

"The Way, the Truth, the Life"
John 14:1-6

Jesus said, **"I am the way, and the truth and the life."** To know Jesus is to know the validity *and* the vitality of that statement. Yet it makes us nervous because you can't easily divorce it from the words that follow: **"No one comes to the Father except through me."** That makes Jesus sound uncharacteristically arrogant.

The 14th chapter of John is read at funeral services more often than not. I have seen worship resources for funerals where the scripture texts are written out and that last sentence is omitted. Is it not offensive to those who are not Christians? A funeral is not the time to be offensive. What if the deceased was not a Christian or Christian in name only?

I've conducted many funeral services when I'm greeted by an anxious family member who wants to assure me that "Uncle George never went to church and he didn't say very much about what he believed but he had a good heart and he was a good neighbor!" Are they not hoping against hope that because he at best is only a nominal Christian that their loved one's goodness is sufficient for entrance into heaven?

Our text sounds similar to another verse of scripture in the Book of Acts: **"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."**ⁱ

Indeed, these verses summarize what Christians have always believed about Jesus. He is not just one Lord among many. He is "Lord of lords and King of kings." He is Lord even of those who do not acknowledge him. He is ultimate truth for all people.

"There is one God;" claimed the Apostle Paul, **"there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all."**ⁱⁱ

What about people of other religions, or of no religion? Do we not need to respect them? Is not their way to God as good as ours? What about those who have never heard of Jesus? What about those who may have heard his name but are not led to confess him as Lord? If our confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior is, itself, a gift from God,ⁱⁱⁱ what about those to whom the gift has not been given? Are they beyond the embrace of God's love?

E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary to India early in the 20th century said that Gandhi taught him more of the spirit of Christ than any other person in the world. Yet Gandhi never became a Christian. Does that keep him beyond the reach of God's love?

Those are real questions, yet I don't believe we have to be the least bit timid or apologetic in saying that Jesus is the only name that saves or that only through him do we have access to God--not when you remember who Jesus is and what he is all about.

I stumbled onto this thought. Perhaps you'll find it helpful as I do. "God comes to us in Jesus who is the way. We are like people who have fallen into a pit and in that fall have been injured. Our legs and our arms are broken. For anyone to lower a ladder into the pit and say, 'This is the only way out, climb it,' only adds to our desperation. But if the ladder is lowered not for us to climb out, but for one to climb down and lift our broken body into his arms, carrying us upwards and to safety--that is good news indeed!"^{iv}

I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." That sounds arrogant *only* if you forget who said it. The one who said that is the one who also said, **"anyone who comes to me I will not cast out."**^v

Remember, Jesus is the most welcoming, hospitable, inclusive name the world has ever heard. In him God makes clear the mystery of his will. **"This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven on earth, with Christ as head."**^{vi} EVERYTHING!

No, there's nothing arrogant about the name of Jesus. Jesus is one who sets Godly prerogatives aside to climb down into the pit to rescue us.^{vii} Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.^{viii}

Every time we get cocky because we claim to know him and bear the name Christian, we are reminded that Christ didn't die for the church, he died for the world. Every time we look down our noses at those who are not Christian, we are reminded that **"God sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."**^{ix}

Many years ago, a man in the church I served was near death. He was a gentleman in every respect. He was faithful in attendance and he exhibited the spirit of Christ in every way.

His wife told me she was worried because she never heard him say that he had received Jesus into his heart. If he didn't say that, she thought he might be lost in eternity.

She asked me if I would please talk to him about it. I did and he wasn't the least bit worried. "I've always been a believer," he told me. I rejoiced in his simple confidence. **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me,"** Jesus said. That is, trust me! "Trust me! I'm not against you. I'm for you."^x

The name of Jesus is not meant to strike fear into us. The name of Jesus is meant to bring the love of God into our lives, the kind of love that casts out all fear.^{xi}

One of my favorite hymn texts of all time comes from Charles Wesley;^{xii}

Jesus, the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.

The Old Testament Book of Judges tells of a conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. In order to keep the Gileadites from escaping, the Ephraimites set up some check points along the Jordan River, like the police set up on New Year's Eve looking for people driving under the influence of alcohol. Any Gileadite who attempted to cross over would be asked if they were an Ephraimite. If they said yes, they would be asked to say SHIBBOLETH.^{xiii} But they couldn't pronounce it. They would say SIBBOLETH. If I were to say, "You all come," that would be a tell-tale sign that I'm not from the south. If I said, "Y'all come..." you might think I was a true-blooded southerner!

I think we often turn the name of JESUS into a SHIBBOLETH. We want people to say his name with a particular inflection - JEEESUS! We have reduced him to formulas and bronzed him in doctrines. We have said, "you must say this or believe that" or you will be outside of God's love.

Those who us who repeat those formulas and doctrines often become proud and think we are deserving of our inheritance. We're often the kind of people with whom Jesus has the most difficulty. Why is it that people outside the church often have a better handle on the grace of God than those within the church. For example, Mark Twain said, "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out, and your dog would go in."

On the other hand, it was Groucho Marx who said, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." All kidding aside, there are those who hold themselves in such low regard. They often feel they have to prove themselves worthy.

The good news of the Gospel is, we don't have to prove ourselves to God. It is **"God [who] proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."**^{xiv} Only Jesus says to the Groucho's of the world, "Y'all come and be a part of me."

Indeed, **"Jesus is the name that is above every name so that every knee should bend before him and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to**

the glory of God the Father."^{xv}

The only one keeping Groucho out is himself. But in time, if not in this life then in the next, Jesus will have his way and Groucho will party with the rest of us while Christ sits at the head of the table as our host.

Endnotes

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- i. Acts 4:12
 - ii. 1 Timothy 2:5
 - iii. Matthew 16:17, John 16:13ff.
 - iv. Henk Booy, quoted by A. M. Watts, "Christian Claims in a Pluralistic Society," Christian Century, March 1, 1989, p. 223.
 - v. John 6:37
 - vi. Ephesians 1:10, Good News Bible
 - vii. See Philippians 2
 - viii. John 10:11
 - ix. John 3:17
 - x. See Romans 8:31
 - xi. 1 John 4:18
 - xii. "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"
 - xiii. Judges 12:6
 - xiv. Romans 5:8
 - xv. Philippians 2:9-10