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John 14:1-7

THE 'I AM' STATEMENTS: I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

Oh how we love to be right! It begins when we are small children, arguing with a sibling or friend over who is right about some trivial matter. But this desire to be right and to prove we are right continues well into adulthood. We've all had those debates with a spouse, family member, friend, or colleague where each side is convinced they are right. It might be about a small matter of history or geography, or about a memory, or a matter of belief. Some disputes are easily settled these days by whipping out the cell phone and googling the question. But not everything is as easily proved. Sometimes determining what is right is not always clear. Sometimes there is no one right answer.

Perhaps there has been nothing more damaging in human history than when religious groups insist they are right. Religious certainty is the source of immense human suffering-- think about the Crusades, or the Inquisition, or the Taliban, or the conflict in India among Muslims and Hindus. Christians slaughtered one another during the Reformation just for having different ideas. Even today, there are Christians who continue to draw a narrow circle around who has got God "right" and who has got God "wrong."

One of the passages used by some Christians to bolster their claim to religious correctness is the one we read today from the Gospel of John. In this passage, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This passage is embraced by some Christians to support their claim that Christianity is the exclusive way to get to heaven and that other religious traditions are not valid. The words of this passage have also alienated many Christians and driven them away from the church. And then there are

many others who remain in the Christian tradition but find this passage embarrassing and are unsure how to defend it.

Let's today look at what this passage is saying and what it is *not* saying. First, what it is *not* saying. It is *not* saying that Christianity is the superior religion. Christianity didn't even exist at the time of Jesus' remarks. Let's remember that Jesus himself was not a Christian. He was a faithful Jewish man as were his disciples. And after Jesus' resurrection, the early followers of Jesus did not call themselves Christians but referred to themselves as followers of *The Way*. Jesus did not come to start a new religion but to show us the *way*--God's way of love.

In addition, Jesus' words were not instructional remarks directed to a large crowd of people but rather they were comforting words aimed at an intimate gathering of his closest friends. In this passage, Jesus has gathered his disciples together and begins talking to this small group of 12 about his approaching death. And he is trying to bring them comfort and reassurance that they are connected to him even after his death. He is bringing them pastoral comfort for the time when he will be gone. That sets up a very different context than a situation of public teaching. Jesus comforts his friends by saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," and adds, "And if I go to 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going." But Thomas jumps in with a question: "Lord, we're not sure where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Thomas is thinking that Jesus means a literal road they are supposed to walk to find him. But Jesus says to them, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." In other words Jesus is saying, you know the way because you've seen it in me. You've seen this way all the time we've been together. You've seen it in my compassion. You've seen it in my love. You've seen it in my forgiveness. You've seen it in my teachings about God. You've seen

it in the way I've included outsiders and the excluded. You've seen it in my service to others, my sacrifice, my generosity of spirit and action. You've seen the way to God by seeing me. John records Jesus saying: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Jesus' words aren't about which religion is the right one but rather words of reassurance that his followers will still have a connection to him after death because they know his way. And through his way, they will know God and the abundant life God offers.

That's what this passage *is* about. It is about reassuring his followers that they have been schooled in the way of Jesus and through this way they can know salvation on both sides of the grave. The well known pastor and writer Eugene Peterson summed up this passage from John's gospel by saying: "Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life." And the Jesus way is all about loving God and loving neighbor.

For many of us, however, the problem we have with this passage from John's gospel is not the phrase "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," but the rest of that sentence: "no one comes to the Father except through me." *This* is the part that rankles so many. It sounds so exclusive. And I think it *is* exclusive but not in the way so many have interpreted it. The way this phrase has usually been interpreted is to maintain that Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and people of other religions are not going to heaven--that Christianity offers the only way to God. And this perspective has fostered great harm, great hatred, great intolerance, and an ugly sense of superiority among far too many Christians throughout history.

A great many of us, I am sure, have known and met people who were not Christians but who came closer to embodying the Jesus truth, and the Jesus way, and the Jesus life than many Christians we have known. Are such people really excluded from God's love or salvation? Do their religious traditions really contain no truths?

Theologian Huston Smith offers this thought. He states that God "is defined by Jesus, not confined to Jesus." God is defined by Jesus, not *confined* to Jesus. We can see God in Jesus. We can learn who God is by looking at Jesus and his teachings and his actions. We can discover from Jesus what matters to God. God is defined by Jesus. But God is not *confined* to Jesus.

What Jesus offers us is a pattern to follow, a way to follow, a path that will lead us to God. It is a path of grace and mercy. It is a path of love and compassion. It is a path of service and sacrifice. It is a path of generosity of the heart and of the hand. When we follow this way, we will know the saving presence of God.

And in this regard, I *do* believe in the exclusivity of what Jesus is saying. I do believe that the way of love, compassion, justice, kindness, service, and sacrifice is the exclusive way to God. This is the exclusive path to knowing and loving God. This is the exclusive path to knowing abundant life. This is the truth that will save us.

Jesus teaches us this way and this truth and thus I believe he offers us a precious treasure, a treasure we are supposed to share with others, out of love--not from coercion or a sense of superiority--so that others will discover what makes life meaningful and abundant. It is a life-saving gift for all of us living in this world where so many other pathways are held out to us, false paths, pathways of selfishness, greed, advancement, intolerance, anger and division. But instead of all these pathways of death, the Jesus truth offers us a pathway to life.

Sometimes this truth is practiced among peoples who do not claim to be Christians who may be part of other religions or of no religion at all but who nevertheless are living the Jesus truth and the Jesus way. Are Christians really going to pronounce these people as "wrong"? Rather than being used to judge the salvation of those who are not Christians, Jesus' statement that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," is

of greater use for *self-examination* by those of us who call ourselves Christians. Jesus' statement invites us to ponder for ourselves: Am I living the Jesus way? Am I living the Jesus truth? Am I living the Jesus life? North American Christians have bought so whole heartedly in to the consumer values, the social standards, the economic and political policies of might and power and tribalism that a visitor from outer space would have a hard time picking us out from the general population.

But Jesus has given us a treasure. He has shown us a way. He has offered us a truth. He has given us life for both sides of the grave. May they know we are Christians by our love.