



THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE

John 14:1-14



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THE TRUTH, THE WAY, & THE LIFE - John 14:1-14

14 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe^{*} in God, believe also in me. ²In 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?^{*}³ 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. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.'^{*}⁵ Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'⁶ Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know^{*} my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'⁹ 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"?' ¹⁰Do 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.¹¹ 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. ¹²Very 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. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me^{*} for anything, I will do it.

Close your eyes and imagine, you're hiking a beautiful mountain trail that, of course, leads up to the top of a mountain – maybe Sopris. You make your way along the path, through the aspens, picking around obstacles, stepping over stones and roots, and you stop to rest -- and to soak in the beauty around you – to commune with God.

Suddenly, a group of people approaches and begins to criticize the path that you picked. They insist, "You're on the wrong path," and, "You'll never reach the top that way," and, "You should take our path because you'll never get anywhere on the path you're taking." Maybe you're curious, or maybe you're just being polite, but you ask them to take you to their path. "Oh, no," they say, "You can't hike our path dressed like that. Oh, no -- and you need a haircut before you join us on our path."

Or how about this: you're sitting at a funeral or something with a very dear friend who serves religiously on the interfaith council. She also happens to be Jewish. Well, the service is being held at an Episcopal church, and the priest reads from the Gospel, "I am the

way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father except through me,” and suddenly, for once, you hear the old verse through your friend’s ears! What must she think of these words?

When I first started studying for ministry in undergraduate school, I found this verse rather comforting. Then I got to grad school. Let me tell you, Iliff School of Theology is no Palm Beach Atlantic University. Immediately at Iliff the first thing they told us is that their plan is to DE-construct our embedded theology: that’s the theology that we grow up with unquestioningly – usually handed down, sometimes unconsciously, from our parents and whatever church we may have attended as a child. That way we would be able to construct our own theology based only on a thorough study and questioning of the scriptures, the church fathers, and a variety of historical and contemporary theologians and philosophers. Suddenly, the verse wasn’t so comforting anymore. I was appalled by the exclusivism of this passage. Surely - this was not what that loving and inclusive Jesus I’d been reading about had in mind.

Texts like this one are often called ‘clobber texts’ – a passage of scripture often wielded as a weapon in theological debates. Maybe you’ve been witness to a discussion where someone asked about Christianity being the ‘only way to salvation.’ It usually doesn’t take very long until somebody pulls out old faithful: “Well, the Bible clearly says,” – that always gets me! I pull up short when somebody starts to tell me what the Bible ‘clearly says.’ The Bible hardly says anything “clearly,” so I know that what’s coming is out of context, and likely misquoted. “The Bible clearly says, ‘Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through him.’” BAM! Discussion over; case closed. That is a clobber text.

How often do people get bullied with this passage? From this perspective, doubters and seekers, faithful followers of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhists, Jews, and any faithful adherents to any other faith are doomed unless they explicitly accept Jesus Christ as their Savior, usually by reciting some simple formula -- a prayer or a creed. Otherwise they’re damned for all eternity! That just doesn’t sound like the compassionate Jesus I’ve grown to love...

Now, I have misquoted a few Bible verses from time to time, but I had never noticed that this passage is almost always quoted like this: “Jesus said, ‘I am the way the truth and the life.’”

“Jesus said..., I am the way the truth and the life,” but that’s not quite what it says. The actual quote is, “Jesus said *to him*, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life,’” and not just “Jesus said --” and on to the clobbering. And it occurs to me that the words left out, “...to

him..." might be important. Who is this "him" Jesus is talking to? What was the question? Why did he ask it? What is the larger context of the passage?

For the most part, scholars agree that John, Jesus' disciple, probably didn't write this Gospel, and trace it instead to a "Johannine community," dating it to around 85-90 C.E. So, we have to read it with the eyes of that 1st century community -- not our 21st century world. With that in mind, we can't interpret this passage as a blanket claim made by the world's largest religion -- like people do -- because Christianity was barely even a religion yet. This is a claim made by one author writing for a small sect or cult, near the end of the 1st century -- an earnest community dealing with growing tensions between Jews and Christ-followers, trying very hard to form and articulate an understanding of who Jesus was, what Jesus had been for them, and what He would continue to be.

