

## "Jesus and the Way to God"

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Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church

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John 14:1-10

"No one comes to the Father except through me." Boy, have those words caused a lot of trouble.

I grew up in a version of Christianity that said that everyone except Christians was going to hell. We were Baptists, but, over the centuries, most Christians have believed that everyone except us is doomed to damnation, and this verse from today's reading is one of the prooftexts supporting that belief.

I don't hold to that belief anymore and the reason I don't is because I have come to a different understanding of who the "me" is that's speaking in this verse. It's not Jesus the first Christian. It's Jesus the eternal, uncreated Word of God in human form. And when the Word of God speaks, it's God speaking. So God is saying, "No one comes to me except through me," or, to generalize it a bit, no one comes TO God except THROUGH God.

Do you think that's true? I do. And now this verse makes sense to me. It only took me about thirty years to figure it out. That's the way Scripture works sometimes; it takes a minute, and so I want to spend our remaining time together this morning offering you a shortcut through the thirty years of scriptural thicket that I had to hack my way through.

One of the fundamental principles of interpreting the Bible is to remember that the Bible is its own best interpreter. So if you want to understand one passage in Scripture, it's always best to start by seeing if there are other passages of Scripture that might shed light on the one you're working with.

And to understand verse six of the fourteenth chapter of John – and, specifically, who the "me" is who's speaking there – we need to go all the way back to the beginning of John's gospel, to the famous words of that prologue which say, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

John begins his story of Jesus not with a birth narrative, as Matthew and Luke do, but rather with a theological statement about who Jesus really was – the Word of God in human form: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14a). For John and the other Jews who became Jesus' first followers, Jesus embodied that Word. And since there is no substantive difference between God and the Word of God, whenever we encounter Jesus in John, we're encountering God.

So to return to John 14:6, when Jesus / the Word of God / God says, "No one comes to the Father except through me," it is John's way of saying that no one comes TO God except THROUGH God. God is not only the destination, but God is also the way. Does that make sense?

I hope it does, because that's the way true biblical spirituality works. True spirituality is not the reward of heaven waiting for us when we die. True spirituality is the way we live right now, and that means that we have serious work to do.

When Jesus says, as he does in Luke's gospel, that the realm of God is within us and among us, he's saying that heaven – which is simply another name for the realm of God – is already here. It's not "out there"

waiting for us if we're only good enough. It's already here, and we're already accepting heaven or refusing heaven by the way we live now. God's way has to be our way, now, if it's ever to be our way at all.

And God's way cannot be conflated with Christianity. That's the big mistake we made early on. We made Jesus' way OUR way, named it Christianity, and then we made OUR way the only way. We turned Jesus into the first Christian, and he was not a Christian. Jesus was God in human form, and it is God speaking who says that no one comes TO God except THROUGH God. That odious religious chauvinism that says that Christianity is the only path to God is a Christian invention superimposed on the Bible. Can you read the Bible in such a way as to defend that view? Of course you can, and many of us have and do. You can get the Bible to say whatever you want it to say. But I haven't wanted the Bible to say that all of my non-Christian friends are going to hell for a long time. So I want to close by telling you the genesis of this sermon.

It began a long time ago, when I was a peculiar child who liked church and Sunday School and who paid attention, sometimes to my elders' consternation. When I was about ten or eleven or so, and I heard, once again, that God had laid on us Baptists the duty to bring the message of salvation to everyone so that they wouldn't go to hell, through the grace of God, it dawned on me that the people who lived before Jesus had not had the opportunity to hear that message. Were they going to hell because of a fluke of history over which they had no control? In my red-letter King James Bible was a whole testament full of such people; were they really damned? Even to my child's sense of justice, that seemed patently unfair.

And so I put that question to Joann Crawford, my Sunday School teacher of blessed memory. Joann saw the logical problem and she knew what the orthodox teaching of our church was, but she wasn't sufficiently cold-hearted or closed-minded to condemn vast swaths of righteous people to damnation on the basis of doctrine. And so she told me not to worry about those folks, God would take care of them.

That satisfied me for a time, but soon enough my curiosity expanded the question into the realm of my contemporaries living in far-away places where our missionaries hadn't reached; would they, too, perish eternally – kids just like me who happened to be born Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu?

And then, of course, since we Baptists didn't baptize babies, what happened to unbaptized babies who died, such as my sister's child, Kelly, who died in infancy – was Kelly really going to hell because he hadn't lived long enough to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and hadn't been baptized by immersion?

The theology said so, but my heart and mind said that such a theology had to be wrong. Who would worship a God who was such a monster as to destroy eternally the innocent?

Even as a child I could see problems with Christian exclusivism, and as I experienced more and more of the world, that problem grew greater and greater, to the point that I felt that if I was going to be a Christian at all, it was going to have to be with a very different Christianity than the kind I had grown up, and the words that Paul wrote to the Philippians struck home: "Work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling" (2:12).

We all have to work out our own salvation, friends, if we are to come to God. The Word of God is available to each and to all of us, and that Word never ceases to speak. We will all hear that call in our own way, but hear it we must, and respond we must, if we are to find that narrow path that Jesus said leads to eternal life. That narrow path is not Christianity. That narrow path is the width of our hearts and minds – our personalities, in other words – which receive as much or as little of the Word of God as we choose.

We cannot save ourselves, but we can make ourselves so narrow, so self-absorbed, and so tribal that we cut ourselves off from the salvation offered us by the One who does not bear the label Christian but instead bears the cross of self-sacrificial love. We call him Jesus, but he could have borne a thousand different names. What matters is not the name – although we love to hear it, as we'll sing in a moment – but rather the life, the life available to all of us who will choose to live it. "So it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me," Paul wrote, and the Christ who lived in Paul was not the first Christian. The Christ who transformed Saul of Tarsus into Paul of the nations was the Word of God made flesh whom even death could not destroy.

That's the speaker, the "me" in today's reading from John, the One who is both with God and is God. Today's reading, properly understood in my view, says that the only path to God is through God. God is both our journey and our end. So let me ask you: How's your trip going?