

IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

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University Congregational Church

Readings:

John 14: 1-7 (NRSV)

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Matthew 7: 21-27 (NRSV)

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall.”

I have put before you in the sermon, *My Faith With Jesus*, my conviction that the heart of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is both the time and possibility of what our relationships with one another would look like if our relationships were forged on the Kingdom values of

love, forgiveness, mercy, kindness, patience, and the general well being of every person. I believe that the Sermon on the Mount, the parables of Jesus, and his own relationships with others give us unique insight into God's will for God's people. I note that these relationships are modeled on a radically open table to which everyone is invited and everyone is fed. Commensality is the Christian metaphor for our life together, even if all of the people gathered at the table are not Christian. I say, again, that the life and teachings of Jesus offer us our best model - example - expression of the nature and will of God. God is about bringing people to the table of life. Christian discipleship is about bringing people to the table of life. It is the doing of the Good News that most pre-occupies my thinking and living as a Christian.

It is somewhere in this part of the conversation that someone will inevitably ask, "But do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord?" Or, "Is Jesus Christ your Lord and personal savior?" Or, "What about all of those people who do not confess Jesus as savior, such as Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus?" To put the whole matter quite simply, "Isn't Jesus the only way to God?" And it is at this point that they quote the Gospel of John that I read to you just a few moments ago. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," they insist with pious passion. "No one comes to the Father, except through me."

Jesus was fully aware in his own day that there were many religious people who paid their tithe to the temple, served on the Board of Trustees in the local

synagogue, prayed and read the scriptures daily. But the accouterments of religion did not necessarily make them faithful Jews. There were stellar examples of humble Jewish people whose tithe was inconsequential to the balanced budget of the temple. Some never held religious office, unless you agree that the kitchen clean up crew is indispensable to any religious enterprise. Many Jewish peasants could not read and their only prayer at the end of a fourteen hour work day was “Oh, God.” But these people did justice in their daily relationship with their neighbors, they sought mercy and kindness for all, and they walked humbly with their God. Neither religious affiliation, nor denominational association, nor congregational membership parallel the Kingdom of God. Indeed, I would go so far to say that none of them are necessary for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus told the parable of the two sons to reenforce this point:

A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, “Son, go work today in my vineyard.” He answered and said, “I will not,” but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, “I go sir,” but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said to him, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.

(Matthew 21: 28-31)

The parable is oriented toward those religious persons who presume special standing before God. Jesus targets those who would pay lip service to religious identity but their principles and relationships with other human beings are immoral. Our Christian identity is meaningless in the absence of God’s kingdom

values that restore people to the whole vision of humanity that God calls us to. The question, “Is Jesus your Lord and personal savior?” is the wrong question. Indeed, that phrase is not found anywhere in the entire New Testament. The real and only question is, “Are you doing the will of God vis-a-vis God’s kingdom of justice, mercy, peacefulness, and loving kindness toward your fellow human beings?”

I also believe that this is the Way of Jesus, or the Way of the Cross. Indeed, early Christians were called “Followers of the Way” soon after the death of Jesus. They were not labeled Christians. In fact, they continued to identify themselves as Jews, which brought up the whole question in the book of Acts whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised - that is, bear the mark of Judaism - before they can be called into the Christian community of faith. When Jesus says, “I am the way,” I do not think he means that the only access to God is through Christian baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I do not believe that personal affirmations of creedal formulas are at the heart of Christian discipleship. I do think that trusting and acting on the love of God is the most fundamental act of Christian faith. This is the rock on which we can build our lives and where our faith strengthened.

The Way of God, the Way to God is the Way of love, service, and sacrifice. It is a way that does not require a religious label. In fact, the Way is not in the least

pretentious and is most often found in gentle common touches of patience, comfort, and helpfulness. Paul wrote of the Way of love to the Corinthians:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

(I Corinthians 13: 4-8a)

This is the Way of Jesus and I believe that it is the Way of God. In other words, those whose lives are compelled by such love as this follow the Way of Jesus, without the compunction to call it Christian. And there are plenty examples of women and men in every religion that I am familiar with who follow the Way of love. For example, the first AIDS houses were created by Zen Buddhists in New York City in the 1970's when every other religious group was honing its judgment and damnation message. The Zen Buddhists gave women and men with full blown AIDS, regardless of their sexual orientation, a place to die with dignity. They offered comfort and solace to them and their loved ones when the rest of the nation was in denial. Now which of these, the Zen Buddhists or the rest of us, did the will of God? Who was the most Christ-like?

