

The Way: Particularity vs. 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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When it comes to interpreting the scriptures, you may have heard of the approach called **proof-texting**, or even cherry picking. That's when a particular verse or passage from the Bible is **lifted from its context and declared as the clear and simple (therefore literal) reading of the text**. We all do it, repeating a favorite verse either in seeking comfort, or to argue with another person's point of view. Yet, the pitfalls and landmines found along this path of biblical interpretation can be devastating, from both a theological and practical point of view.

For example, the sermon last week was primarily based on John 10:7, where the gospel writer puts on the lips of Jesus, "I am the gate for the sheep." Throughout the ages, especially in the perspective of conservative, orthodox, and traditional Christian thought, this verse has been used to demand that the only gate to access God's Presence, and hence salvation, is through Jesus – through being a Christian. Yet, I shared a personal statement of faith, "Jesus is for me the gate through which God is most fully known."

Things got a bit heretical, however, when I added what many progressive Christians believe today, while Jesus is indeed our *decisive* approach to understanding the nature and character of God, there are those who find a different path and gate into God's inclusive love, grace, and Sacred Presence. I say 'heretical,' because **those who claim that believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior is the only way to God, salvation, and eternal life, will also quickly quote John 14:6, 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 also as the way to which we experience the Divine.

But the verse doesn't stop there. Here's the full verse: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. **No one comes to the Father except through me.***" Responding to those who take that literally and at face value (hence, out of context), an ever-growing number of mainline progressive Christians find that narrow interpretation deeply troubling. Why? Because of how **it has been used as the classic "proof text" for Christian exclusivism, even Christian exceptionalism and Christian triumphalism**, all of which have played into a reciprocal role in American thought and politics. 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. If a person doesn't give intellectual assent to this claim, professing oneself to be a Christian, then the only recourse is eternal damnation. Where's the good news – the gospel – in that?!?** For those of us on the other side of the theological spectrum, **we see these words as embarrassingly exclusionary and judgmental.**

I invite you, now, to pause for a moment, perhaps take a deep breath, and reflect upon where you find yourself along this particular theological spectrum. I have

been reflecting upon this for decades. And I'm not ashamed to admit 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 Sacred Presence, the more I understand God as radically inclusive, rather than radically exclusive, as this passage would have us believe.**

In our day and age, however, there are still many who consider being inclusive (to the point of being a universalist, believing all of creation – including all people – will be redeemed) is 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, in its full context as part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his shocked disciples.

Let's explore now what, "No one comes to the Father except through me," might mean if it is *not* a categorically exclusive statement. There are many different explanations. But there is one that I find the most meaningful from the biblical author's perspective. Look at 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 is intentional and 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, death and resurrection 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, then, 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 – to those who are already believers.** Therefore, the author of the Gospel of John is defining that particular understanding of God for the members of his Christian faith community. So, the real issue in **this verse is not whether people outside the Christian tradition are promised access to God's Presence and eternal life, but whether people inside the church truly understand their distinctiveness as Christians.** It is the belief of many, including myself and many of you, that this passage is about our *Christian* identity, not about access to God or 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 wrote:

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 is why ministry within the Interfaith community here in Tulsa and beyond is so important to me, and to so many of you. That's why so many of us love the bumper sticker that proudly declares, "**COEXIST**", written in symbols that represent a variety of faith traditions. There's a picture of it on the cover of 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 or exclusion. **But "COEXIST" does not mean we compromise or devalue our own beliefs.** To use an historical phrase in Presbyterianism, it's about '**mutual forbearance.**' 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... [it is] about a *person* in whom we see embodied the way, the truth, and the life.

That's particularity, not exclusion! Yet, is all this also heresy? That depends on who you ask.

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.