

Life: Bold and spicy

Is Jesus the Only Savior?

Acts 4:12; John 14:6

November 25, 2007

I was sitting with a friend in my favorite Indian restaurant – a place where I eat often – and suddenly my friend asked, “So, Matt, you’re friends with the waiters here. You know them all by name. But none of them are Christians. Do you really believe that the religion they follow is all wrong and that what you believe is all right? I mean, can you look at all your friends here – people you obviously love and respect – and then tell me that your Jesus is the only way to find salvation and truth?”

I said, “Wow, those are good questions!” How would you answer them? How could we possibly say that our way is better than someone else’s way? What kind of God would include some people and then exclude others based on a different religion? How can we say that people – all people on the face of the earth – can find salvation in Jesus alone?

As a follower of Jesus I can’t ignore these questions anymore. Fifty or thirty years ago we could have brushed off these questions but we can’t afford to ignore them anymore. Due to cultural factors like globalization and immigration, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims are not longer exotic people “over there,” they are our neighbors, co-workers, friends, doctors, teachers and classmates.

The Core of the Christian Story. These factors have made these questions more relevant. They also make it harder to accept the core of the Christian story about Jesus. In our two readings from the Bible you heard the core of what Christians believe about Jesus. The early Christians lived in a culture as diverse as ours and yet they believed something very specific about Jesus. Read Acts 4:12. Where did they get this strange notion that Jesus is the only way? Well, they believed they received right from the lips of Jesus Himself (read John 14:6).

So for a moment let’s allow the force of these statements to sink in. “There is salvation in one else.” Really? And the early church would say, “Yes, really.” Here’s the background to the startling claim in chapter 4 verse 12. In chapter 3 two followers of Jesus named Peter and John have healed a man who was lame for forty years. This caused a stir so in the next two chapters Peter gave a few mini-sermons about who really healed the man – Jesus. And you’ll notice that the claim is that Jesus isn’t just some local tribal god among many others gods; he’s not just one way among many ways. In 3:15 Jesus is called “the Author of Life.” In 3:22 it claims that Jesus is the fulfillment of a 1,500 year old prophecy. In 3:25 it claims that all the families on the face of the earth – not just some but all – “are to be blessed through Jesus.”

Then in chapter 4 the religious leaders demanded an explanation so in verse 7 they asked, “By what power or what name did you do this?” Notice – because this is very interesting

and shocking – how Peter moved from the local to universal, the lowly and despised to the exalted and glorious. In 4:10 he says, “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified.” Everyone knew that Nazareth was a local, little, ordinary town. It’s like saying, “The Savior of the World – the one, universal Savior for all humanity – was born in Buffalo, New York or Duluth, Minnesota.” We might say, “Hey, why not Manhattan or Beijing or London or Tokyo or Washington, D.C.? But Buffalo or Duluth? What kind of Savior-of-the-world is that?” Then notice that this Savior of the world had a common name – Jesus, or just Josh for short. He’s a regular guy as we might say. And then, even more shocking, the world’s Savior and King was murdered, but not just murdered: he was crucified as a common, pathetic criminal. He suffered, we wept and then he died. As verse 11 says, He was and is in so many ways, “the stone which the builders rejected.” He was cast out as unusable and unfit for anything.

So we get a clear picture of the Savior of the world: humble, ordinary, rejected and despised. And now we’re ready to hear the shocking force of Acts 4:12 – “Salvation is found in *no one else*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Again, they weren’t the first ones to make this claim. Jesus started this shocking claim when he said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Is this narrow? As philosopher Peter Kreeft says, “Yes it is. Reality is (sometimes) terribly narrow. There is only one operation that can save you ... only one answer to the equation, only one place a body can be at one time, only one living spouse to be married to. There’s only one correct formula for Pepsi; other formulas give you other things. Other saviors save you from things other than sin – if they save at all.”

So Christians say that this ordinary, humble, suffering Jesus is the only one who can save us. He is the only path. Notice how they focused on his NAME. In the New Testament it is calling on the name of Jesus that saves us (see also Acts 10:43 and Romans 10:12-13). In the ancient world, calling on someone’s name didn’t just mean repeating their name – as in “Matt, Matt, Matt” – it meant calling on the essence of the person, all that they are and all that they can do for you. So when a little girl calls out, “Daddy, there’s a rattle snake by my feet, save me!” she knows that her daddy will come and kill the snake and save her because she has called on his name. She knows her father’s name – she knows that he is trustworthy and loving and powerful. And for those first followers of Jesus, calling on the Name of Jesus was the same as calling on the Name of the True God and it was the only way to get saved.

