

Preaching on the **Way** of John 14:6

William H. Willimon

Jesus is on the way, the way of the cross. And on his cruciform way, Jesus speaks about the way of the disciples.

He tells them that he is the way, his way is the way, that is, the same way that Jesus is walking (the way of the cross) is to be their way too. “Way” (*hodos*) is used only here in John. It’s the same term for the Christian movement in Acts 9:2, 22:4, etc.

It can mean not only a road, a path, but also a practice. This Gospel ends with Jesus telling Peter, “Follow me” (21:19). Elsewhere Jesus has used the image of a path to speak of his own movement from God and to God. Now, the path becomes a road, a practice, an insight whereby Jesus’ disciples get to God.

At last Jesus, who has been rather elusive in this Gospel, comes forward, looks his

followers in the eye, and declares that he is the way. “I am . . .” His declaration is graciously simple and absolute. That which was once elusive and implicit is now graciously made explicit. “I am . . .”

It would take an experiential Wesleyan to note this, but surely Jesus means more than simply his way of life (and death) is to be the disciples’ way. He doesn’t say that his philosophy is the way (as Plato might

have said) but rather “I am the way . . .” A person, rather than a doctrine or a belief, is the way. It’s similar to what he says elsewhere about being the Door and the Shepherd (10:7, 11), a saying much like Matthew 7:13f. Because Jesus is uniquely related to the Father, he is our way to the Father. Verse 14:7 is a statement about destination. When we see Jesus, we see the Father. To know Christ is to at last see God.

John Milbank says that modern theology is in the grip of a “false humility.” God? Oh God is too grand, too ethereal; therefore, it is impossible to say anything definitive about God.

We wish. If God were not incarnate in Christ, then we could make “God” mean anything we please. John 14:1 dares to assert that the one standing before us—this Jew who is soon to be crucified by an unholy alliance of church and state because of what he said and what he did—is our access to God. Belief in Jesus is not something added on to a belief in God, but rather belief in Jesus is our belief in God. Here, standing before us is not only the “way” but also the “truth” about God.

Yet while this talk of “way” speaks of gracious access, it also smacks of exclusivism. Is Jesus not only “the way” but also the *only* way? “No one comes to the Father except through me” (v. 6, compare with Hebrews 10:20) sure sounds exclusive.

It may help to put this exclusivism in context: We think that John’s Gospel arises in a bitter struggle between Christ-affirming and Christ-denying Jews. We are reading the literature of a persecuted, hanging-on-by-their-fingers minority, literature that is meant to strengthen a minority in their struggle with the majority. For those of us who live in a majority Christian environment to simply apply it to ourselves (“We have the one and only way and you don’t.”) is to do scripture an injustice. Followers of “the Way” who were being expelled from the synagogues (9:22) are reacting to their rejection by proclaiming that their newfound minority way is the way.

The passage may be intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Here, in this rich, expansive Gospel, is a faith that has “many rooms.” Jesus reassures his disciples that there is room for them in the Father’s house (v. 2). “House” (*oikia*) can also mean “household” or “family.” Jesus is the way we are adopted into God’s rapidly expanding family.

There is no way for people like us to get to the Father—but now Jesus has generously opened one (Heb. 10:20). We are to read John 14:1 as saying that Jesus is the open-handed way; not that he is the only way who now closes off all previous ways. In fact, in verse 7, Jesus gives explicit reassurance of the openness of his embrace. In his Father’s home, there are many rooms (v. 2). Thomas can’t figure out how to get there (v. 5). To this, Jesus reiterates, “I am the way . . .” (v. 6). To Philip’s obtuse, “Show us the Father” (v.8) Jesus reiterates, “I am in the Father.” He is the way. For all those earnest seekers who have longed to see God, Jesus graciously reveals the way. He is the way that God has made to us; he is the way that we get to God and God gets to us.

Jesus ends what we thought to be an exclusivistic discourse with an inclusivistic

on a set of doctrines or beliefs, but rather on a person, a Savior who is the Beloved.

In saying that Christ is the one and only way for them, is this community also claiming that Christ is the one and only way for all? Probably, but not necessarily. On the basis of our daily experience of walking with Jesus, we have difficulty imagining any other way for people like us—inherently selfish, violent, idolatrous, cowards that we are—to get abundant life other than through a crucified and risen Savior like Jesus. But why should we try to imagine other possible ways, truths, and lives? We’ve got our hands full just trying to keep up with Jesus. Cannot we joyfully, lovingly testify to the unique, unsubstitutable way that has led us to such abundant life?

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bomb: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (10:16). What? You mean that we—a persecuted minority who are giving our lives to follow Jesus are not the only “sheep” God has got?

There are a number of possible ways to preach this, “I am the way . . .” One way is to think of this as the extravagant poetry of love. The community that first heard these words and recorded them in John’s Gospel is a group of people who are swept up in loving infatuation of Jesus. They have suffered dearly for their love. Most people in love are firmly convinced that their beloved is “the one and only” for them. These words are written by followers of Christ to followers of Christ to strengthen their love and fidelity to the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. The language is passionate and personal, centered not

theology. I’m saying that if we believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, it is because Christ has lovingly made a way to us. This is not our doing, our achievement, but rather his. He has come out, in the Incarnation, to love us, and it will cost him dearly (John 1:10-11). Furthermore, Christ himself says that his “way” is wide, eager, and resourceful. Lots of rooms, other sheep. Having found us wretched sinners, he is determined to seek others. Unwilling to bed down with us good, faithful, United Methodist “sheep,” he is on the move toward “other sheep” whom “I must bring... also, and they will listen to my voice” (John 10:16). For all I know Jesus is here saying, “I’ve had so much difficulty getting you United Methodists to listen to my voice, I’m going to go out and find me some more attentive sheep!”

Judging from our dismal membership figures, we United Methodists are already much too exclusive, having excluded two or three generations from the gospel. Our great evangelistic challenge as preachers is not to exclude—it's not up to us to decide who are and are not his valid "sheep." Rather it is our tough task to keep pointing toward Christ's peculiar way as the way, the truth, and the life, to pray that in our preaching more sheep might hear his voice.

What gets me is not that Jesus had the nerve to say that his way was the only way but that his way—the way of the cross—is the way! I was helping in a church center where homeless persons are being trained for possible employment. The job trainer said to the group that this was a



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Christian ministry to help people get off the streets and into good jobs. A homeless man stood up and began raving, "Where do you get off telling us we need to get jobs? Did our Lord Jesus ever have a job? Show me in the scriptures where Jesus ever said, 'get a job, get a mortgage and buy a home!'"

Can you believe that way, the way of homeless, jobless Jesus, is the only way to truth and life?

C.S. Lewis spent his life trying carefully to define and advocate for orthodox theology. But an important text for Lewis was that obscure moment at the end of John's Gospel when Peter asks Christ, "What about this other disciple, what is his ultimate fate?"

Christ responds, "What has that to do with you? Follow me!" (21:22) Rather than preach John 14:1 to determine who's on the way and who's got the truth, we've got our hands full just trying to follow Jesus down his wide and narrow way. Let's preach that. Believe it or not, it's the only way. □

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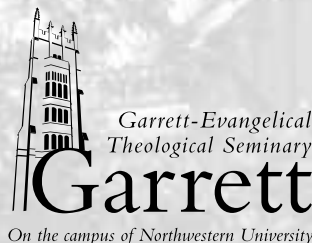
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