1960s, when our Presbyterian denomination adopted a *Book of Confessions* and made it part of the Constitution, the **Westminster Confession of Faith** was our primary guiding confession when it came to the theological understandings of Presbyterianism. It was written in England in 1649 after the monarchy had been overthrown by Oliver Cromwell, and while the struggle with the authority of the Roman Catholic Church was still intense. In the Shorter Catechism, it states:

6.056 2. In the gospel, God...reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ...

6.058 4.□ ... there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel...

Following this up in a question and answer in the Larger Catechism (which is similar to a question I remember wondering about back when I was in church youth group):

7.170 Q. 60. Can they who have never heard the gospel, and so know not Jesus Christ nor believe in him, be saved by their living according to the light of nature?

A. They who having never heard the gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in him, cannot be saved; ...neither is there salvation in any other, but in Christ alone, who is the Savior only of his body the Church.

A good many Presbyterian congregations left our denomination in the late 1960s to form the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) after we no longer held the Westminster Confession up to nearly biblical status, and as the dominant exposition of our understanding of the Christian faith. Yet, some Presbyterian congregations that continue to cling tightly to this 17th century theology have chosen to remain, including some here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery.

Perhaps this gives you an understanding why there is such a fierce and impassioned reaction by those who hold to our historical theological tradition that Jesus is the *only* way when having to deal with those of us who interpret this passage from John 14, and others, differently than they do today. **You might be surprised to learn, however, just how many Presbyterians now conclude that while Jesus is *their* way to both access and an understanding of the nature and character of God, Jesus isn't the *only* way to God.**

The result of this thinking, therefore, is that God has not eternally condemned those who happened to be born and raised in a different faith tradition, including Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Taoists, etc. This is the basic meaning behind the common bumper sticker that states, 'COEXIST' written in symbols that represent a variety of faith traditions. There's a picture of it in today's worship bulletin. It means that we **appreciate the diversity of world religions** and find value in all of them, including the common ground among them. **It means we respect the right of others to believe what they believe, without – and this is the difference – judgment or condemnation.** But "COEXIST" **doesn't mean we compromise or devalue our own beliefs.** To use a historical phrase in Presbyterianism, it's about 'mutual forbearance.'

As you can see, our own theological tradition has most often **connected access to God with the issue of salvation. When some of us progressives do this, we are labeled as universalists. A universalist is someone who believes that in and through God's grace, each and every person ever born, all of whom were and are created in the image of God, will somehow be included eternally in God's realm and Presence.** Yes, that means that we necessarily believe there is **no hell, as defined as a place of eternal damnation and punishment by a wrathful and unforgiving God.**

That label, universalist, is one many of us Presbyterians now proudly wear, even though it's considered by our more traditional and/or evangelical brothers and sisters in the faith as absolute heresy. Saying that, however, we progressives can also continue to proudly claim to be Christian. For a growing number of us, that is in no way a contradiction, as many would suggest. Why? First of all, progressive Presbyterians now approach the confessions much like we do the scriptures themselves. **Though they have authority, they are not inerrant, nor are they direct words from God, but rather words of humans expressing their experience and understanding of God in a particular time and place in history, not, then, as eternal truths.**

So how, you may be wondering, do progressives interpret the words in the Gospel of John, "...no one comes to the Father except through me"? It begins by

recognizing that **these words have been turned into a weapon** with which to bludgeon one's perceived religious opponents into theological submission. Where's the good news – the gospel – in that? In increasingly heated debates, one side uses these words as **a litmus test for acceptance into the Christian faith**. It's also a rallying cry of **Christian triumphalism, proof positive that Christians have the corner on understanding God, and that Christianity is the one 'true' and only 'right' religion – and everyone else be damned, literally**.

On the other side of the theological spectrum, where many of us are located, we see these words as **embarrassingly exclusionary**, pointing to this perspective as evidence of the problems inherent in asserting Christian faith claims in a pluralistic world. Now I wouldn't be surprised to learn that many of you here this morning, like myself, have found ourselves siding with both sides at different points in our own journey of faith. Yet, the more we learn about the nature and character of God, and the more we experience God's Sacred Presence within ourselves and within all of creation, the more **we understand God as radically inclusive, rather than radically exclusive**.

So let's explore now what, "No one comes to the Father except through me," might mean if it is *not* a categorically exclusive statement. It begins by noticing the exact wording in John 14:6. Notice that the author of this gospel did not write, "Jesus said to him, 'No one comes to **God** except through me,'" but rather, "No one comes to the **Father** except through me." Why does that make a difference? When God is identified and named as "Father," it is the very concrete and specific affirmation of a particular faith community about the God who is known to them because of the incarnation – the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Historically, "Father," as opposed to "Yahweh" in Judaism, or "Allah" in Islam, or other names for the understanding of God, is the *particular* way to express the *Christian* understanding of God. Therefore, **the way to this particular understanding of the nature and character of God as 'Father' is necessarily through Jesus**.

In **John 14:6**, the story has Jesus defining God for his disciples; and the author of the Gospel of John is **defining God for the members of his Christian faith community**. So the real issue in this verse is not whether people *outside* the Christian tradition have access to God and eternal life, but whether people inside the church truly understand their uniqueness and *distinctiveness* as Christians. **This passage, then, is about our Christian identity, not about access and salvation exclusively for Christians**. In her remarkable commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Gail O'Day, preaching professor at Emory University in Atlanta writes:

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 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...

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.**

Most of us, then, can indeed claim that for us Jesus is the way; Jesus is the truth; and Jesus is the life. But we can now understand this as a joyous exclamation of who we are as Christians, not an exclusionary doctrine applied to the rest of humankind. Or, as author, theologian, and Jesus Seminar fellow Marcus Borg writes:

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.

That's particularity, not exclusion!

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.