
Is Absolutism the Way, or is Jesus the Way?

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year A**

*Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me."
John 14.6*

In the old days, the days before our present absolutist political divisions, there was one particular question that I was asked in my ministry more than any other question. It was not a question about sex. It was not today's question about politics. It was not a question about morality.

It was a question about other religions. And it is still a life-changing question. I am asked the question in various ways: Maybe they ask how I, as a Christian, explain other religions. Or, they ask, "Do you really believe Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; and do you really believe that no one gets to the Father except through him?" Or, in its most simple form: "Will people in other religions get to heaven?"

Sometimes folks use the question as an accusation, as a test, a simplistic way of determining if my brand of Christianity meets their standards. At any rate, surely you all know that kind of question. You do not live in today's world if you have not asked that question.

So, let me deliver a clear answer at the outset. I enjoy a life-giving and progressive view of the bible and of Christianity; and you might be surprised that I actually believe this provocative verse from the Gospel of John. I understand that many Christians are embarrassed by this seeming exclusivity of this verse, John 14.6; and that is too bad. Yes, I do believe Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Yes, I believe that no one gets to the Father except through Christ, the Way of Jesus.

However! Let me be equally clear about something else. I also believe that other religions, in addition to Christianity, get to God, too. In fact, it is because I believe that Jesus is the Way, that I also believe that other faithful people besides Christians get to God, too.

My reasoning for these beliefs begins when I was in high school. Like many a young person, I asked these sorts of questions while I was on a youth group retreat. I was searching for my own soul on that dark night. I was searching for God in those lonely times, and I did not ask the question of my leaders and teachers; I knew what they would say. Instead, I decided I would ask God directly. I prayed the question, in my own way.

"Most Holy God, creator of the universe and lover of souls: What about other religions? How can I believe in Jesus Christ when there are so many other religions in the world?"

I remember very clearly the answer given me in that black night. The answer was not proclaimed across the sky in fireworks. But the answer was clear in my soul.

The answer was this: "It is not for you to worry about those in other religions. I will worry about those in other religions," said this voice of God. "Be concerned with who you will follow. You follow me," said the voice of Jesus. And I did follow Jesus that night. Jesus Christ is still the way, the truth, and the life.

But let me caution us today. That answer is not so simplistic as it might sound. That verse, John 14.6, is not so simplistic as it sounds.

It has turned out, in my life, that the more I follow Christ, the more I also respect people in other religions. And the more I follow John 14.6, the more I notice and respect other dramatic passages in scripture, including the one that opens Jesus' conversation today, John 14.2. What does it say, not four verses away from John 14.6? It says "In my father's house are many rooms!"

Many rooms, Many dwelling places. Many mansions!

Unfortunately, it was in one of the grandest of those dwelling places, the Basilica of St. John Lateran, in Rome, Italy, where one of the most tragic church decisions was ever made. It was in the year 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council. One of the most calamitous declarations in Christian history was this one: in Latin, it is "Extra ecclesiam non salus est." In English it means "Outside the church, there is no salvation."

Outside the church, there is no salvation? That thought, that tendency, that very temptation, is one of the most dangerous in Christendom. Because with that ammunition, Christian after Christian throughout history has waged the war of membership: "Who is in the true Church, and who is outside it?"

Consider the years of misery, the centuries of misery, we cause one another while trying to determine who is in, and who is out! Remember that old joke: Are you a member of the Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879; or the Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912? If you aren't one of my kind, you are a heretic!

The moment I have defined my own church, whatever church that is, as the *only* true church, is the moment I have sinned. It is the moment I have separated myself from God, for I have narrowed the range of God's grace.

Look again at John, chapter fourteen, verse six. In fact, let's consider it literally. Go ahead! Take it literally! Jesus Christ our Lord never said, "No one gets to the Father except through the *Christian Church*." Jesus said, "No one gets to the Father except through *me*." That is the verse I believe. I believe that Jesus the Christ is larger than any church system, no matter how old or wonderful that church system is.

Let me acknowledge something embarrassing about religious people, about most people, actually. Religious people of any culture, all of us, are susceptible to absolutism. Whether we are conservative or liberal, religious people risk absolutism all the time. Maybe because we yearn for something infallible, again, no matter who we are.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could rely on one institution, or one system, or one person, or one tyrant, as infallible? Wouldn't it be comfortable to know that one set of books might always be infallible? If only we had certainty about things!" I accept this yearning, inside all of us, whether we are spiritual or not. Inside every soul resides the deep yearning for absolute truth.

But, friends, that truth is never fully contained in any one person, or in any one book, or in any one country, or in any one institution. That truth is contained only in the mystery of God, and in the mystery of Christ, in the Jesus Christ who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

It is not the Bible, not the Church, not the Country, as wonderful as all those realities are, where I put my trust. It is Jesus the Christ in whom I put my trust.

Jesus did not say, "No one comes to the Father except through the Christian Church." This is where many Christian churches have often erred. We have often accused other religious communities as being somehow "deficient." Yes, I know that other religions are deficient in some way, but so is my own religion! We are all deficient in some way! All our structures are deficient!

Yet, in spite of those deficiencies, Jesus said, "In my Father's structure, in my Father's house, are many mansions!" The way of Jesus does not exclude people; the way of Jesus includes people!

Mansions! In olden times, that word "mansion" meant only a house, a dwelling place, a house where one tarried and rested. It was where one rested. This is why the King James Version of the Bible translates this verse as "mansions."

In my Father's house are many mansions. The phrase excites us now, and especially at funerals, because we want heaven to be full of mansions in the modern sense. We want heaven to have palaces of gold and silver.

And perhaps heaven will. The opulence of heavenly grace will surely be like that. But the power of heaven, the power of God's house, is this truth: God's saving grace is much larger, more spiritually spacious, than anything we can imagine.

Jesus is the Way that includes people! In my Father's house, are many rooms, many mansions, many places to stay and to reside. What a beautiful image of heaven! And what prevents us from getting there, from getting to that heaven of saving grace? Absolutism does.

The hindrance to heaven today is the tyranny of absolutism. We are tempted and led to think that political parties are either absolutely right, or absolutely wrong. We are tempted to think of political leaders as either absolutely right or absolutely wrong. We are tempted to think of countries as either absolutely right or absolutely wrong. We are tempted to think of different religions as either absolutely right or absolutely wrong. We are tempted to think of our neighbor as either absolutely good or absolutely evil. We are tempted to say that if you are not "Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879," we will push you off the bridge!

Such all-or-nothing absolutism is dangerous. Exclusivist absolutism divides the world according to narrow human terms and not according to God's wide kingdom.

Good and holy religion is not simply another player in our dangerous world of competing absolutes. Competing absolutes. The most serious dangers facing our world today are those resulting from all-or-nothing polarities, presented by everyone from politicians to preachers. Holy Christianity is not a player in that game. Exclusivist faith is dangerous, whether that faith is conservative or liberal.

Is Absolutism the Way, or is Jesus the Way? I believe Jesus is the Way! Our faith is in Jesus the Christ. Jesus came to give us life — life above these absolutist polarities. Jesus came to give us truth — truth above these divisions. Jesus came to be the way — the way of saving grace that expands beyond our understanding. Jesus the Christ is the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through that way of Christ, the way of God's wide and unimaginable mercy.

AMEN.