

“... except through me.”

John 14:1-11

Collegiate Presbyterian Church

August 8, 2010

Sermons By Request: John 14:6 (“No one comes to the Father except through me.”)

Sermon

I remember it like it was yesterday. I must have been nine or ten at the time... it was a Sunday evening and as usual, we had been to Sunday school and church in the morning, and then back for training union in the evening. I was bathed and ready for bed when sitting in my Dad’s big recliner I asked my parents: “What happens to people who never get to hear about Jesus. Do they get to go to heaven?”

How many of you remember asking that same question? I think it’s pretty much a universal part of growing up in a Christian home. Though I don’t recall now just what sparked me to ask, my hunch is that the Sunday school lesson or sermon *that* morning was on our Bible reading *this* morning: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus first says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” such familiar and much loved words! But then there’s this troubling P.S., “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Well, many if not most of us hear those words and first think Jesus must be saying that Christianity is the only way to God... that if we want to get to God, ours is the only religion with the right path. That’s what WE hear. It is not, I believe, what Jesus is saying. Jesus spoke these words on the night before he was crucified. Other religions were not his topic. In fact, there was no religion called Christianity yet! It was the night before his death... the cross is looming... the air hangs heavy with what is coming... and Jesus’ purpose is not to have a philosophical discussion about religious diversity. It was to make his disciples understand there was no other way than the cross. Jesus is saying there is no way to the Father except by what awaits him the next day – the consummate act of self-denial, of obedience, and of trust.

Self-giving is his way;
the cross is his truth;
and resurrection is his life.¹

Properly understood, Jesus’ words are not about Christian exclusivism... properly understood, Jesus’ words are about his way of being God among us. And... about our way of being his followers.

Self-giving is now our way;
the cross is now our truth;
and resurrection is now our life.

II.

That being said, the fact remains that we are followers of *this* way... of *this* truth... and of *this* life. We are Christian and not Muslim, not Buddhist, not Hindu... although we may be a little Jewish. We are this and not that, and thus the question for us who live in what is now the most religiously-diverse nation in the world is: “What about all those

¹ Michael Lindvall in his sermon “My Way or the Highway?” preached to the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, April 20, 2008, p. 2

other religions? What do I say to the mother of my daughter's Muslim friend... my Buddhist research assistant... my Jewish next-door neighbor?

Well, as with any complex question our tendency is to come up with simple answers... and this question is no different. Way out to the extreme right of the spectrum are those who say: "You must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior or be condemned to eternal separation from God." There's a children's Sunday school chorus: "One door and only one, and yet the sides are two. I'm on the inside; on which side are you?" A preacher friend says there is a technical, theological term for this way of using Jesus' words. It's called a "diddywhacker." A "diddywhacker" is a "diddy" you take from the Bible and "whack" somebody with it.² According to this answer, all non-Christian religions are at their best untrue, and at their worst demonic.

Then, way out on the other extreme is the liberal answer that all religions say basically the same thing... that all paths basically lead to the same place. You have no doubt heard this... you may have said it yourself: "Personally, I'm a Christian. Jesus is my way to God. It was the way I was raised... it is what I know. But I believe that other paths are just as valid... and that we're all trying to get to the same place."

So, on the extremes the conservative answer is "My way or the highway" and the liberal answer is "Every way is a highway." And to tell you the truth, it would be a whole lot easier for us if one of these was THE ANSWER.

But alas, we are Presbyterians... and that means at least two things. First, it means that nothing is ever that simple... and second, as those who are reformed and always being reformed, we never seem to arrive at the definitive answer.

The fact is that our Presbyterian forbears have thought long and hard about this matter and true to form have arrived at a nuanced and much deeper place. In this deeper place we find ourselves holding two fundamental theological truths in tension.

The first truth is that *Jesus Christ is the center of our faith*. If you want to know what God is like – look at Christ. If you want to know what real humanity is and how you can live a genuinely human life – look at Christ. If you want to know what God is up to in the world and in your particular life – look at Christ. This is what Jesus is struggling so hard to get across in John's Gospel. God is not a generic deity... instead, God is the One whom the disciples walked with, talked with, ate with. God is the One they watched die, saw resurrected, experienced through the Holy Spirit. For the follower of Jesus, *Jesus* is the key to all truth about God, ourselves, and the world we live in.³

Now, to say that does not mean that all of life's questions are suddenly answered. Not even close. Christ is himself the answer, but Christ is the question... the mystery we spend our lifetimes seeking to understand.

Yet, for us he is not one witness among many; he's the One.⁴ At the very core of our faith is the uncompromising trust that Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God-with-us.

So what does that mean? Especially, what does it mean for us when we encounter people who are not Christians... what should we do? Should I tell them this part of who I am? Should I speak about what I believe? Should I try to introduce them to Jesus?

