

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Outdoor Service)

Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

August 27, 2017

John 14:1-6 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.² My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (NIV2011)

In Christ Alone, we Find...The Way, the Truth, the Life

Is our God an exclusive God? Is the God you believe in an exclusive God? That’s probably a tricky question to answer. If you have been given an exclusive offer to a great deal, you love having it to yourself. But if you hear someone else has gotten in on an exclusive offer that wasn’t made available to you, you feel pretty rotten. We get this same sense when we visit different parts of God’s beautiful creation. We want beautiful parks where anyone can go and enjoy a beautiful morning. But we also want to reserve the shelter so no one else can get to it before this service ends. That’s the feeling I get whenever I’m up in the mountains or out on a beach somewhere. I love getting the chance to go explore and appreciate creation. But then when I see a fence and a no trespassing sign, it bothers me. I have to admit, if I had enough money to build my dream house anywhere I wanted, I would probably have a different attitude about that mountain-top or beach-front location.

That’s the mixed feelings we as Christians have when we talk about Christ alone. There is this tension between having access for all people to something amazing and awesome one the one hand and on the other hand of having something that you can claim and enjoy as your own. So let’s explore what it really means when Christians place trust in Christ alone. And we’ll do that as we dig into Jesus’ words in John chapter 6.

1. THE Way

I don’t know about you, but I can’t help but cringe when I hear Jesus’ words that he is “**the way and the truth and the life.**” (John 14:6) Jesus isn’t one of many different ways. He’s not one version of the truth that allows for other interpretations. He doesn’t have one sort of life that is equally valid as any other life goal. Sounds rather exclusive. And we would rather think of Jesus in more enlightened terms, inclusive and accepting of all people.

We feel good that we have something as Christians. We appreciate what faith in Jesus does for us. But we feel bad that other people aren’t like us, we don’t want them to feel shut out. We wrestle with this clear word from Jesus and what we wish Jesus had said. And then we wonder, can’t we all just coexist? And we should. Christians should be able to live in

harmony with people who don't share our beliefs. We should be able to disagree with people and not hate them or try to destroy them or silence them.

Actually, it's when Christians don't have answers that things go wrong. Today we are celebrating the heritage we have from the Reformation. But we can also be thankful that there might never have been a Reformation at all if things had been different politically. Most people who dissented from established church teaching at that time didn't get any debate, they got the a visit from soldiers and instead of discussion they got burnt at the stake. Honesty makes us admit Christianity has turned violent when we run out of good responses. When Europeans came to America and forced people to convert or face the fire. When Christians came in contact with a Muslim empire in Palestine and decided to launch the Crusades.

So it's obvious there can be a wrong way to deal with differences of opinion on something as raw and emotional as religious beliefs. But does that mean all roads can really lead to one destination? Or is it possible that these different paths don't all lead to the same destination? When I was younger, one of my favorite kinds of books were the Choose Your Own Adventure series. I loved how interactive they were, how they let you take charge of the story. But each different choice didn't always get me to the ending I was after. So I ended up going back, retracing my steps, and reading every possible scenario until I got the one I wanted. There is a reason why Jesus tells us he is THE way.

2. THE Truth

If we treat different religions the way we treat those Choose Your Own Adventures books, we have to be honest enough to follow the story to see where each one leads. There are some things many of these religions have in common. They give you a framework for your life. They teach you have to be good people. But they don't all teach the same thing. Some religions, like Hinduism, teaches there are many different gods. Others, like Buddhism, teaches that there isn't really any god, but more of a supernatural force that we can tap into. Even the religions known as the three great monotheistic religions - Islam, Judaism, and Christianity - can't get together on the crucial teaching of who Jesus is. Islam says Jesus can't be God, because that would be blasphemy to say there is more than one. He must have been a prophet on the level of Muhammed. Judaism says he may be anywhere on the spectrum from reforming rabbi to delusional sorcerer. But they all agree that he wasn't the Messiah. And then, of course, Jesus says: **"I am the way and the truth and the life."** (John 14:6) So let's be honest. All religions can have a claim on the truth, but they can't all agree.