Now let's be honest. When people insist on Jesus being the only way to God, are they not also trying to determine who is on the salvation plan and who is not? When you insist that each and every one must accept Jesus as Lord and personal savior, is it really not an attempt to declare who is welcome at the table of

God? People seldom ask such questions from the goodness of their hearts. No, such questions are used to screen out and exclude those who are different and are not understood. It is not meant to put more places at the table of grace, but a way of gate-keeping and judging. Such Christians seem to imagine that they are the security squad for a posh nightclub in New York City whose job is to admit only those who are holding tickets or those who have enough money to bribe their way in, but in all circumstances to keep out the party crashers and the riffraff. The same can be said for fundamentalist Jews who are certain that the only family of God is the family of Judah; or the fundamentalist Muslim who demands that one must convert to Islam or suffer the fate of the infidel. I say to you that there is no place in the Kingdom of God for exclusivity or religious presumption. Jesus told the disciples multiple times that in the Kingdom of God there is no place called the right hand of God or the head of the line. Those who keep trying to assign people a place value in the Kingdom of God do not understand the term.

I also believe that Jesus would be willing to give up all religious identity if that meant that everyone was welcome to the table. If an open and welcome table, where every human being has a place, requires that we drop our religious identity, I believe that Jesus would happily give it up. The Way of Jesus is not the way of ritual, dogma, creed, confessions, covenants, prayer books, or hymnals. The Way of Jesus is the way of compassionately relating to the world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge from prison on July 18, 1944:

“To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man - not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the suffering of God in the secular life.”

Bonhoeffer believed that we live in a secular world, a world where God is dead and morality either deeply compromised or totally collapsed. The language of the church is a language that the world can no longer hear, much less understand. Even the church as an institution is more defined and organized around secular principles than the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes of Jesus. The church quickly concedes to the powers of the state, is wowed by the power of the media, and too often measures itself by the volume of its membership and treasury.

I think we have come to that point in history where participating in the suffering of God, which can only mean the suffering of other human beings, is the only gospel that the world will be able to hear. Loving the alienated, healing the battered, giving courage to the dying, and empowering the vulnerable is the Way of the Cross. St. Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”

I am reminded of a seminary professor I had at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Dr. Walt Lowe is a brilliant man who taught theology. He introduced me to philosophers like Paul Ricoeur. He taught one of my favorite classes entitled, “Human Suffering and the Gospel of Love.” In that

class we read Soren Kierkegaard and Thomas Merton. Dr. Lowe was the first graduate educator I knew to wear blue-jeans and did not always wear a tie. At the beginning of a fall term I asked him what he did over the summer. “I read Sigmund Freud,” he said quite simply. By that he meant that he had read the entire works of Sigmund Freud. One of the things that I did not know about Dr. Lowe for a very long time was that every week he worked in one of Atlanta’s soup kitchens. He never talked about that, never used it as an example for the rest of us. He never presumed to have special insights into poverty because of his service. He simply showed up every week to cook, serve food, wash dishes or mop floors for the poor, i.e. anything that was needed to provide for their needs. No doubt he made financial contributions. When I learned about Dr. Lowe’s unflinching and unfailing support for the poor I began to understand human suffering and the gospel of love. It was one of the finest lessons I ever learned in seminary.

What I have shared with you these past few weeks are reflections of my own faith adventures in life and learning. I have tried to be honest with you about a Christian faith that has both meaning and integrity in my life. I understand that by many other definitions of Christian faith I am not a Christian. But I do not worry about that any more. I figure that if a bunch of old men could gather in Nicea in the fourth century and define the Christian faith by what we now call the apostle’s creed - and get it so wrong, I can be wrong too.

I truly believe that when I walk with those in need or the poor or the marginalized in our society I am on the Jesus walk. I believe that Jesus walks with me. I believe that I often see the face of God in their faces, feel the touch of God's grace in their eyes, feel God's pain in their suffering, and hear the laugh of God in their squeals of joy. Sometimes these are truly the poor and destitute. Sometimes they are the dying. Sometimes they are the brokenhearted. Sometimes they are a couple about to commit marriage and their enthusiasm for life is unbridled. Sometimes they are women and men like you who work with me in this ministry, who care for this institution we call University Congregational Church, and who bring real creativity and love to life.

I am not simply talking about ethics. My Christian faith is not only a value system. It is a living community of men and women and children shaped by values that forever challenge what it means to be in right relationship with one another. I am still growing and evolving in my faith, in what it means to be a just and loving man. I sometimes get it wrong. I make mistakes and betray the very values of God's Kingdom that I espouse. My community sometimes betrays those very same values. I cannot undo the past mistakes. But what I can do is re-orient my life to reconciliation and love. I can ask for and grant forgiveness so that we can create a new future. I can take up the call every morning to preach good news to the captives, the set the captives free, bring food to the hungry and healing to the

wounded. Every new hour is a gateway to the kingdom of God. Every moment is a choice to follow the Way of the Cross.

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