Yes... if the time seems right... and by that I mean if it seems to you that the Spirit has created an opening and is leading you through it. Yes, you should share with them

² Patrick Willson who is now pastor of the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church in Williamsburg, VA.

³ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) p. 10.

⁴ Lindvall, p. 4

this part of who you are, how can you not? But you don't do it to add another notch in your "belt of conversions." You tell them because it is good news and you just can't sit on good news. You tell them because it is Jesus who gives your life its meaning and purpose. You tell them: "This is the most important relationship in my life." Christ is at the center... this is the first towering truth.

OK... but let's say you have good friend who is a colleague at the university and who is also devoted Muslim. And let's say that part of what makes him such a good friend is the ongoing dialogue you are able to have about your lives of faith. It's honest... it's lively... it's respectful. Yet, no matter how articulate and genuine you are in sharing how Christ is the center of your world, he continues to believe that "there is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet?" What then?

I remember Jim Chatham, one of my dearest mentors in ministry, sharing in a sermon once that when he was in high school one of the recurring discussion topics in youth group was Rabbi Steinberg... the wonderful, benevolent man who worked at the neighborhood synagogue. "Isn't it unfortunate," we said, "that a person and good as Rabbi Steinberg will not qualify for heaven because he does not accept Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior." That was their interpretation of John 14:6; an interpretation, by the way, which was bolstered by a particularly zealous Sunday school teacher who said: "Realize it, boys and girls, no matter how good a man he is... no matter how much you like him, he is still destined for the fires of hell."⁵

Well, eventually it became clear to Jim that this particular reading of Jesus' nine words is based on one bold assumption – the assumption that Jesus and the Christianity we practice are one and the same. That the Word of God (and that's the Word with a capital "W")... that the Word of God and our understanding of that Word, our presentation of that Word, are the same.

As many of you know, this is when religion becomes terribly, terribly dangerous. This is when people invent crusades to coerce others to one brand of Christianity... this is when people fly planes in to tall buildings in the name of God... and this is when well-meaning, but overzealous Sunday school teachers mislead the children in their class.

Thanks be to God that whenever we assume that we know what God is up to, our theological tradition insists on a second towering truth. ***It is the sovereignty of God.*** The sovereignty of God. Michael Lindvall says that the "sovereignty of God" is a five dollar theological term for the idea that God can do whatever God wants to do.

So, for instance, if God wants to speak through secular philosophy or literature or art, God can do it. If God wants to heal through modern medicine or psychotherapy or alternative medicine, God can. And if God wants to reveal God's self in nature or even in other religions, God can do it because God is God. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is our constant reminder that God cannot be contained in the Bible... cannot be contained on our theologies... cannot be contained in the church... God cannot be contained.

Imagine "a child digs a hole in the sand and, with her little bucket, busily sets about transferring the ocean into it. We smile at the grandeur of her ambition, but only because we know she will soon mature beyond such pathetic futility. An ocean cannot be

⁵ James O. Chatham in his sermon, "No One Comes Except by Me," preached at Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY., February 13, 1994.

contained in any hole of any size on any continent. And neither can God be fully contained within any religion.”⁶

So the not-so-simple answer to the question about Rabbi Steinberg and your Muslim colleague is this: Hold fast to these two truths – OUR centeredness in Christ on the one hand and the sovereign mystery of God on the other.

We have been reminded this week about the importance of holding one’s religious convictions in tension with God’s sovereignty. As politicians and religious leaders and grieving loved ones debate whether it’s appropriate to build a mosque so close to Ground Zero, we are reminded that how religious folk relate to one another is not only about getting along with our neighbors in Ames, it’s about the peace and sanity of the world. And it seems to me that for religion to be a force for good in the world rather than evil... for religion to make this world more peaceful and same... depends on two words.⁷ The first word is “humility.” I pray that our faith in Jesus Christ as the Way and Truth and Life is deep and passionate. I pray that it may form the very center of our existence. Yet, may we also remember that God is God, a mystery far beyond our ability to know. I love how Henri Nouwen says it: “You can be an expert in many things, but you cannot be an expert in God.”

If humility is the first word, then the second word is “humanity.” Yes, we are Christians; devotedly and passionately so. Yet, deeper than that we are human beings. I am Christian... another is Muslim... another is atheist... another Hindu... another “none of the above.” But we are all human beings and may our multiple faiths never trump what we all share in common.

You may have heard of Elias Chacour. He is well-known for his peacemaking work between Israelis and Arabs. Well, Chacour said once that in his world, people are often asked, “What were you born?” One might answer and Israeli... or an Arab... or a Christian. But Chacour said that when someone asks him, “What were you born?” he always answers the same way. He always says, “I was born a baby.” And then he laughs and laughs.

⁶ Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995) pp. 31-33.

⁷ For this conclusion I am indebted to Michael Lindvall.