In a moment, we’ll look at what the word saved means, but for now, let’s be honest and say that this shocking claim raises at least two common objections:

Objection #1 – All religions are basically the same. And if they are basically the same, who am I to judge someone else’s religion. It just sounds like, “My God can beat up your God.” To begin with there certainly are points of contact between the way of Jesus and the major world religions, especially on moral issues. Nearly all religions teach some form of being nice to others, honoring the elderly, restraining your sexual appetites, giving to the poor, and practicing some kind of disciplined life. So based on this surface

agreement, some people assume that this implies that all religions are the same. So maybe my friend and the Indian restaurant was right - she even has Oprah on her side. Oprah once remarked, "One of the biggest mistakes we make is to believe there is only one way. There are many diverse paths leading to God." There you have it.

Unfortunately, this fails to grapple with the deep, radically different assumptions about life, God, salvation, sin, forgiveness, etc. that underlie every world religion. For instance, take one simple comparison: Christianity and Hinduism. God is not the goal of Hinduism; Nirvana is. So while followers of Jesus envision a personal, loving relationship between an "I" or a "you" and a loving God who has been revealed to us in the person of Jesus, Hindus envision a state of soul without knowing, desiring, suffering or without an "I" or a "you." Through Christ you get to become your true and deepest self. In Hinduism your self is extinguished forever. Followers of Jesus see our chief flaw as sin; while Hindus believe that the main problem with humanity is ignorance. Thus, the Hindu concept of salvation is radically different: the Christian life is all about reconciliation with God; Hindus seek self-understanding and inner enlightenment. The Fatherhood of God is a crucial part of the Christian story; in contrast, Shankara, a respected Hindu thinker, once said that theism is only a child's way to help you discover that you and god are not distinct from each other.

All religions are not basically the same. That's sort of like saying that all sports are exactly the same. Some people who don't appreciate sports at all make the comment, "They're all the same. Baseball, basketball, soccer - they're basically the same because they all involve moving a ball around a field." People that actually play or watch these sports would disagree. They aren't the same game. They would say, "You don't understand my game. You haven't taken the time to understand how soccer is radically different than baseball." In the same way, to say that all religions are the same may be a way to say, "I really don't know that much about them and I'm too lazy to investigate them on their own terms." All "religious roads" don't lead to the same place. And it doesn't show respect for the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim or the Christian to say that they're all the same thing.

Objection #2 – Saying Jesus is the only way leads to arrogance and oppression. And then the objection will continue with "And I've met some Christians who have been real jerks – pushy, self-righteous, smug, unfriendly, domineering and mean. Who are you to say that you have the *only* way to God?"

So what do we say to the charge of arrogance and exclusivity? First of all, we need to humbly confess to God and admit to others that they have a valid point. We have been pushy and arrogant and self-righteous and even oppressive. I've been self-righteous and unkind in my own home let alone on the world scene. There's an Indian proverb (quoted by Ravi Zacharias) that says, "Once you cut off a person's nose, there's no point in giving him a rose to smell." We believe that Jesus is the Rose of Life, but we've cut off a lot of noses and then tried to say, "Here, smell our Rose, Jesus, or we'll kill you." We need to say we're sorry for being so un-Christ-like, so pushy, unkind, smug and unloving.

Actually, the whole message of the Gospel (the Christian word for the whole story of good news found in Jesus Christ) should produce a profoundly humble posture in Christians. Remember that Jesus, the Savior of the world, came as an ordinary Savior who didn't conquer by oppressing people or forcing others to convert, but by showing sacrificial love by dying for his enemies. There is no passage in the New Testament to justify doing evil to others in order to convert them to Christianity.

It's the exact opposite. For example, after 9-11 many people came to Pastor Tim Keller in Manhattan and asked him, "What does your faith have to offer me at a time like this, a time when mothers and fathers and children have been violently killed?" And Pastor Keller would reply, "Christianity is the only faith that tells you that God lost a child in an act of violent injustice. Christianity is the only (faith), therefore, that tells you God has suffered as you have suffered." Or as someone else has put it, "Jesus is the only God with wounds." That's the path of sacrificial, humble, identifying-with-us love that Jesus walked with us and for us. And that should make us incredibly humble and gentle as we seek to share the message of Christ with others. Any form of personal smugness or racial or cultural superiority is not Gospel love. Anytime we say, "We're better than you because we're Christians or we're from a Christian nation we deny the humility and redemptive love of our Lord and Savior.

But while we remain humble in our interactions with others, as a follower of Jesus, I have to remain true to what he claimed about himself. Jesus made some astounding claims about himself: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; "I and the Father are one ... if you've seen my, you've seen (God) the Father." "I am the Bread of the World"; "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst." Coming from the lips of this ordinary, small-town carpenter, these claims are shocking. No other religious figure has ever dared to make such daunting claims about him self. Jesus is unique and his claims are unique.

