

“Jesus: The Way. The *Only* Way?”

John 14.6; Philippians 2:9-11; Acts 4:12; Matthew 7:13-14

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It was the winter of 2008, about eight and a half years ago, and I was interviewing for a job. I was having phone interviews with Pastor Nominating Committees all around the country. Two churches wanted to fly me out for a face-to-face visit. One was a certain stone church in a certain county seat in mid-Michigan. The other was a newer church in Florida. I flew to Michigan, where the PNC gathered in Margaret Doolittle’s living room on a cold day and peppered me with question after question. I flew to Florida, where the PNC gathered outside in a backyard veranda on a warm evening and peppered me with question after question. The discussions were similar but the contrast in weather was striking!

I don’t remember all the members of that Florida PNC clearly, but a few stand out. There was the chair of the committee, a woman who had her heart set on me becoming the next pastor of that church. There was a high school student, a football player, representing the youth of the church. And then there was the middle-aged man who had offered to drive me back to my hotel after we were done having dinner that night. A friendly guy ... with a question he wanted to ask me in private.

In that community there was a small but modest Muslim population. They had a mosque there in the city. In the wake of 9/11, the previous pastor’s wife had reached out to the mosque, in a gesture of friendship, and she had arranged for a series of educational events where the Christians at the church and the Muslims at the mosque had an opportunity to engage in some dialogue, to learn more about each other’s faith. All of that was well and good; in the world we’re living in, it’s important that Christians have *accurate* understandings of people of other faiths, especially Muslims. There’s a lot of fear out there, and a lot of misconceptions. My chauffeur from the PNC had attended some of these dialogues, and had learned some things, and he appreciated that, but something was bugging him. There was something he wanted to hear that he wasn’t hearing. It felt to him like the whole tenor of the discussion was missing something important, something vital, something crucial. What he wanted to hear *someone* from the church leadership say was what Jesus says in John 14.6: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” So his question for me was: *Do Presbyterians still believe that’s true?* Or have we given up on that idea in the name of multiculturalism and diversity? He wanted to know my opinion. This wasn’t an *interview* question. This was a *spiritual* question. He was seriously wondering whether he *belonged* in the Presbyterian Church any more.

We sat in his car in the parking lot of the hotel and talked for more than an hour.

Ultimately that stone church in Michigan successfully wooed me, that church in Florida called somebody they liked better, and I have absolutely no idea if that man with that question still worships at that Presbyterian church ... or if he decided he needed to find another church home.

But the question remains. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Not, "*a way, a truth, a life.*" Do we believe that Jesus is *the way*? That the *only* way to the Father is through him?

The face of religion is changing dramatically in our country. Christianity is shrinking; Judaism is shrinking; Hinduism is growing; Islam is growing. The Pew Research Center is projecting that within another 20 years there will be more Muslims in this country than Jews. Muslims are constantly being discussed in the news, thanks to a certain political candidate's views and because of all the violence that some Muslims have committed, like what happened in Orlando a week ago. There are those who think all Muslims are terrorists – which is about as idiotic as thinking that all Christians support the actions and views of the Westboro Baptist Church. There is a lot of ignorance out there. Efforts to promote greater awareness and understanding are *important*. People need to be working with *facts*. The more we can educate ourselves with *real* information rather than sensationalist garbage, the better. Given that there was a Muslim population in that Florida city, it was *good* that there was dialogue going on.

But: should we stop there? Is education *sufficient*? Or as Christians, is there *more* we need to be doing? It's one thing to engage in a fairly academic discussion about what different faiths believe. I remember my Religion 101 course, my first semester in college; we learned some pretty basic information about all the major world religions, a week or two on each one. It was good, though fairly superficial – imagine trying to shrink Christianity down into four one-hour lectures and two discussion sections. It was all academic, all bookish, all "hands-off"ish, as if we could detach ourselves, set our faith on the side, and look at these various religions as if we were looking at specimens under a microscope.

But the thing about religion is ... *it's personal*. We're talking about what we *believe to be true*. In some cases, believe *very strongly*. If we worship Jesus as Lord, if he says he's the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through him, then *isn't that true*? Don't we need to be trying to persuade other people – *including* people of other faiths – to *join* us in worshipping Jesus? We used to send missionaries all over the world; a century or so ago we Presbyterians sent many missionaries to Korea, to convert the people who lived there, and we were *wildly* successful in that endeavor – the largest Presbyterian church in the world today is in Seoul, South Korea. Nowadays, we have growing numbers of Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims and Wiccans living right in our own communities. Some of you work with people of other faiths; some of you are friends with people of other faiths. If Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him, then what do we *do* about these co-workers and friends who believe in a different God, or a set of gods? Do we tell them that *we're right* and *they're wrong*? Do we tell them, as some Christians do, that unless they become a Christian they're going to burn in hell for all eternity? Or do we never bring up the subject of what *we* believe? Respect for other cultures, showing kindness to people who are different than we are, appreciating diversity – these are good values, right? Wouldn't it just be easier for *everyone* – and potentially a lot less dangerous, less risky, less potentially *violent* – if we all just learned to *get along*, regardless of what people believe? Put a "Coexist" bumper sticker on your

car, and preach tolerance? You can have your faith, and I can have mine – and let's just respect each other's views and try not to hurt each other. The world would be a more peaceful place, right?

But how do we square that with some of those verses in the New Testament that sure make it sound like Jesus has a *monopoly* on truth? Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Peter says: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." (Acts 4.12) Paul says: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2.9-11) And Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, says: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matthew 7.13-14) Jesus is the Way. But is he the *only* Way?

When Katharine and I got married, we received a wedding gift from one of my dad's colleagues at the university – a Hindu. It was a wall decoration, a round object, about a foot and a half wide, embossed with a representation of a dancing Shiva, one of the primary Hindu gods. It wasn't labeled, but I had learned enough about Hinduism as a religious studies major at a secular liberal arts college to be able to identify it easily. I was uncertain what to do with it. I felt like two of my core values were clashing. It was a nice gift, something that was clearly important and meaningful to my dad's colleague. I could appreciate it as an object of art, even as an expression of faith. But not *my* faith. I was a Christian, heading off to seminary. Do I hang a representation of a Hindu god on our living room wall? Somebody else had given us another wall hanging, with a quote from Joshua 24.15: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." That one was *definitely* going up. But what do I do with the other?

In an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, questions like these are going to keep coming up. Those of you who work at the university, or in the medical field, probably deal with questions like these on a regular basis. How much do you practice *tolerance* and *respect*? How much do you keep silent about what you believe about Jesus? How much are you willing to *express your faith*? And is it *really* the case that all those people who practice other religions are completely *misguided*, even *wrong*?

I am not going to wrap all this up in a neat and tidy fashion this morning. We're going to spend three more weeks wrestling with these matters. Fred and Charlie are going to help us wrestle: both of them will be here, in the pulpit, soon. Fred will be here next week; Charlie will be here July 10. I've asked them to each come at this issue, at these scripture passages, though I have not told them what I want them to say. I'll let the Holy Spirit guide them. I'll let the Holy Spirit guide *me* when I take my turn on July 17 (which gives me the benefit of listening to Fred and Charlie's wisdom first!). But in the meantime, I really want you to do some wrestling on your own. Look up those four passages that I shared with you this morning. What do you think they *really* mean? What implications do they have for the way we interact with people of other faiths? If we value tolerance and respect, then how do we square that with what these passages say? If these scriptures really are *God's Word* to us, then how do we interpret them *faithfully* in today's radically diverse world? Is Jesus truly the *only* way? Let us pray...

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