

Is Jesus the Only Answer?

Romans 8:26-28

This sermon is a response to two questions received from congregational members. The first question: “Is it necessary to believe in the unique, singular divinity of Jesus to be a Christian? Divinity means specifically that Jesus was *the* Son of God, not *a* daughter or son of God like any typical human would be. Depending on the answer to question above, what does *Christian* mean? The second question: if Jesus is the only way to heaven, what happens (happened) to the over 90% of humans in history who did not follow/know him – also the billions following other religions?

Let me take the liberty to translate these excellent and challenging questions into four essential questions. Who was Jesus? Who is Jesus? What does it mean to follow Jesus? Is Jesus the only way to heaven?

Who *was* Jesus? Was he the unique Son of God, different from the rest of us? Who was Jesus? He was a person from the region of Galilee who lived during the first three decades of the common era. He was a teacher, healer, and social activist in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. He gathered around him a small group of disciples. Some claimed that he was the Messiah. He was crucified around the year 30CE at Jerusalem after which his followers made a unique claim – resurrection. Most Jews believed in resurrection, a return to life of all people at the end of time for judgment. But Jesus’ followers claimed that resurrection happened to Jesus alone -- during time instead of at the end of time. The expectation was that Jesus would be coming back to finish a Messiah’s work.

For much of Christian history, we have tended to focus much more on the divinity of Jesus and have often lost sight that, first and foremost, he was a flesh and blood person who lived and died. Jesus was a man, but he was also much more.

Who *is* Jesus? Is he God, the only Son of God? Is he divine or not? Is Jesus God? The claim of divinity, equality with God, was not made explicitly until the fourth century in the Nicene Creed. The Apostle’s creed, not written by the apostles themselves, but dating from the second century, calls Jesus “the only Son of God, our Lord.”

The understanding of Jesus as Son of God and then God the Son evolved slowly during the first four centuries of the Christian era. The title *Son of God* was not claimed by Jesus in the Gospels. He preferred Son of man which simply meant a *human being*. *Son of God* was a title ascribed to Jesus for the purpose of comparing the *kingdom* of God with the *kingdom* of Caesar who also claimed the title *Son of God*.

Diverse schools of thought developed regarding the nature of Jesus in the early years of Christianity. These included the extreme views on the one hand that Jesus was only human or, on the other hand that Jesus was God pretending to be human. The compromise view was adopted that Jesus was both human and divine. His mystical, dual nature, was designed to avoid the extreme views.

The fourth century was a time of significant change with Emperor Constantine making Christianity the state religion of Rome. Constantine considered doctrinal clarity essential to determine who was *in* and who was *out*, and to distinguish friends from enemies. His *guidance* led to the church's adoption of the Nicene Creed in 325CE. For the next 1000 years, the church sought and held political power based on the idea that allegiance to the church's doctrinal statements equated to loyalty to the church.

Who Jesus is as *God* or *Son of God* is a matter of mystery and faith. What we know of Jesus as a man is that he lived and died 2000 years ago. What we who follow him believe and trust is that he is more than that. So, given that the divinity of Jesus -- Jesus as God -- is a matter of mystery and faith more than certainty. The idea of Jesus as *God the Son* was developed by the early church during the first four centuries following Jesus' early life. It was not a teaching of Jesus. Given that, what is a Christian? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Christian was originally a derogatory term designed to mock the *followers of the Way* for serving a crucified and failed Messiah. These followers, who were eventually described as *turning the world upside down* became a term of admiration. Let me suggest that we think in terms of being Christian in two senses: a narrow sense (focused, not rigid) and a broad sense (universal, not relativistic).

Being Christian in this broad sense means following the way that Jesus followed -- a path of love, non-violent social justice, peacemaking, inclusion, and abundant grace. It is to follow what author Matthew Fox called the Cosmic Christ, faithful to the spirit of Jesus that is present in many people and even many faith traditions whether or not they identify with Jesus or the Christian Church.

Being Christian in a narrow sense refers to those of us who intentionally follow Jesus. We embrace his story and believe that through his life, death, and resurrection the temporal and eternal dimensions of life are reconciled. We seek his mystical presence through prayer and we see in his human face the nature of God. This more narrow sense of being Christian includes, but is not limited to, those who believe in him as God the Son.

Something we must wrestle with that the early followers of Jesus did not was the religion of Christianity. Even when Jesus says, in John 14: 6 that "No one comes to the Father but by me," there is the sense of following Jesus' way of relating to God and not in accepting the religion of Christianity. Religion is a human creation to help us make sense of our experiences of the mystical. It can be very helpful as a means to help us grow up in faith. Religion can also be very destructive when coupled with coercive power. In this instance, religion can be used as a way to divide and judge people on behalf God. Let us not presume to take on God's role, but follow Jesus' example -- to love extravagantly and work for the well being of all people. As Christians in the narrow sense, we trust in the power of our faith not in it being the only correct one, but in having the name and story of

Jesus to guide our path. We are able to call on the Spirit of Christ to be our friend, guide, and comforter.

