

The Way or the Highway  
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The Way or the Highway  
John 14:1-14

There's the story of the guy who gets to heaven and St. Peter is showing him around. The two of them began walking down a long hallway, and they came to a door. Peter opened the door and they heard all of these people singing hymns, and Peter said to the guy, "Oh, here are all the Methodists." Then they walked on a little further, and came to another door, and opened it, and saw a bunch of people dressed up and the strong smell of incense, and Peter said, "Oh, here are all the Episcopalians." They walked on, and came to another door, and opened it, and saw a bunch of people shouting and jumping up and down, and Peter said, "Oh, here are all the Pentecostals."

But then they walked near another door, only this time, instead of opening it, Peter said to the guy, "Sssshhh, we have to be quiet. Those are the... [ oh, who should we pick on—Mormons, Baptists, Nazarenes, Edgewoodians] in there, and they think they're the only ones up here!" This joke works for two reasons. One, we who are telling it can feel so superior to those poor, misguided, prejudiced denomination members in the room thinking they are the only ones there. That's the not so great reason.

The other reason is that this joke in very short order lays out the tensions of this morning's text, part of Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples in which on one hand he promises rooms in God's mansion for everyone, and on the other declares he is the only way to get there. As followers of "the Way", a name for Christians, we are challenged to discern what Jesus' words meant, and mean, for us today.

First, let's set the scene:

This is Jesus' "farewell speech." In fact this farewell goes on and on for several chapters and Jesus talks and talks and talks to his disciples letting them know everything he wanted them to remember. This reflects an ancient tradition which we see in other parts of our Bible, particularly Moses' farewell speech comprising the whole book of Deuteronomy

"Jesus...is doing much the same thing with his followers before his death: speaking not only to those present but to those who would come long after, including us today. This speech, in a sense, is a love letter." (Kate Huey, ucc.org)

Jesus has returned after his death and is reassuring and commission his disciples to do the work in his stead, in his name.

the disciples who are worried and fearful so Jesus is reassuring. He says, "Believe in God, believe also in me." This can be translated trust God, trust in me, too.

Finally we have to look at the most problematic verse, John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life; No one comes to God except through me,"

Here is what is important: Reading this verse in its particular context in this scene. It is not a universal response but a direct answer to Thomas's question.

Thomas' question is not, "Jesus, are all non-Christians going to hell?"

His question is: "we don't know the way—Jesus, please help us understand."

And so Jesus responds.

The verse does not say, "Jesus said I am the way, the truth, and the life."  
But rather, Jesus said to him, to Thomas "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Big difference.

Jesus is saying to Thomas, "you say you don't know the way, you don't know where you are going. But that's what we've been doing together. What other way is there?  
What are you going to go back to?  
Sadducees making it rich at temple?  
Pharisees and rules rules rules?  
Societal expectations of exclusion, the damning of the disabled, women, and the poor?"

Jesus continues: "No one sees God, gets to God, experiences God except how we've been doing it: Love, forgiveness, generosity, peace, inclusion—that's the way. And you need to keep it up even when I'm gone; I'm counting on it."

Jesus is answering a particular question in a particular situation. And that answer has been held up and become a narrow standard of salvation for all people. Become Christian, you are saved. Anything else, you can't get to God and so you are damned. But if we, even as liberal Christians, are to take this text and historical interpretation seriously, we have to wrestle with this understanding. It is what makes us uncomfortable. But should it?

Harvey Cox wrote a book, *Many Mansions or One Way? The Crisis in Interfaith Dialogue* (Excerpted in *The Christian Century*, August 17-24, 1998, pp. 731-735.) in which he took on the very uncomfortable problems that get in the way of having interreligious dialogue particularly in the face of such texts.

He says "the most nettlesome dilemma hindering interreligious dialogue is the very ancient one of how to balance the universal and the particular. Every world faith has both."

This may be contrary to some popular understandings of other world faiths. Let's look at Islam. Islam instructs its followers to abstain from compulsion in religion (no forceful conversions), no one is to transgress or attack anyone (self defense or fighting an oppressive leader are the ONLY means for fighting), and to treat all kindly and with respect. One sura (verse) says that "Sabians (probably the followers of John the Baptist), Jews and Christians "shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve" if they have faith in the one true God, believe in the hereafter, and do good (2:62, 5:69)." ([www.islamicperspectives.com/Quran](http://www.islamicperspectives.com/Quran))

One theologian said "This means that all of the followers of all of the prophets of Almighty God from Adam to Moses to Jesus and Muhammad, peace be upon them all, will find that they will be supplied the correct answers to these questions [at heaven's gate] when asked."

Judaism is not so concerned with afterlife. Judaism proscribes rules for all people to follow and then an extended set of rules for Jews themselves to follow. One writer said, "salvation is not a Jewish concept, as it implies a focus on the afterlife, which is not significant focus of Judaism. In particular, the Christian view of the question just doesn't work, for it implies a notion of "hell" for those that aren't saved. Jews believe that people are supposed to do the best they can at being good." ([faqs.org/soc/culture/jewish/FAQ: Jewish Thought](http://faqs.org/soc/culture/jewish/FAQ:JewishThought))

In the Bhagava-Gita, a sacred Hindu text, Lord Krishna proclaims, "Whatever path men travel is My path; no matter where they walk it leads to me."

And Taoism is a religion whose name is based on a root that means "the Way."

