

I am the Way and the Truth and the Life

John 14: 1-7

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We've been exploring the "I Am" statements in the gospel of John, exploring who Jesus is. So far we've heard that Jesus is the good shepherd, the gate, the resurrection and the life, the bread of life, and the light of the world. Today Jesus is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. That sounds fine. But then Jesus says, "no one comes to Abba, which translates, the Father, except through me." To our modern ears this sounds very exclusive and we have likely heard this passage used as ammunition for seeing Christianity as the only path. On a day when we are hosting a forum on Christianity and Islam with the hope of better understanding our Muslim neighbors, it seems important for us to dig into this passage, understand it and its context a little better, and to find a place for it.

With this passage it is very helpful to understand the context of the Gospel of John.

The gospel of John was written three generations after the death of Jesus. If we are looking for the historical Jesus, words the historical Jesus would have said, we will have better luck in the other three gospels. If I was to write the gospel of Todd, I would use the voice of Jesus to respond to the challenges of our time. The writer of John is using the voice of Jesus to respond to the challenges of his time. This gospel is written for a particular community of Jews who are followers of Jesus, and experiencing a painful separation from the synagogue.

There's been tension for a while in this synagogue over whether Jesus leads a Jew closer to God and torah, or whether Jesus is a distraction from life with God. This tension is now leading to separation. If any of us are engaging in daily battle with family and friends on Facebook because of the election, we may have a window into the conflict and pain that comes when family and friends live in different tribes. John's community is separating from their tribe. Our passage starts with, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," because of this reality. John's community of Jews was separating from the center of religious life, and all kinds of conflict follows that, conflict in friendships, and family relationships and more.

The gospel of John as a whole is constantly defending and affirming this community. Sometimes this gospel writer is angry at his adversary. Understandable. Maybe we can cut this writer a little slack. Would you want people 2000 years from now to judge you based on your angriest Facebook posts? Most of all, this gospel writer is trying to build this community up, give it confidence. To help it grow its faith and trust its faith. The next line provides direction and assurance. "Believe in God, believe also in me." The writer is saying, "It is ok to believe the way we do. It's ok to have made this separation. You are faithful." Keeping this background in mind will be helpful.

In conversation with our own Bible scholar Bill Poehlmann, Bill said that at the heart of the gospel of John is the view that Jesus is the core of what Jewish life and belief now are.

John's saying, that where you used to follow torah, now Jesus holds all of torah. In his self-sacrificing, self-giving life of love, Jesus is the torah now. Jesus is the way, the path. The truth for John is that in Jesus one can now see and know God in a way never before possible. For John, Jesus is the access point to abundant life. You get to abundant life through Jesus who holds all of what Judaism has been. This is a creative recasting of Jewish faith.

As scholar Gail O'Day says, this passage's statement that "there is no way to the Father except through me," is not the sweeping claim of a world religion." It is a statement trying to support the faith of a small community that is reimagining Judaism with Jesus at the center. When we hear this statement, we think it is answering the question, "are other faith traditions legitimate? And the answer appears to be, "No." But that isn't the question that John's community is asking. They are asking the opposite question, "Is it legitimate to practice Judaism like this?" "Are we being faithful to God?" This gospel answers "yes" as powerfully as it can. It would have been hard for this gospel writer to imagine a time like ours where the practices of his community had become its own religion, on equal footing with Judaism, not to mention Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and others.

The intent of this verse, no one comes to the father but through me, isn't to cast others out. The intent is to encourage an uncertain faith community. Any time we hear this verse being used to cast people out, it is an unfaithful interpretation.

I think the intent of this passage as well as the content in this I Am statement can help us. We have some similarities with John's community. We are not the Christian majority. We are not Catholic and many are here having left Catholicism. We are not Evangelical, and many are here having left Evangelicalism because that worldview does not hold anymore. We are not even Lutheran, but we still enjoy the Lutheran jokes. We are also not secular. Many of us are on the fence between the secular and the sacred world. We wonder if there can be something helpful in this sacred spiritual tradition. This is where our church is.

Like John's community, we may be uncertain too. Some who have come from other Christian tribes may be asking "is this really faithful? Others may be feeling like they are leaving their tribe if they are trying out Christianity, considering being something more than secular. We might be asking, "is it ok to be Christian like this?"

Like the writer of the gospel of John, I want to communicate that it is ok for us to be who we are. We are a legitimate strand of the Christian faith, tracing our history back to the Pilgrims. We are a strand that came into being with a commitment to freedom of conscience, an openness to the challenges of interpreting an ancient tradition in the modern world. We are just as Christian as anyone else and we will very naturally take all that we are learning about our neighbors and about the natural world and examine our faith because of it. But we will practice the Christian faith at the same time to keep our hearts open to the transforming power in our tradition.

As we navigate our place in the Christian faith, this bridge between the sacred and the secular, this place of refuge for those who have come to us from other Christian tribes, seeing Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life can be a helpful focal point for us. Keep it simple. The self-sacrificing life of Jesus shows us what we need to know, and it will lead us towards the Holy.

When I served as a pastor in Wisconsin, a family with young children started attending worship. They attended for a while and asked about joining. The dad, John asked to meet with me. John was a great guy, extremely smart, very funny. He was an aspiring writer but was working as a guidance counselor at the Alternative High School. The more complicated the challenges a youth was facing, the more he liked to be with him or her.

John sat down and said to me. "I don't think I can join the church." "Ok." I said. He said, "I don't believe in the things I'm supposed to believe." "What are you supposed to believe?" I asked. "Well, I assume you have to believe something about God sending Jesus to die on the cross for my sins." "That's not what excites me about Christianity." That's not a deal breaker. "Oh, well then what do I need to believe?" "Is there anything you like about Christianity?" I asked. "I like Jesus. I like the way he acts, what he does. He's for justice, he's bold. It's Christians that drive me crazy. Not you, of course." Thanks, I said. "I can't stand Christian hypocrisy. Saying you are loving and not being loving. "Do you see anything hypocritical in Jesus? No, he said. "If Christianity was just following the life of Jesus, allowing that life to guide you, what would you think?" "I'd be in," he said. "But wouldn't there be a bunch of stuff missing?" "I think the rest will sort itself out." John ended up joining the church, pausing after each baptismal promise, thinking through it before he agreed.

If we are wondering how to navigate the Christian life, I think this passage from the Gospel of John can be helpful. Jesus is the way, the path. Pay attention to the self-giving life of Jesus. Love God and neighbor. Stretch your boundaries of who is welcome. See value in those who are undervalued. Serve the poorest and most vulnerable. Meditate and pray. Sacrifice for others. When we pay attention to the life pattern of Jesus, the truth is, we will discover God on this path. We will come face to face with the holy and we will be transformed. We will step into a different kind of life.

I have no reason to say that Jesus is the only way to God. I don't believe the writer of the Gospel of John would be saying that living in 2017. I do believe that this gospel writer would be assuring us that the self-sacrificing way of Jesus holds everything we really need for the transformation of our lives and to be a community that is transforming the world.

Maybe most of the complications and confusion of the Christian faith can be simplified when the self-giving life of Jesus becomes our focal point. This may be a surprising gift that the gospel of John has to offer. May it be so. Amen.