

## The Only Way?

John 14: 1-14

The words “No one comes to the Father but by me” have been used to justify an exclusive approach to Christianity – the way to God runs only through the Christian Church. What do they really mean? Is Jesus the only way to God? Let’s see if we can get some insight into this issue. I believe that we need to choose where we will stand on this issue because it is the most divisive issue facing the Christian church today.

I was talking with a ministry colleague about challenges facing Christianity in our day. We discussed the resistance to full equality for women in ministry leadership within many churches and similar resistance toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people both in ministry and in terms of the full benefit of the sacramental offerings of the church such as marriage. We both agreed that these are challenging questions, but mostly in terms of the degree to which many Christians embrace them and the degree of comfort and acceptance they are slowly growing to have. Finally, we agreed that the greatest challenge the Church faces today involves the issue of salvation.

There is a clear and significant division within the Christian Church on the question: “Are some saved and others not?” In other words, “Do some people go to heaven and others to hell when we die?” A great many Christians say “Yes.” There is judgment. There is damnation and reward. All souls spend eternity either in hell or in heaven. Of these, most agree that the criterion for determining that eternity destiny is professed faith in Jesus as savior. It is the central tenet of faith.

A great many Christians believe that. Many others do not, yet even they think the scenario represents the central tenet of Christianity. As a result, many turn their backs on biblical faith and reject Christianity. As a lifelong Christian who embraces biblical faith, Jesus, and the Church while rejecting what might be described as traditional views of heaven, hell, reward, and damnation, I find myself asking, “Is there another way?” I find myself answering, “Yes, there is!” That “yes” answer is the subject of this sermon.

I am asked from time to time, “What is our congregation’s position on the salvation question?” I first remind the questioner that, since Crossroads is in the *free church* tradition, there is no official congregational view on pretty much any theological question! We hold a common belief that each individual is capable of interpreting scripture for herself or himself with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the accountability of the community. Since there is no one specific official answer on matters of dogma that suffices for the entire congregation, each of us has tremendous freedom -- and the corresponding responsibility -- to weigh such questions as salvation for ourselves. There is a general framework to guide the *weighing* process. The good news in all this is that, as far as I can tell, there is no final exam at the last judgment other than the Biblical question, “What have you done for the least of these?”

How we stand on the question of “Who gets saved?” has a great implication as to how we relate to Christians who view salvation differently and also to those who don’t profess

Christ at all! How do we bridge that chasm within the Christian community between those who have a very strong belief in judgment and eternal punishment and reward, and those who just don't – who tend to believe in a universal salvation or who don't believe in an afterlife at all? How do Christians on opposite sides of this divide relate to each other as sisters and brothers and as mutual members of the mystical body of Christ? I find my answer in what one ancient rabbi said, when asked to summarize Judaism while standing on one foot. He said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else." Jesus taught essentially the same thing, "Do to others what you would have them do to you."

What about non-Christians? Is Christianity the only way? Are those who don't profess faith in Christ just out of the equation?" How can we understand the words of Jesus in the text of John's gospel, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life? What about the second part, "No one comes to the Father but by me?" Who gets saved? This is really a huge question! What is salvation? What does the Bible tell us about salvation? What does that term really mean for us?

The Bible never actually explains salvation. Instead, the Bible proclaims that salvation is God's gift and, as a result, it proclaims God. God is the one who saves. Salvation is what God does. It is the historical action of God in our lives in the past and the present. It is the ultimate hope of God's action in a cosmic sense and the reality of that hope in the world today. We cannot know God, in a biblical sense, apart from God's action – what we call *salvation*.

The Hebrew words for *enlarge* and *spacious*, that have the connotation of deliverance and freedom, are translated salvation. These words speak of deliverance from adversity, oppression, captivity, or death. God was the deliverer in the Exodus from Egyptian slavery, through the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land. The Hebrew prophets affirmed God's past action and drew the conclusion of a future promise of salvation, deliverance, at the end of history. There would be a new creation and the ultimate redemption of God's people.

The New Testament claims that this ultimate deliverance has already happened in Jesus. Biblical Christianity finds its self-understanding clearly within the framework of Jewish thought. Christians inherited from Judaism the sense of God as our special Savior for all eternity. That special status we hold tells us that we are saved. It also tends to imply that others are not. There are actually many salvation stories in the New Testament. One that can help us gain a clearer, and perhaps somewhat different, understanding of salvation is the story of the wee little man Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is a story of salvation. He was "a chief tax-collector and was rich." Everybody hated him. He met Jesus who had come in from out of town and had invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. Consequently, Zacchaeus found himself standing there in front of the whole town, confessing his sin of cheating them and living badly, and promising to make restitution four-fold. As a result, the Gospel tells us that he and his whole household were saved. Why?

Zaccheus was saved because Jesus walked into his life and invited himself to dinner! He was saved because he accepted Jesus' invitation. He was saved because he stood up in front of the whole town and confessed his sin saying, "I have cheated you! I have lived badly! I have valued money more than relationships." He was saved because he promised to make it right. This was more than just restitution. It was a restoration of relationship. Zacchaeus promised to restore four times the amount he took and apparently he followed through. He had lost his way. His life was meaningless. He was rich in money, but filled with scarcity. Salvation came to him and his family. They were restored to God and their community.

Salvation is not simply something that happens to you. It is something we engage in each day. As the apostle Paul reminds us, we must "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling," (Phil. 2: 12). It is a mistake to settle for too narrow and limited an understanding of salvation -- a religious transaction that punches our ticket to heaven. It is disastrous for the Church to restrict salvation to just saying certain words or to joining the right group, even if that group is the Church. When we reduce salvation to a transaction to get into heaven, we miss the richness and depth of salvation the way Jesus lived and taught it. We miss the breadth of salvation the way Zacchaeus received and lived it. We miss the opportunity to encourage all Christians to embrace that rich, deep, and broad understanding of salvation that is much more than they think!

But is Jesus the only way to God? What are the implications of our answer in terms of relating to people of other faiths? Can we reconcile John 14 with interfaith-friendly theology? Let me add a couple of more important questions. What are we guarding or protecting by limiting salvation to Christianity? What might we fear in letting that limitation go?

Do we fear the ambiguity that results from questioning narrow definitions? What do we have to lose? Is it certainty? Is it power? Can we reject narrow views as incomplete without rejecting those who hold them? Can we do this without giving up our call to hold them and ourselves accountable? We know in part and we testify in part. We seek the whole. We worship the Whole who brings life-transforming power through people like us.

In the *Lord's Prayer*, we request, "deliver us from evil." This is more than a plea to protect me and keep me from eternal meaninglessness. It is also a commitment to be an agent of transformation, delivering all people from the oppression of evil, the dungeons of darkness, and the prisons of despair. This is what Jesus did. This is the way of Jesus we have to follow. This is why we are here. This is why the Church exists in the world.

The faith question then is not, "Who is in and who is out?" The question is, "Will we choose to see the world as scarcity or as abundance? Will we think of life as hopeless or as possible? The faith question is, "Will we see abundance as self-defeating greed or as life-affirming good news? The invitation of God along the way of Christ is to answer the faith question with abundant possibility and life-affirming good news. How will you answer?