The universal is a key facet in all these religions. But at the same time, and this is important, we are not all the same. Sloppy pluralism doesn't truly honor religious diversity. Each religion makes particular claims and assertions of the truth. "Maybe it is the message of the one true God delivered to the prophet Muhammad. Or the faithful Son of God dying on the cross. Or the supreme moment when enlightenment comes to the patient figure seated under the bo tree. Or the bestowal of the life-giving gift of Torah on a chosen people." (Cox) There are particular truths to each tradition and they cannot be reconciled.

Therein lies the tension. We have both particular and universal dimensions to our tradition. Where we get into trouble is when we ignore one or the other.

We UCC'ers tend to lift up the universal and play down the particular, as if we are embarrassed, or ashamed of Jesus' claims on us. When we are dialoging with a Muslim, do we expect them to play down Mohammed, to deny Islam's tenet that he is the last and correct prophet? We don't. We expect our Muslim brothers and sisters to be rooted in their faith. And when we meet our Jewish neighbors do we expect them to hide their traditions and beliefs, including their feeling that Jesus was not the Messiah? No, we don't. So why do we feel we have to put Jesus in the corner and speak to our universal God instead of holding our own particular faith?

To be true to our faith we must embrace the particular about it as well. I'm not advocating exclusivity, but only that standing in this tradition we need to hear Christ's words to us, particular words to us, that speak out of our scripture, that guide our actions and our living. And understand that they do not need to be for every faithful person.

When I lived in Michigan I belonged to an interfaith clergy group much like LICA here in Lexington. One fall the folks at the neighboring Episcopal church had a special event where they invited the interfaith community to come together for a reading of the Koran. It was in response to a Koran burning that had happened in town earlier in the year. It was just a couple years after 9/11.

At the next interfaith clergy meeting our group debriefed the event and then the pastor from the Unity church said he had a couple questions for the Episcopal priest there. His members who had been at the event wanted to know why Jesus had been in the dark.

Now at this church there was a very large sculpture of Jesus on the cross suspended from the ceiling. Certainly it was appropriate and right for a Christian church. But for the interfaith event, the leadership decided to turn off the lights that illuminated that area of the sanctuary thus leaving Jesus literally in the dark. An interesting metaphor to how we sometimes deal with our faith in an interfaith setting. Do we leave Jesus in the dark since he is too inconvenient, too particular, too Christian?

The reality is we are followers of a particular religion, a particular figure named Jesus who have very particular things to say about life and the world. "Jesus was not a model of vacuous tolerance. He did make judgments about the faith of the people he met. In fact, he did so all the time. He argued with some of the Pharisees and excoriated the rulers of the temple. But the key to Jesus' approach to any religious perspective was, "By their fruits you shall know them. " He seemed singularly uninterested in the doctrinal content or ritual correctness of the different religions he encountered. He was, however, terribly concerned about the practical outcome of their practitioners' commitments. He once told a pagan Roman that he had not found such a faith as his anywhere in Israel." (Cox)

In today's text the universal is Jesus saying "in God's house there are many rooms and I'll take you there." Then the particular comes right on its heels: "I am the way the truth and the life, no one gets to God except through me." Hence the tension.

But even a closer look at these statements is helpful. Jesus says, "In the house of God, they are many habitations." The word translated as "habitations" is monai. In the popular imagination, this is often taken to mean that the Methodists will have a room and so will the Catholics and the Baptists, etc..

But the word "Monai actually means a temporary resting place for a traveler. It was associated with caravans. In those days, there would be a contingent of folks who would go ahead of the caravan to "prepare a place" so that when the caravan arrived there, the camp ground had been prepared, the water supply located, and food prepared. The travelers in the caravan would have a place of comfort to spend the night.

"Monai is less about getting some fancy digs in the hereafter, in a house separate from the people you can't stand, and more about welcome, hospitality, and community for people traveling on a journey. (John Petty, progressiveinvolvement.com)

And then the second claim, "I am the way, the truth, the life, the only way to God."

Theologian Wesley Ariarajah writes that: "When my daughter tells me I'm the best daddy in the world, and there can be no other father like me, she is speaking the truth, for this comes out of her experience. She is honest about it; she knows no other person in the role of her father.

"But of course it is not true in another sense. For one thing, I myself know friends who, I think, are better fathers than I am. Even more importantly, one should be aware that in the next house there is another little girl who also thinks her daddy is the best father in the world. And she too is right. No one can compare the truth content of the statements of the two girls. For here we are not dealing with the absolute truths, but with the language of faith and love. ...

"The language of the Bible is also the language of faith....The problem begins when we take these confessions in the language of faith and love and turn them into absolute truths. It becomes much more serious when we turn them into truths on the basis of which we begin to measure the truth or otherwise of other faith claims."

Imagine if the daughter told the little girl next door that she was wrong, that she had the only truth, that she had the only best daddy....well, that would just be childish wouldn't it?

As a Christian, Jesus is my way, my truth, my life. And in some cases I might ask, "can I share it with you? It might be saving or life giving for you?"

In all cases I shouldn't be embarrassed to claim it, to say, yes, Jesus' way is my way. And that is what I am focused on. That is how I choose to live. And that is hard enough. As pastor Carl Gregg who grew up in a "Jesus' way or the highway" tradition says:

"What haunts me now is not whether faithful Hindus, Muslims, and Jews are saved. Even if this were a concern, there's too much wonderful, beautiful, and challenging involved with being a Christian to worry too much about everyone else's religion. Today the questions I ask myself today are:

Am I living the Jesus truth?

Am I living the Jesus way?

Am I living the Jesus life?"

(Carl Gregg, a progressive Christian reading of John 14:6, patheos.com)

Those seem like perfect questions for all of us. Amen.