The last question: if Jesus is the only way to heaven, what about the over 90% of people who are not Christians? In other words, is Jesus the only way to heaven? Is the penalty for not following Jesus hell? This question raises so many other questions. “What happens to us after we die? What is heaven? What is hell? Are either or both of these real? Is the Christian religion the only way to follow Jesus? How do you wrestle with these questions?”

I suggest that the only way to become awake to the ultimate truth of life is in the way Jesus did it, by reaching out to embrace and include others, to touch and be touched by the love of God. This is true for people who never knew Jesus or who have felt rejected by those who see them as condemned by God – true also for those who have rejected the Christian religion for a variety of reasons. Ghandi has said, “I love your Christ, but I can’t stand your Christians.” (*Ghandi* by E. Stanley Jones)

The greatest challenge the church faces today is the issue of salvation. Are some saved and others not? Do some of us go to heaven and others to hell when we die? Is professed faith in Jesus as divine Lord and Savior a specifically determining factor? Many Christians believe that. Many others have turned their backs on biblical faith and rejected Christianity saying they cannot worship a God who could condemn good people to eternal punishment.

I am a lifelong Christian who embraces biblical faith, Jesus, and the Church. I do not profess what might be described as traditional views of heaven, hell, reward, and damnation. As a result, I find myself asking, “Is there another way?” Yes, there is and that *yes* answer makes all the difference. One of the challenges we Christians on opposite sides of the *salvation* divide face is how to relate to each other as sisters and brothers, as mutual members of the mystical body of Christ? The answer one ancient rabbi gave was this: “what is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else.” Jesus essentially said the same thing: “Do to others what you would have them do to you.” We all need to respect each others’ journeys and trust that God is working in their lives just like in ours.

What about those who don’t profess Jesus? Are they just out of the equation? How should we understand Jesus’ words from John’s gospel: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me?” We should see salvation not simply as something that happens to you, not a transaction that sets you for life. Salvation, rather, is something in which we engage each day on the journey. The apostle Paul told us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” (Phil. 2: 12). Salvation is the process of awakening ourselves to the divine presence and embracing our relationship with the Holy.

It is a mistake to settle for a narrow and limited understanding of salvation as a religious transaction that punches our ticket for heaven. To do so is to miss the richness and depth of faith as Jesus lived and taught it.

What is the question behind the questions? What is it we really want to know with questions about Jesus, God, judgment, and eternal life? What are the deep questions? What is the reality behind the mystery of life? Is this reality trustworthy, just, and loving? Where can I place my trust? Will I and those I love be okay in an ultimate sense? The answer we see in Jesus is “yes.” Exactly how that “yes” is experienced remains a mystery that requires trust is the source of all mystery -- *God*.

Jesus trusted. He showed us how and how much trust is needed. To follow Jesus means to challenge an approach to religion that defines who is *in* and who is *out*. To follow Jesus is the challenge the fear that results from drawing the circle of inclusion and grace large, questioning narrow definitions. To follow Jesus is to challenge us to face the fear of letting go our need to control -- to live by faith. Can we differ in our understandings of the nature and mystery at the center of life? Can we differ without rejecting those with whom we disagree?

What would Jesus do? What did Jesus do? We know in part and we testify in part. (1 Cor. 13) We seek the whole. We worship the Whole who brings life-transforming power through people who can live by faith -- people like us? In the *Lord's Prayer*, we pray “deliver us from evil.” (Matthew 6:) More than a plea to protect *me* and keep *me* from eternal meaninglessness and eternal death, these words are a commitment on my part to be an agent of transformation, delivering all people from the oppression of evil, from the dungeons of darkness, and from the prisons of despair. This is what Jesus did. This is the way of Jesus we can follow. This is why we are here.

The fundamental faith question is not, “Was Jesus the Son of God or God the Son?” It is not, “Who is in and who is out?” The faith question is, “Will we choose to see the world as scarcity or as abundance? Will we think of life as hopeless or filled with possibilities? Will we see people as essentially evil, in need of a divine pardon, or as essentially good and called to grow into the likeness of Jesus? Will we see abundance as self-defeating greed or as life-affirming good news? We follow the way of Jesus in order to answer this faith question, to live with abundant possibility, and to discover and share life-affirming good news. This is the journey Jesus invited and challenged us to take. This is the journey we travel here at Crossroads. We invite you to walk with us.