

Only One Way?
John 14:1-7
September 9, 2007

Last Sunday I shared the fact that this fall offers a rare confluence of sacred moments in the calendars of several major world religions. Both Jewish and Muslim calendars are rooted in lunar “months.” The Jewish month, Tishrei, is the seventh month of the Jewish year. It always comes in the fall and is a sabbatical month, filled with holy festivals at every phase of the moon. Next Sunday we’ll consider the meaning of the Jewish High Holy Days, which begins on September 13 with Rosh Hashanah. In the Muslim calendar, Ramadan is the month in which the Quran was revealed and the most holy month in the Muslim calendar. Once in every generation, it coincides with the most holy Jewish month for two or three years at a time. This year Ramadan begins with the actual sighting of the new moon on September 13.

During these sacred seasons for Jews and Muslims, Christians will celebrate St. Francis Day and World Communion Sunday. We are seizing this opportunity to grow in our understanding of our neighbors around the world.

One of the stumbling blocks to interfaith relationships tends to be one of the verses from this morning’s scripture reading: Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” On the surface it appears that Jesus is saying that he is the only way to relationship with God. If so, that means that God is known in no other way; any other attempt at religion is invalid and false. I invite you to open our minds to look at this scripture in its context and understand its original meaning before we make any applications to our current situation.

This passage begins what is called the Farewell Discourse of John’s Gospel. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his death. He is encouraging them “to stand firm in the face of his departure, when the events may look to them as if evil and death are having their way.”¹ That’s why he says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” Their faith and trust in the relationship of God and Jesus will empower them to rejoice in the events of Jesus’ death, for even in those events they will recognize the work of God.

We often use the image of the Father’s house with many rooms as a reference to heaven. John’s Gospel often uses locations as symbols for relationship. Early in the Gospel when he refers to Jesus being close to the Father’s heart, this is an image for the intimacy between Father and Son. When he speaks about “my Father’s house,” he is referring to the relationship

between Jesus and God. “House” in Greek can also mean “household” or “family.” Jesus is the way we are adopted into God’s growing family. The image of “many rooms” indicates that the relationship or household is not closed, but that others are welcome to share in the intimacy and fellowship. Jesus is promising his disciples that they will share in his relationship with God. They will not be abandoned when he dies. The relationship will continue and they will be included.

When Jesus refers to himself as “the way,” the word is not used strictly as the route to somewhere else, as a geographical destination. In Jewish tradition, “way” refers to a lifestyle. Jesus is the expression of a faithful person’s life with God. He models for his disciples how one is in full relationship with God. Jesus is “the way,” because he is the access point to God’s promise of life.²

Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” are a joyous affirmation of a religious community. God is made known and accessible through Jesus. John was writing to his community late in the first century. At that time in history, Christians in the ancient Mediterranean World were a religious minority. Their new understanding of how God was made known through Jesus led them into conflict with Judaism, which had previously been their religious home. A bitter struggle ensued between Christ-affirming and Christ-denying Jews. Christ-followers were a persecuted minority expelled from the synagogues and rejected by the majority. John 14:6 expresses the particular identity of this emerging religious movement. It says, “This is who we are. We are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ.” It is a statement of identity.

For those of us who live in a majority Christian environment, we must be cautious in interpreting this scripture simply as “We have the one and only way and you don’t.” The Gospel of John is not concerned with the fate of Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. Islam did not even exist when Jesus lived nor when the Gospels were written. John is not trying to establish the superiority or inferiority of Judaism and Christianity as we know them. John’s mission is to clarify and celebrate what it means to believe in Jesus. Christians have access to their God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the way to relationship with God for a particular people called Christian. How then, are we called to relate to people of other religious traditions who come from contexts different than our own? Scripture offers us some clues.

