When I was at the University of Idaho, I had the good fortune to fall in with a group of great friends who had all grown up together in Moscow, where the university was. Moscow is an interesting place, religiously. As a small town in Northern Idaho, it has a strong conservative Christian presence; but it’s also a college town with a lot of religious diversity and a strong secular identity.

My agnostic and atheist local friends had had more than a few negative experiences with the Church among them. They were used to being labeled as heathens, told they were going to hell, judged for their left-leaning morality and secular philosophy. Now, their religious affiliation (or lack thereof) never bothered me, and because we were friends, they knew I was a safe person to talk with about faith. I was privileged to have some deep, meaningful theological discussions with several of those people. Because I never tried to persuade or convert them, I got labeled “one of the cool Christians.” Unfortunately, I think they were a bit too charitable with that label at the time.

I ended up renting an apartment with one of that group of friends, a guy named Jon. Jon and I got a long alright; like any roommates, we had our arguments, but we respected one another. As roommates, we continued to have deep, meaningful conversations about many things, including theology. It was during one of these discussions that we got onto the topic of salvation (I don’t remember how). In the midst of it, I remember that Jon asked me point blank: “Do you believe that, because I’m not Christian, I’m going to hell?” I thought about it for a moment before I replied, “Yes, I guess I do.” “And that’s the problem I have with religion,” he said. That was the end of the conversation. I sure didn’t feel like one of the “cool Christians” then.

My answer to Jon’s question in that moment was largely influenced by verses like the one we read in John’s gospel account today, where Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Like most of you, I was taught, consciously or subconsciously, that there is a question behind this text about who gets into heaven, a question that this text is intended to answer. When we make this assumption, the text says something different to us, something about how our beliefs determine our fate. Faith becomes an act of discipline, a person’s ability to hold seemingly irreconcilable facts in tension with that person’s eternal soul hanging in the balance.

This assumption is reinforced by Jesus’ opening words in this reading today: “Believe in God, believe also in me.” In English, the word belief implies that we’re talking about facts: facts about Jesus’ divine parentage, his virgin birth, his bodily resurrection. We read this and hear that we need to hold certain facts to be true in order to follow Jesus. But the New Testament isn’t written in English. The Greek word spoken by Jesus here and used throughout the New Testament can just as easily be translated “trust:” “Trust God, and trust me.”

Whereas “belief” speaks about facts, “trust” speaks about relationship. You trust what you know to be trustworthy. Our faith is not a mental exercise, it is a relationship. In John’s account, almost every time Jesus opens his mouth, the word “abide” slips out—or rather, the word that gets translated “abide.” It can also be translated to remain, stay, live among, dwell, wait for or continue.

The facts we believe about God don’t influence who God is; our relationship with God and our trust of the God we know in that relationship influences what facts we believe about God. Time and time again, Jesus bases his proclamations about God in the trustworthiness of God he has experienced because God abides with him, and which we can trust because through him, God abides also with us.

Because of its variety of translations, the Greek word is often hidden in John’s Gospel; searching for it can be like a linguistic game of “Where’s Waldo.” Here, it’s hidden in a very clever place; instead of a verb, like usually is, it’s a noun: the “dwelling places” that Jesus goes to prepare for us is the cue in the red-and-white striped cap that Jesus isn’t speaking here about mansions in heaven, but rather God’s desire to continue to live among us, even after Jesus has departed. It is that desire—and that ability—of God to abide among us that makes God trustworthy.

The clearest place to see both God’s desire and God’s power to abide is in Jesus, the Word of God made flesh and come into the world. He is God’s message in the flesh, God’s love embodied. God’s Abiding Presence doesn’t come to smite the evil people or issue commandments, but to heal us, to eat with us, to walk alongside us, to love us, even to allow us to kill him if it will bring about God’s salvation for us.

It is not just the physical person of Jesus that shows us God’s trustworthy abiding, it is the way he lives his entire life abiding with a broken and bleeding humanity, the way he entrusts himself to God and to God’s work no matter what the consequences may be. Jesus is more than a teacher to follow or an example to emulate: he is our literal point of connection to God, the vine that connects the branches to the root.

That can be confusing, so here’s an example. The book of Acts records the story of Stephen, one of the first seven deacons in the Church. The 12 Apostles had their hands full teaching and preaching, and needed help to make sure the needy in the community were being tended. Stephen and his friends stepped up to help, and ended up doing that and a lot more. Because of his faithfulness to doing the works of Jesus, he is brought before the Jewish authorities, who want to kill him. In our reading today, Stephen is stoned for his bold witness to the gospel, and as he dies, he says two things, both of which ought to sound awfully familiar: he commends himself to God’s care, and with his dying breath, he earnestly prays for the forgiveness of his murderers—just like Jesus did.

This is a story not about the death of Stephen, but about the abiding life of Christ. When Stephen receives his vision of Jesus standing at God’s right hand, he is seeing Jesus with God and also with himself: he understands that, in St. John’s words, Jesus abides with both God and himself, and through Jesus, he abides with God. That abiding is Stephen’s salvation—not his rescue from death, and not his life after death; that abiding is Stephen’s life in the midst of death. Even as Stephen dies, he lives because Christ lives in him. In Christ, Stephen still lives, even as he now lies dead awaiting the resurrection with all of us.

My relationship with Jon is what made me feel badly about how our conversation ended. The facts I thought I knew about God were at odds with my relationship with God and with Jon. That’s the problem the Pharisees and scribes and priests had; it is not the Jewishness of the authorities that condemns them, it is their refusal to give up the facts they think they know about God—the way they “cover their ears”—in order to abide with God in Stephen and in Jesus. Christ didn’t come to make Christians, but to make Christs: Jesus came to be our point of connection, to replace our facts and beliefs with a living relationship with a living person. He came to be the vine that connects us to God.

This kind of abiding is secondary to one’s religious tradition. Faithful Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and even agnostics can all have a connection to God, even if they call God something different like “the Divine” or “the Universe” or the life-force that binds everything together. We all have things that we can learn about God from one another. In this way, we are all one family with God as our Mother and Father and Sibling. In the end, it was the God I met in Jesus Christ that convinced me of this, the God that I saw living in the words of Scripture and in the lives of my church community. God’s abiding relationship with me taught me something new about God: that the Living Word of God can be found in any religious tradition or expression that allows us to abide with God and God with us.

Our particular lens as Christians for understanding the truth of God through the life and person of Jesus gives us special insight that we can use to love and build up our siblings in other traditions, and it helps us to be especially open to learning what they have to teach us. When Jesus says he is the Way and the Truth and the life, he is saying that, yes, he is the one point of access to God, but only because all the ways people connect with God, all the truth people can know about God, all the life that God gives to the world is contained in him.

It’s much like how the one altar in our sanctuary where we receive the meal is now all the tables in all our homes, just as it always has been every altar in every sanctuary that ever was or is or will be; it is the same as the table that is set for us in God’s kingdom, laid for us with the feast that has no end, the feast of which we get a foretaste this week and every week that we gather together in worship to abide with one another in Christ.

When we come to this table, we are reminded that all are invited. All means all. This is important for us not only because I know I am invited, but because I know you are invited, regardless of your religious affiliation, or lack thereof, regardless of the facts you think you believe or don’t believe about God. I can only rightly receive this gift of grace when I abide in you and you in me, and we abide in Christ, and through Christ, God abides in us.