So yes, we do want to coexist with people who don't believe the same thing as we do. But usually there is something different implied. It's that we have to co-believe what everyone else believes. And to do that, we must do violence to every religion and insult every believer. (The exact opposite of what we were trying to do in the first place.) Or we will need to boil every religion down the most basic teachings that men them all agree. That means compromising what each one actually teaches and watering it down on important beliefs. We could take away every religion's claim to have a hold on the exclusive truth. That would mean being equally offensive and insulting toward every belief that says there is a right and a wrong.

That's actually what is behind what most people mean when they say coexist. It's the theology of John Lennon: imagine there's no religion. What people usually really believe is that none of the religions are true. Faith is just a psychological phenomenon. It helps some people. People can use their own belief system as a way to get them through life. But your way can't be any better than my way, because none of them are really based on any truth. There's no such thing.

But then what happens to you? You are still supposed to have a good life. You are still supposed to be a good person. If there is no truth, all the pressure goes back on you. You have to provide a nurturing and enriching environment for your family. You have to reach your fullest potential. You have to make use of all the privileges you've been given in life. You have to be beautiful and strong and smart and self-sufficient. You have to be the kind of person who makes a positive impact on the world, generous toward your friends and family, charitable toward those weak and in need. If there is no truth, you are at the mercy of the standards of this world. And that target is always moving. It lures you in. It entices you. But you can never reach it. You'll never arrive.

This is the exact reason Jesus insists on being THE truth. Not just your truth or some version of the truth. He's not trying to be insulting or offensive. But when we rob Jesus of the right to claim who he really is, it robs us of the unique benefits he offers. Jesus can claim to be THE way and THE truth because of what he actually did and said throughout his earthly ministry. He claimed to be the Son of God and promised to rise from the dead. If Jesus wasn't really God, then that would mean he deserved to receive mental help. If he claimed he could conquer death but really couldn't, we would have no business treating him as a prophet or teacher or moral leader.

C.S. Lewis, the famous 20th century Christian author said it well: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse."¹

3. THE Life

But if it's true, that makes Jesus uniquely qualified to do what needs to be done for you and for the world. Jesus insists on being THE way and THE truth so he can give you THE life only he is capable of giving.

Jesus speaks these words to his followers at a time that was very emotionally turbulent for them. They were in the Upper Room after Jesus ate the Passover meal with them. He had washed their feet earlier that evening, causing all sorts of confusion. He announced his

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* New York: Macmillan, 1952; p. 41,42.

betrayal from one follower and denial by another. Now he says he is about to depart and leave the disciples. It was a confusing time for them. But it was even more troubling for Jesus. He knew what was coming next. But he knew it was necessary.

There was only one way for Jesus. That way meant giving up his own life. There was only one truth awaiting him. The only way every human being wouldn't be left twisting in the wind was through the cross. That truth meant the end of his life. His life and death was the only way he could give the life God demands of every human being.

In the life of Christ, you have something real. The reality of what Jesus gives doesn't depend on how you feel about it or what your experience has been. Jesus doesn't show you the way. His rescue is the way. Jesus is the way for people who want to throw their hands up in disgust at the confusing ways so many people are claiming are right for themselves. Jesus doesn't just hold out the truth to offer to you. Jesus is the truth so you don't have to choose your own adventure. Jesus has pinned down the truth for people who are always coming up short to the shifting standards of what you need to be to make this world happy. Jesus doesn't just lead you to find a better life. He is the life. Jesus is the life you and I will never get from all our searching and seeking down every other path in every other truth claim.

To followers of Jesus who are so often filled with doubt and confusion, Jesus gives us this encouragement: **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."** (John 14:1) If Jesus is the only Savior, trust in him. If Jesus can deliver to you what others can only wish to bring you, find your place with him. If Jesus has opened heaven's gates wide open through his salvation, find your home with him. In Christ alone we have grace alone, that comes to us through faith alone, revealed to us by Scripture alone.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life to bring you to the Father. Only through Jesus can you reach this destination. In Christ alone you have access to something awesome and amazing. In Christ alone everyone has access to the way, the truth and the life. In Christ alone you will enjoy blessings you can claim as your own. Jesus provides the ultimate home for you. He is personally preparing it for you. And yet it is available to everyone. Amen.