

An Inclusive Invitation to an Exclusive Relationship
Sermon on John 14:6 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, April 24, 2005

The bright young woman came to my office because she was interested in going to seminary and entering ministry. She was more than qualified. She was intelligent, talented, and committed to helping other people as she had demonstrated by participating in mission trips and international peace work. She had been raised in a devout Christian home and identified strongly with the Methodist tradition's commitment to social justice. There was just one problem: The ordination process requires candidates to explain what it means that "Jesus Christ is Lord," and she did not believe that Jesus is the one true way to salvation.

My young colleague-to-be is not alone in her non-belief. Many of the people—and particularly the young people—who come to me seeking counsel and advice confess that they simply cannot accept that Jesus Christ is the one and only way to having a relationship with God. I think this conviction is rooted in the genuine Christian virtue of compassion, as well as in our experience of living in a pluralistic society. People my age and younger have grown up in an amazingly diverse society, one that is perhaps more pluralistic than any other in history. We grew up in neighborhoods that give concrete definition to the concept of America as a melting pot. I went to school with Caucasians, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. In college my first roommate was Jewish and my next-door neighbor was a Mormon. I served on inter-religious councils with Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and B'hais. When you have grown up attending your friends' First Communion and Bar Mitzvahs and worked on community service projects with people of all races and religions and creeds, I think it is natural that you begin to wonder about possible pathways to God. Just one path seems so exclusive, so arrogant, so—well, to be frank—intolerant.

And if Methodists are anything, we are tolerant people. We are, after all, the people of the Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. We cannot abide the thought that anyone would find us anything but warm, gracious, hospitable, and welcoming. Our unofficial denominational symbol is not the casserole dish for no reason. We like to believe that the most important thing John Wesley ever said was, “Think and let think.”

So when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” we get rather flustered and not a little embarrassed. As Moody Smith points out, “This statement reflects a severe exclusivity, even intolerance.”¹ The one thing that will not be tolerated in our enlightened, liberal, tolerant society is intolerance. “How dare he, people have asked. How dare John, or the church, or anyone else, put such words into anyone’s mouth? Isn’t this the height of arrogance, to imagine that Jesus or anyone else was the *only* way?”² We liken God to the summit of a mountain, vast and majestic, but ultimately accessible by any number of equally valid pathways. So long as you reach the top, does it really matter by what means you get there? I submit that the answer to that question is yes, a very definitive yes.

As Tom Wright puts it, “The idea of a vague general truth, to which all ‘religions’ bear some kind of oblique witness, is foreign to Christianity.”³ Christians do not accept the idea that God is what Christopher Brown calls “an impersonal absolute reality that interpenetrated all things, [or] that the Divine was ultimately located in the inner self” and can be discovered through “knowledge of one’s own innate divinity.”⁴ “At the core of Christian orthodoxy is what has often been called the ‘Scandal of Particularity,’ that God has acted in a particular way, in a

¹ D. Moody Smith, Jr., *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, 269.

² N. T. Wright, *John For Everyone, Part Two: Chapters 11-21*, London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 59.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Christopher Brown: “The News Gnosticism and The Scandal of Particularity,” at <http://titusonine.classicalanglican.net/index.php?p=2813>.

particular time and place, with a particular people, yet in a way that has universal consequences.”⁵ All of scripture, and particularly the New Testament, bears witness to the truth that God created the world, populated it with people created in the divine image, and from these human beings called a special group of people named Israel to live out his saving purposes for the world. Through Israel God has acted through people—like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, and Joseph and Mary—in places—like Egypt and Jerusalem and Bethlehem—and at various times to rescue the world from the problem of sin.

God’s reason or motive for creating and saving and sustaining God’s people is quite simple: God loves them. Throughout history, God has acted repeatedly to show his people the way, to correct them when they have strayed, and ultimately given them himself in the person of his son, Jesus. Jesus’ mission is to reveal the truth of God’s intent to save his fallen people, a mission he accomplishes by being who he is. Jesus preached good news to the poor and healed the sick and fed the hungry and shared fellowship with the outcasts and forgave sinners because this is God’s work. If the fact that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus seems “offensively exclusive,” F. F. Bruce reminds us “that the one who makes this claim is the incarnate Word, the revealer of the Father.”⁶

When Moses asked whom it was who was sending him to Pharaoh to demand freedom for his people, God said, “I AM sends you” (Ex. 3:14). And so when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” he is identifying himself with the God of Israel, the God who acts in particular ways. Jesus reveals this God, whom no one has seen, to the world. The God that Jesus reveals is loving and caring and merciful. Jesus says, I am the bread of life because the God that he reveals provides for his children like a loving Father. Jesus says, I am the good

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John : Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1983, 298.

shepherd because the God that he reveals protects his children like a caring Father. Jesus says, I am the light of the world because the God that he reveals casts light into the darkness of our lives like a merciful Father.

Since our heavenly Father provides and protects and shows mercy, why do we seek for ways to Him other than the one Way he has provided? Why do we look for two or fifteen or 800 ways when one way is both necessary and sufficient? Our insistence that there must be more than one way seems to confirm that we are ungrateful, rebellious, untrusting children. When we insist that there must be several paths to God, and Jesus but one among many, we turn away from God's amazing gift, which in the words of Rudolf Schnackenburg is, that "In Jesus Christ, ... the invisible and incomprehensible God has, in his will to save people, made himself so tangible and so comprehensible that they are able to reach the goal of their existence along this way...."⁷

Why is Jesus the one and only way to the Father? Because, as Thomas à Kempis says,

Without the Way, there is no going; without the Truth, there is no knowing; without the Life, there is no living. I am the Way, which you ought to follow; the Truth, which you ought to believe; the Life, which you ought to hope for. I am the Way inviolable, the Truth infallible, the Life unending. I am the Way that is straightest, the Truth that is highest, the Life blessed, the Life uncreated. If you remain in My way: 'Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:31, 32), and you shall lay hold on eternal life. (*Of the Imitation of Christ* 56)

This is Jesus' inclusive invitation to an exclusive relationship: Because God loved the world, and everyone in it, God offered himself to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the way, the truth, and the life which God offers to share with us.

⁷ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John, Volume 3: Commentary on Chapters 13-21*, trans. David Smith and G. A. Kon, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 65.