

Jesus the only way?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 22, 2011: The Fifth Sunday of Easter.
Based on John 14:1-14.*

I remember the moment as if it were yesterday. The words—not my words but words that I was reading, words coming out of my mouth—seemed to hang in the air:

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [John 14.6]

And I remember that young man staring back at me from the front pew, his face frozen in a lethal mixture of anger and pain. The words I had read were stoking up the anger portion.

The occasion was the funeral for the young man's father. They had been more than usually close, having navigated through the father-son thing early and honestly and had come out friends. Now the father was dead, before his time.

And here I was, saying to this marginally religious, grieving young man: if you're not a Jesus guy, forget it.

I was to give a short homily, following a family member's personal eulogy. There was no time to try to explain *No one comes to the Father except through me*.

I made a decision then, and I've followed it since. Unless there is time, and unless it's an appropriate topic in the homily, we just won't read that last phrase in John 14.6, which is steadily the first or second most commonly chosen reading at funerals.

We've let those words hang in the air far too often.

Now this barely understood, much abused, passage has become part of the Sunday readings in the Easter season every third year. Here we are again.

We have a choice, of course.

We can take the words literally and out of context, and say, Jesus is the only way to God. Plenty of Christians have done so and do so today.

Or, we can try to understand more deeply what the writer meant in including these words in the gospel, and further, what context they were embedded in when first read or heard.

Either way, we'll want to ask about our own context and therefore what the words, literally or otherwise, might be saying to us today.

As to taking the words as the literal words of Jesus, words intended to mean that henceforth he would be gatekeeper for true access to God, it seems we confront at least two problems:

- The whole burden of his ministry seems to have been opposing the gatekeepers of his own generation, those who insisted on class, privilege, or in-group status as tickets to an audience with God.

- And a literal reading ignores what the overwhelming conclusion of scholarship is about these texts. And I mean overwhelming: while there are many books and people who make the claim that Jesus was speaking in the divine "I" and that he meant to exclude all who don't follow his way, but they are taking a religious, a personal religious, position— pious, faithful and sincere it may be. But it just doesn't hold water.

And why wouldn't we want to let our minds weigh in on this?

It should be obvious, even to the most pious reader, that the Jesus of the fourth gospel sounds different, looks different and really does say some very different things from the Jesus in Mark, Matthew and Luke. However artful and poetic John is in his presentation of Jesus as making "I" pronouncements—I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I am the true vine—a balanced view would want to know if this agenda didn't have more to do with the communities John was writing to than with Jesus himself.

It matters. Careful study and much extra-biblical evidence shows that these communities were under great strain. They were disagreeing among themselves, and they had broken painfully, sometimes violently, with Jewish life in which they had gotten their start. Both communities had been shattered by the Roman destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. Both were looking to invent, or reinvent, a way forward. Some said keep to the tried and true way. Others said Jesus was "the way."

A text, however artful, especially a text crafted in conflict and for conflict, is hardly the arbiter for all time for all of humanity's relationship with and access to God.

If we do not answer that question fairly and honestly, we should not be drawing people into this relationship.

And then there's the simple and honest matter of context. Jesus is answering an anxious plea from Thomas, who like the others, is disheartened at Jesus plain insistence that he's getting ready to go to his death:

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 you? 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."

Again, it's artful writing and teaching: it's a house, a mansion, with many rooms. If it's a picture of salvation, it's a roomy one. Even C.S. Lewis, regarded as the gold standard of robust orthodoxy, said that in these many rooms there might be different furnishings and decorating styles to accommodate the widest possible variety of humanity, but it would be one house.

Religious America has become that kind of house. Big, with lots of rooms. A multi-faith house, with rooms many in the still-Christian statistical majority have not bothered to visit. But they're there. They've pretty much always been there, but they're more crowded today. Particularly notable are the Asian religions—Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Steadily the immigrant majority in each is being populated by inquirers and converts.

Other religions may in varying degrees have their own *No one comes to God but by our way* texts and adherents.

But that's not our business, unless it becomes coercive or violent. And if and when he does we should pause before any counterattack and consider how often our own tradition has been just that—coercive and violent.

The real reason we should get straight about John 14.6 is that narrowly and literally understood, it's thinking can block our own growth and development as human beings—as children of God.

"Mature religions, and now some scientists, say that we are hardwired for the big picture, for transcendence, for ongoing growth, for union with ourselves and everything else." That's how the Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr summarizes some interesting and advanced research going on today.

He goes on: "We are driven, kicking and screaming, toward every higher levels of union and ability to include (to forgive others for being "other")."

That's why the phrase *No one comes to the Father except through me* is troublesome, and why we should be honest about what we mean when we sway it.

I agree with where Rohr takes this, that many of us "get stopped and fixated at lower levels where God seems to torture and exclude forever those people who don't agree with "him" or get "his" name right."

I hope that drives us to this question: "Do we want a God that small? A God that territorial and exclusive?" I don't think so.

And that's what I wish I could say to those sullen faces at funerals. Or, the many who might want to learn the way of Jesus who might be able to say that he is the way for them, but who do not want to close down the option that others may have another way.

This is so critical to the spirit and the substance of the gospel. And of course I believe this is the true orthodoxy of Christianity. That the power of Jesus to open the way is just that. And it should open the way in our own minds to say there is enough room along that way no matter what the door is for all to come to God.

We're here today, hearing these words, not because we want a small God to beckon us. But, because we want to escape the otherness of others religions. I believe you and I come again and again here to find a way and a truth and a life in the largest God possible. *Amen.*

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