In the seventh chapter of Luke Jesus is asked to heal the servant of a Roman centurion. The servant and centurion were representatives of the

empire that was oppressing Jews. They were considered religiously off-limits. As Jesus goes to the soldier's home to heal the servant, a delegation meets him bringing a message from the soldier: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed." Jesus sees that the Roman soldier acknowledges Jesus' divine authority. Jesus says, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith." "The ability to recognize the presence, power, and goodness of God is not limited to the chosen people. The religious 'others' are not prevented from knowing God even if they do not know the practice of the religion of Israel."³

The parable of the Good Samaritan is well known beyond Christian circles, for there is even a secular law known as the Samaritan law. In Jesus' day, Samaritans followed a form of Jewish life at odds with the dominant practice centered around the Jerusalem temple. They were seen as enemies or outcasts by the dominant Judaism. Yet Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero and role model of one of his most memorable stories. Not only does the story communicate that being a neighbor means reaching out to someone in need. The story also applauds not the religious leaders, the priest and the Levite who pass by the neighbor in need, but lifts up as an exemplar the religious "outcast" who is hated by Jesus' audience.

These passages and others illustrate that "God's grace and mercy, while promised to Israel, are not confined to the chosen people." Likewise, it would not be appropriate for Christians to assume to have an exclusive claim to the goodness and love of God. "The fact that God has chosen to reveal Godself to Christians in the person of Jesus Christ does not necessarily mean that God thereby closes off relationship with all others. While Jews and Christians are to be 'exclusive' in their loyalty to God and forgo allegiance to other 'gods' or ideologies, God is free to be 'inclusive,' because all people still belong to God and are equally creatures of the one Creator."⁴ These passages of scripture remind us that knowledge of God is not limited to Jews and Christians. Others can and do recognize the presence and power of God. And the mercy and compassion of God extend beyond the "primary relationship" between God and God's chosen people. We mustn't pretend to know the limits of God's love. Such a claim is not only selfish, but also arrogant.

Nor do I pretend to have all the answers in this arena. I speak from my particular experience as a North American Christian at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in a time and place of much religious diversity. I speak as a Christian who knows God as a God of unconditional love, having experienced God's grace most powerfully through the witness of Jesus Christ.

I have experienced that love in my own family and in several church families of which I have been a member. I have witnessed God's love expressed in the face of tragedy in local communities of faith and in response to disasters through our global denomination. I have also experienced the darker side of the Christian community, when personal agendas try to trump God's agenda. I am still seeking salvation from my own demons within, behaviors, judgments, and attitudes that are not Christ-like. I am still growing in faith. I am in no position to judge another's faith, although I am privileged to be a position of encouraging others in the journey of faith. Nor am I able to confine the mysterious, gracious work of God to experiences just like my own. As God says, "My ways are not your ways." God is far greater than my own understanding. Therefore, I am open to the possibility that God is at work in faith traditions other than my own.

Huston Smith, a well-respected historian of world religions who has taught at Cal, offers an image that is helpful in considering the relationship of the world's religions. He "likens them to a stained glass window whose sections divide the light of the sun into different colors. This analogy allows for significant differences between the religions without pronouncing on their relative worth. If the peoples of the world differ from one another temperamentally, these differences could well affect the way Spirit appears to them; it could be seen from different angles so to speak. Stated in the language of revelation, for God to be heard and understood divine revelations would have had to be couched in the idioms of its respective hearers."⁵

What is important for us is to plant our feet more deeply on the path God has revealed to us. "When a Christian seeker asked the Dalai Lama whether she should become a Buddhist, his response, which I paraphrase, was: 'No, become more deeply Christian; live more deeply into your own tradition.'"⁶ May we cling more closely to the way to relationship with God shown to us by Jesus Christ, while trusting the Spirit of the Living God to move the hearts of God's people in ways that are beyond our comprehension.

¹ Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 740.

² Ibid, p. 743.

³ Cynthia M. Campbell, *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 51.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 53-54.

⁵ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 386.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003) p. 223.