

One Way?

John 14:1-14

9/30/18

Comedienne Cathy Ladman uses humor to express a view of religion which is becoming more and more common when she says, "All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt with different holidays!" I hope that guilt hasn't been your primary experience with religion, but the majority of Americans agreed with Ladman that all religions are basically the same and that they all lead to God. Unfortunately, that view puts us at odds with Jesus' statements in this morning's passage from John's gospel. Jesus and his disciples are having a final meal together before Jesus' crucifixion the next day. He has revealed to them that one of them will betray him, that he is leaving them soon, and that even Simon Peter will deny him. Following these disclosures, Jesus said,

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?<sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*

*<sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going."<sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the*

way?" <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1-6)

Jesus is comforting his fearful, confused disciples, whose whole world has been shaken by Jesus' latest revelations. He tells them not to continue being troubled, that instead they should trust him as they trust in God. Then he says he is going to prepare a place for them, and promises to return and take them with him to this new place. Looking back on these words, we understand that Jesus is speaking about going to heaven to prepare a place for his followers there. That's why this passage is often read at funerals. It gives us hope when someone we care about has died, that Jesus has a place prepared for them in heaven.

But the disciples didn't understand this yet. So when Jesus says that they know the way to the place he is going, they are baffled. Thomas speaks on behalf of all of them when he says that, no, they don't know where he is going or the way to get there. Then Jesus utters those words that many find so difficult today, "<sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Now if we hadn't gotten to know the Jesus who takes up the cause of the downtrodden, courageously takes on corrupt religious leaders, weeps at the grave of his friend, and humbly washes his disciples' feet, this would sound like the claim of a very arrogant man. And even with all that

knowledge about Jesus, the claim to be the only way to the Father would still be arrogant, unless it were true.

So let's spend a little time exploring this claim, especially in light of how jarring it sounds in a culture that believes there are many ways to God. But, let's look first at the assumptions behind that belief and see if they hold water. The first assumption is that God is unknowable, but each religion tries to contribute a little something to our knowledge about God. There is some truth in that. The Bible itself states that no one has ever seen God the Father. But if you've been paying attention during our study of John, you've noticed that everything changed when Jesus, the Word made flesh, entered our world on that first Christmas day. Before Jesus, it was true that God was to some degree unknowable. But, God graciously chose to reveal himself to us in the person of Jesus. John has been saying all through his gospel that Jesus shows us who God is, because, as Jesus himself said, "*The Father and I are one.*" (John 10:30) He will affirm this again in the verses that follow.

So, if you believe Jesus, the first assumption- that God is unknowable and therefore every religion is simply wandering around in the dark trying to blindly discern who God is- that assumption is not true. For God has chosen to reveal himself to us in a flesh-and-blood human being, that

people could see, hear and touch. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

The second assumption behind the belief that all religions lead to God is that all religions are pretty much the same. That is a nice, democratic statement, but it is simply not true, as even a cursory look at religions will reveal. Consider just the basic question: "What is God like?" While Christians and Jews and Muslims all believe in one God, Hindus may believe in one god, no god, or in literally millions of gods! Buddhists do not find it necessary to believe in God, arguing that the concept of a personal supreme being is unimportant at best, and an oppressive superstition at worst. Muslims, while believing in one God, are appalled by the idea that God could take on human form, experience human emotions, and suffer. And they reject any idea of a trinitarian God.

So, on the most basic question a religion must answer- "Who or what is God?"- the major religions offer vastly differing answers. Not to mention the thousands of fear-based animist religions whose goal is to appease the malevolent spirits that they believe control life. Simply stated, all religions are not the same!

So, there are some major problems with the culturally popular belief that all religions lead to God. But we must admit that there are also some

issues with Jesus' claim to be the only way to the Father. What happens to those born into religions that don't believe Jesus' claim, or who have never had a chance to hear about Jesus at all?

Commentator and pastor, Dale Bruner, says that we should keep two words in mind when answering these questions. The first is mission, meaning that those of us who follow Jesus have a responsibility to share the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ with others. That's how we address the problem faced by those who have never heard about Jesus; we tell them! After all, it's pretty selfish to keep Jesus to ourselves! The second word is mystery. We don't know what God is going to do with those who haven't heard about Jesus. However, we do know a couple things. God is just and fair and can be counted on to do the right thing for each of the creatures he has made and loves. In fact, John reminds us that it was God's love for the world that prompted him to send his Son into the world in the first place. God will do the right thing! I'm sure some of you will have other thoughts on this difficult issues. Feel free to raise them after the service with Lou!

Let's keep going, as the following verses may give us more clarity.

*<sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.*<sup>8</sup>*Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."*<sup>9</sup>*Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time,*

*Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. (John 14:7-11)*

Philip is asking to see God the Father, the desire of every true seeker after God. I think he was hoping for some kind of grand vision. But Jesus explicitly states that if you've seen him, you've seen the Father. And he says that if you don't believe what he says, then you should at least believe his works- the miracles, the signs, because they point to God working in the world through the Son. These verses are a very good summary of Jesus' claims about himself, claims that the leaders of other major religions have never made.

Let's look at the end of our passage that, unfortunately, raises new issues that are also difficult to understand!

*<sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father*

*may be glorified in the Son.* <sup>14</sup>*If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.* (John 14:12-14)

Really, Jesus? We are going to do GREATER works than you did? And if we ask you for ANYTHING, you will do it? How are we to understand these words, which seem absurd on their face? After all, Jesus turned water into wine, cured the lame, and raised the dead! In what sense are his followers going to do greater works than these? Well, there is always the possibility that Jesus is using hyperbole here, as he does a few other times, like when he talks about us having faith that will move whole mountains. But it may be that he was speaking quantitatively rather than qualitatively. Jesus ministered in a very small geographical area and had relatively few converts. After the coming of his Spirit in Acts 1 and 2, the disciples spread the message throughout the entire Roman empire and beyond, and thousands and eventually millions would become followers of Jesus. Perhaps those are the greater works Jesus had in mind.

But, how about the promise that Jesus will do anything we ask for? Notice that the purpose of the promise is that the Father will be glorified in the Son. In other words, God the Father must be given honor in any request he grants. In fact, Jesus specifies that the request is to be made “in his name.” That’s why we usually end our prayers by saying, “in Jesus name.” But just adding that phrase to a selfish prayer doesn’t somehow

baptize it and make it acceptable! A request “in Jesus name” means that it is consistent with his character and mission. And part of Jesus’ character was trusting that God knew best.

Still, this is a very difficult promise for me, and I don’t pretend to understand exactly what it means. I’ve seen many prayer requests go unfulfilled that seem to me to be ones that would honor God. But, after sometimes venting my frustration with God’s answer, I accept that God knows best, and move on. And verses like this one prompt me to keep on praying!

Let’s sum up. Many people today believe that Jesus was just a very good, moral teacher, like other moral teachers who have founded other religions. But Jesus hasn’t really left us that option of thinking about him. A man who claims to be one with God, who claims if you’ve seen him, you’ve seen God, who claims to be the only way to God- such a man would be anything but a good moral teacher, unless those claims were true. I think we’ve only got three choices regarding Jesus’ identity. We can say that Jesus was deluded- that he really thought he was God, but wasn’t. We can say that he was a megalomaniac- that he knew he wasn’t God, but wanted to deceive people into believing he was. Or, we can say that he was God in the flesh- the way, the truth, and the life. Those are the choices. What do you believe?