Scholars like to refer to this passage as the "Farewell Discourse" -- Jesus is offering the disciples some reassurance for the separation and the grief that he knows is coming. "Don't let your hearts be troubled...", he says, "You know the way..."

And Thomas apparently has an intense need to know the details, the how's and the why's of everything -- he is 'doubting' Thomas, after all. Poor Thomas' heart IS troubled; and he's the only one with the courage to ask, "How can we know the way?"

Four chapters earlier, Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also." Other sheep? My mind immediately wants to know, what other sheep? But not Thomas. Thomas never asked about them. Thomas' questions concern Thomas - and maybe his disciple friends. Thomas' question would be appropriate for us to ask, too: As Christ-followers, how can WE know the way?

And so I think that Jesus' answer was meant for Thomas. "Dude -- Thomas -- You're looking at the way! Haven't you been paying attention? I told you," -- and these are the famous "I am" statements -- "I am the bread of life, I am the vine, I am the resurrection, I am the gate, I am the shepherd, I am the way. Follow someone who knows the way!" In other words, "Do what I do."

This is a statement written by Christ followers for Christ followers. It is not an effective statement for inter-religious dialogue. But more than that, many of us grew up in a kind of vertical, heaven-or-hell Christianity. Heaven is the reward for Christianity. Sin is the problem, forgiveness is the answer, and the most important thing about Jesus is his death because that covers that whole sin thing.

For many people who are grappling with these questions, this kind of black and white Christianity has become unacceptable and unsupportable in light of the diversity of

our global community. It used to be all about being 'saved'—But from what? When we look a little deeper and broaden our understanding of the teachings of Jesus, we can let go of this fear-based, heaven or hell religion. It's not our job to worry about who's saved and who's a heathen. Jesus tells us to love them all the same anyway so it doesn't matter. Love your neighbor. Period. My neighbor might be gay. Or Muslim. Or an addict!

I had a friend and mentor thirty years ago named Geoff. He never set foot in a church his whole life. He was a kind and generous man who was always willing to go out of his way to help another person. I had just started back to church when he died, and I asked my pastor if he thought Geoff would go to heaven, and he said one of the smartest things I've ever heard come out of a pastor's mouth. He said, "I don't know. It's not for us to say." -- I don't know

Part of what Jesus was offering to Thomas and the disciples was some sense of reassurance and comfort. "Don't worry, guys, you know me. When I'm gone, just keep doing what I've been doing." Follow this path laid out by Jesus and you're following the way. Then we are free to find the message of transformation and abundant life that Jesus was talking about – on earth as it is in heaven - and we are free to include everyone in each one's understanding of the way.

I'm sure you've seen that bumper sticker "COEXIST" spelled out with different religious symbols. That's a great definition of religious pluralism. Here are a couple sayings that I have found helpful: "God is defined by Jesus, not confined to Jesus." If we want to know God, we can look at Jesus. Another saying is from Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who said, "I walk the Christ-path into the mystery of God, but I do not believe God is a Christian."

My religion isn't my God; this Bible isn't my God; but both of them point to God. Other sacred writings and other religions can point someone toward God, too. I'm OK with that. I'm secure enough in my faith that I am comfortable affirming the validity of other religions. I don't need to be concerned about whether or not faithful Hindus, Muslims, and Jews are saved, or if gays go to heaven. I need to be concerned whether they have enough to eat, a roof over their head, clothes on their back – that they're welcomed and affirmed, and loved as children of God.

What we should be asking ourselves is this: Am I living the Jesus Way? Am I living the Jesus life? Am I living the Jesus truth? Do that and we won't have time to worry about other people's religious beliefs. One writer summed it up beautifully when he said, "Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life." Amen.