

“The Way” of Particularity, Not Exclusion

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

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Last Sunday, biblical text on which the sermon was based included the following verse from John 10:7. The gospel writer puts on the lips of Jesus, “I am the gate for the sheep.” I talked about how we should proudly acknowledge the designation of the term “Christian” if we find that our primary gate, or path if you will, to the Divine is through the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Going further, I went on to share a personal statement of faith, “**Jesus is for me the gate through which God is most fully known.**”

Today's gospel reading picks up on a similar theme. John 14:6 includes another one of the author's “I AM” statements where he has Jesus say, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” There is indeed a parallel between acknowledging Jesus as the gate and the way to which we experience the presence of God in our midst. Perhaps things got a bit controversial, however, by adding what many progressive Christians today believe, that **while Jesus is indeed an approach to God, and that we understand Jesus as our path to God, he is not the one and only way.** I say ‘controversial,’ because those who claim that believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior is the *only* way to salvation will quickly quote the second half of **John 14:6**. Here's the full verse: “***I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***”

That's a pretty good comeback. For us to claim that's what is written, but not necessarily what it means on face value, indicates to those folks that we don't take biblical authority seriously. Well, **I do take biblical authority seriously. So seriously, in fact, that I refuse to take passages out of their historical and cultural contexts so that they can mean what I want them to mean.**

An ever-growing number of mainline Christians find that a literal and narrow interpretation of this particular verse is deeply troubling because of how it has been used as **the classic “proof text” for Christian exclusivism.** In doing so, these words “no one comes to the Father except through me,” 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, and as a rallying cry of **Christian triumphalism.** (And yes, there is indeed a link between this theological position and the political position of American triumphalism. But that's another sermon.) 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.

I invite you 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. Yet, I'm also not afraid to confess that **the more I learn about God, and the more I experience God's presence, the more I understand God as radically inclusive, rather than radically exclusive.**

In our day and age, however, there are still many who consider being inclusive akin to heresy. That used to concern me. But no longer. 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.

Let's explore now what, "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 the access point to God through which they pass. I find this explanation inadequate.

Others, including myself, are drawn to the exact wording in John 14:6. Notice that **the author of this gospel does not write, "Jesus said, 'No one comes to God except through me,'" but rather, "No one comes to the Father except through me." The specificity of that theological nomenclature needs to be taken seriously.**

God as "Father" is the very concrete and specific affirmation of a faith community about the God who is known to them because of the incarnation, life and death of Jesus. **Historically, "Father," as opposed to "Yahweh," or "Alla," or other understandings of God, is the particular way to say the Christian understanding of God. So of course, the way to this particular understanding 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 faith community. **So the real issue in this verse is not whether people outside the Christian tradition are promised eternal life, but whether people inside the church truly understand their distinctiveness as Christians.** It is my belief, then, that this passage is about our **Christian identity, not about 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:

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 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.**

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.

I'll leave you with these additional thoughts from Marcus Borg:

The way of Jesus is thus not a set of beliefs about Jesus... Rather, the way of Jesus is the...path of transition and transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being... Jesus is the way – Jesus is what the way embodied in a person looks like. Jesus is the truth – Jesus is what the truth embodied in a person looks like. Jesus is the life – Jesus is what life (*real* life) embodied in a person looks like. **Taking Jesus seriously is not about a set of beliefs but about a person in whom we see embodied the way, the truth, and the life.**

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.