

**BEING CHRISTIAN AMONG MANY FAITHS:  
RE-HEARING “THE WAY AND THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE”**

John 14:1-14

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on April 27, 20008, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**Focus Text**

**John 14:1-14**

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? 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.*

*And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 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’? 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. 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.*

*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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*

**Explanation of Series**

This is the second of five sermons in a series entitled “Being Christian Among Many Faiths.”

- One reason I am preaching this series is that, as you just heard, our church is in a process of envisioning the course of our ministry over the next few years, now that our major effort to renovate our building has been completed. I hope you will participate in that charting by attending one the town meetings next Sunday or May 19.
- Perhaps the most important role your ministers play in this process is to set a theological tone for our congregation and its ministry. Our task as pastors is to articulate a theological integrity for Westminster Presbyterian Church and ways we can embody our beliefs in this community. Much of the preaching in the upcoming year will relate to that effort.

I have chosen the title of this series – “Being Christian Among Many Faiths” – for two reasons.

First, as a Presbyterian congregation, we are Christian.

- We believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- We believe in the Trinitarian God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Scripture is the primary source and expression of faith to which we turn.
- And the Reformed heritage, as expressed through eleven confessions of faith written at different points in history, serves as both the foundation of what we believe and the umbrella under which exercise our belief as we live together with differing gifts, interpretations and emphases.

We are thus, first and foremost, Christian.

Second, as a congregation and as individuals, we are more aware than at any time in our history that we are Christian “among many faiths.” Increased immigration from countries with less than Christian majorities, increased global communications, and, since 9/11, a practical need to know about other religions have combined to make us aware that being Christian today means “Being Christian Among Many Faiths.”<sup>1</sup>

*Let us pray: “Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; kindle the flame of sacred love; in these cold yet expectant hearts of ours. Amen.”*

I begin by sharing with you what as a minister I believe we know about salvation and what we don’t know. As I indicated last Sunday, words from *The Study Catechism* used for teaching in our denomination since 1998 express my belief well:

No one will be lost who can be saved.

The limits of salvation, whatever they may be, are known to God.

Three truths above all are certain:

- God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with.
- No one will be saved except by grace alone.
- And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The position expressed in these words does not claim that all will be saved. Neither does it claim that we know who will be saved and who, if any, will not be saved. Rather, this position holds that *only God knows* and, that as we know God in Jesus Christ, *we know God to be gracious and merciful*. “No judge could...be more gracious than...Jesus Christ.”

As a minister, I take these words to mean that we live with the mystery of a gracious God and that we neither know nor control the ultimate fate of any human being, including ourselves. As to who is ultimately saved, I trust the graciousness of God with that decision.

## I.

At first hearing, the position I have outlined may sound contrary to the familiar words in our scripture passage today. In this passage, read so often at memorial services, 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...<sup>3</sup>

These words sound clear and unequivocal:

- Jesus is the only way to God.
- Jesus is the truth; no other truth has the status of the truth of Christ.
- Jesus is the life; no other claim about life has the authority of his claim.

This interpretation of John 14:6 seems consistent with one of our confessions, *The Larger Catechism of The Westminster Confession of Faith*, written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

Question 60: Can they who have never heard the gospel, and so know not Jesus Christ nor believe in him, be saved....?

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia M. Campbell, *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Study Catechism*, Question 49.

<sup>3</sup> John 14:6 NRSV.

Answer: They who having never heard the gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in him, cannot be saved, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the laws of nature, or the laws of that religion which they profess...<sup>4</sup>

From the answer to Question 60 and from the quote in John 14:6, it seems that the *only* way to “come to” salvation is through our personal faith in Jesus Christ.

## II.

If this is true, how do we account for the less defined position in the teaching catechism of 1998? Has the passage of time led us simply to water down our understanding of salvation?

I think not. Follow me closely.

In making the claim that salvation comes only through Christ, the *Larger Catechism* cites ten New Testament passages, but it does not cite John 14:6 – “the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>5</sup> Yet for some reason, the framers of the *Larger Catechism* did not see Jesus’ words to Thomas as worth citing in making a claim that salvation comes exclusively through Christ.

Following the instinct of the framers, I believe that in John 14:6 Jesus is not shutting the door to salvation as quickly or as tightly as it at first appears.

When Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life,” he is engaged in an intimate conversation with his closest disciples in which he is preparing them for his death.

He has just shared the Passover meal with them.<sup>6</sup>

He has just washed their feet following the meal.<sup>7</sup>

He has just told them that he will be betrayed<sup>8</sup> and that Peter will deny him.<sup>9</sup>

He has just given them a new commandment to “love one another” just as he has loved them.<sup>10</sup> As a mother brings a child to her lap to whisper in the child’s ear, so Jesus whispers words of assurance to his disciples:

Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself: that where I am there you may be also. And [where] I go you know, and the way you know.

At this point a disciple named Thomas, who must have been a concrete, literal thinker, interrupts Jesus’ slew of images by saying: “Lord, we do not know the place you are going? [Since we don’t know the place,] how can we know the way?”