For instance, there's a parable advocating religious diversity about blind men analyzing an elephant. One blind man touches the elephant's leg and says, "Wow, it's like a tree." Another touches the tail and says, "No, it's flexible and thin." Another touches the elephant's side and exclaims, "It's like a wall." Supposedly, this parable teaches us to be very humble in our approach to other faiths because they all have a slice of the truth. But here's the catch to the parable: there is an elephant! There is something objectively there. What if the elephant touched the eyes of all the blind men so they could see the elephant clearly? What if the elephant revealed himself in fullness to the blind men? That's what the New Testament claims about Jesus. He is the perfect picture of God (see Colossians 1:15 and John 1:18). Jesus made a very clear statement: "When you look at me, you've seen the true God in the flesh." God is disclosed in Christ so we don't see partially any more; we see the whole thing; the whole elephant; the whole revelation of God's nature and character. If that is true, then it would be silly to say, "No, I'd rather just have the tail or the trunk or the side of God."

Jesus: the heart of everything. So back to my friend's questions at the Curry Club Restaurant: what did I tell her? What did I say to her seeking heart? Well, I fumbled

around and, honestly, I can't even remember what I told her, but I can tell you what I tried to say or what I would like to say if I could do it all over again. I would tell her, "Ruth, for me, the crux of your question centers on Jesus. I do believe what he said – that "there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved."

But then I would try to explain what I and the Bible mean by the word "saved." So I would say something like this: "You know, Ruth, because of who Jesus is I believe that he saved me. I know that word smacks of religiosity, but let me try to share what I think of when I hear the word "saved." The Good News of Jesus tells us that we were in trouble – big trouble – and we couldn't get out of it by ourselves. We all have this problem called sin, this problem of missing the mark in our moral life, our spiritual life and in our relationship with others. I miss the mark every day. And I need advice. I need instruction on how not to miss the mark. But I need something else: I need someone to get into the pit of sin and mark-missing and pull me out of it. I need grace. I need deliverance. I need salvation. I need a Savior.

Theologian James Edwards retells the following true story to illustrate our need to be saved: In August 1957 four climbers – two Italians and two Germans – were climbing in the 6,000 foot near-vertical North Face in Swiss Alps. The two German climbers disappeared and were never heard from again. The two Italian climbers, exhausted and dying, were stuck on two narrow ledges a thousand feet below the summit. The Swiss Alpine Club forbade rescue attempts in this area (it was just too dangerous), a small group of Swiss climbers decided to launch a private rescue effort to save the Italians. So they carefully lowered a climber named Alfred Hellepart down the 6,000 foot North Face on a steep cable a fraction of an inch thick.

Here's how Hellepart described the rescue in his own words: "*As I was lowered down the summit ... my comrades on top grew further and further distant, until they disappeared from sight. At this moment I felt an indescribable aloneness. Then for the first time I peered down the abyss of the North Face of the Eiger. The terror of the sight robbed me of breath ... The brooding blackness of the Face, falling away in almost endless expanse beneath me, made me look with awful longing to the thin cable disappearing about me in the mist. I was a tiny human being dangling in space between heaven and hell. The sole relief from terror was ... my mission to save the climber below.*"¹

That is the heart of the Gospel story. We were trapped, but God himself, in the person and presence of Jesus, lowered himself into the indescribable aloneness, the abyss of our sin and suffering. He did it to be with us and he did it for us. He did it to save the climbers below – you and me. We see it in the life of Jesus; we see it especially in the cross of Jesus.

The Gospel is much more radical than just another religion telling me how to be good in my own power. It tells us that we are worse off than we would ever dare to admit and that we are more loved than we would ever dare to imagine. This is radical good news.

¹ James Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, pages 160-161.

This cuts across religion and irreligion. To the irreligious person this sounds unnecessary. To the religious person it also sounds unnecessary.

How do we get saved? We admit that we are lost. We call on the name of the one who came to save us. And then we live for him. But the order is extremely important. My attempts at self-rescue are hopeless. See Ephesians 2:8-10.

What about those who have never heard the Gospel? We know a few things about God: (1) God is just; (2) God wants others to be saved; (3) We know that a rescue attempt has been made not just for us but that Jesus is Savior of the whole world and (4) We know that there is an open invitation and (5) we know that we – those who have been rescued already – have a part to play in this mission. Does this make us proud or morally superior? Of course not! That would be ridiculous. But it does make us humble and passionate to join the rescue attempt.

C.S. Lewis quote.