Jesus then says: “*I am* the way and the truth and the life; no one comes into [this relationship with] the Father but by me. If you know me, you know my Father also. From now on you do know him and you have seen him.”

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<sup>4</sup> *The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, Question 60.

<sup>5</sup> At various points in the answer to this question, the following verses are cited: Romans 10:14; II Thessalonians 1:8,9; Acts 4:12; Romans 1:18-32; Romans 3:9-19; John 4:22; Philippians 3:4-10; John 6:39, 44; John 17:9.

<sup>6</sup> John 13:1.

<sup>7</sup> John 13:3-11.

<sup>8</sup> John 13:18-20.

<sup>9</sup> John 13:21-30.

<sup>10</sup> John 13:31-35.

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Jesus then goes on to promise his disciples that the Holy Spirit will come once he departs, that their sorrow will turn into joy, and that they will find peace.<sup>11</sup>  
He concludes with a long and beautiful prayer for them.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, when Jesus says “*I am*,” he is using a beautiful phrase familiar to his disciples.

- “I am the light of the world.”<sup>13</sup>
- “I am the good shepherd.”<sup>14</sup>
- “I am the bread of life.”<sup>15</sup>

“I am” is an ancient Hebrew name for God passed down to Jesus’ disciples as YAHWEH and to us as Jehovah.<sup>16</sup> As he is preparing his disciples for his death, he is identifying himself as God in the most familiar, intimate, and comforting terms. “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

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I suspect that one reason the *Larger Catechism* does not footnote John 14:6 in making its claims about the exclusivity of salvation through Christ is that its writers knew this was not the passage to use.

- They knew that Jesus was presiding over a beautiful farewell, not conducting a nuanced seminar concerning whether Jews, Muslims, non-believers would have a place in God’s future.
- He was simply comforting those closest to him and re-assuring them of their part in his relationship with his own Father.

### III.

So are you confused yet?

If so, that is understandable, for we have several sets of contrasts roaming around in this sermon:

- Words from one part of our confessional heritage – “Those who...know not Jesus Christ ... cannot be saved...”  
*versus*
- Words from another part of that same heritage – “The limits of salvation, whatever they be, are known to God”;  
*plus*
- Words we think sound definitive “I am the way and the truth and the life”  
*versus*
- A sermon that questions whether theological definitiveness is the purpose of these words.

With such conflicting messages, what are *we* to do? How are *we* to “[Be] Christian Among Many Faiths”?

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<sup>11</sup> John 14:15-31; 16:5-33.

<sup>12</sup> John 17:1-25.

<sup>13</sup> John 8:12-20.

<sup>14</sup> John 10:1-21.

<sup>15</sup> John 6:35-39.

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 3:13-22.

#### IV.

Let me suggest four ways:

First, we are to acknowledge that we are recipients of an enormously rich relationship with Jesus Christ.

- We know Christ from prior to his birth: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”<sup>17</sup>
- We know Christ through the beautiful experiences we have surrounding his birth: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus...”<sup>18</sup>
- We know him through his parables and his healings, his reaching out to sinners and tax collectors, his loving those whom no one else loved.
- We pray his prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven...”
- We were “there when they crucified my Lord”; “we lift high [his] cross”; and in it we “glory.”<sup>19</sup>
- When “the strife is o’er and the victory won,” we sing “Christ the Lord is risen today.”<sup>20</sup>
- We pray: “Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove...”<sup>21</sup> and when he comes, our hearts feel “strangely warmed.”<sup>22</sup>
- And when we stand at the graveside of one we love, we pray: “O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in thy great mercy grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.”<sup>23</sup>

In “Being Christian Among Many Faiths,” our first task is to acknowledge what we know.

Our second task is to acknowledge what we don’t know. Even though we know Jesus Christ and benefit immensely from him, we cannot enter into his relationship with another human being: Christian or non-Christian, believer or non-believer, adherent of another faith or of no faith. It is simply beyond our pale to enter into someone else’s relationship with God.

In the meantime, which is the only time we currently know, our third task, when the time is right, when the place is appropriate, when dynamics of the relationship allow it, is to share, as Jesus did, what *we* know of *our* relationship with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and then trust that what God does with our sharing will be consistent with God’s good purposes.

Finally, confident of God’s good purposes, we can live our daily lives, and our church can live in this community, following words from still another part of our confessional heritage, *A Brief Statement of Faith*, affirming

In sovereign love...  
God makes everyone equally in God’s image,  
Male and female, of every race and people,  
To live as one community

*and*

The Spirit gives us courage...  
To work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.”<sup>24</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 2:1.

<sup>19</sup> *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*, #102, 371, 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, #119, 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, #126.

<sup>22</sup> This is the famous phrase of John Wesley, founder of Methodism, in describing his conversion experience.

<sup>23</sup> A prayer from the funeral service of the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, 1946, often referred to as “Cardinal Newman’s Prayer.”

<sup>24</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *A Brief Statement of Christian Faith*.