

**Financial announcement:** Just before I preach this morning, I want to take this opportunity to welcome everyone...my name is Mark, I'm one of the pastors here, and I'm grateful to be a part of what God is doing in our church and on the North Shore.

And I want to thank you for your ongoing partnership in the gospel. Our commitment to following Jesus overflows into every aspect of our lives...it shapes our worldview, it shapes our values and desires, it shapes the way we live, it affects our wallets. I am so grateful to the many of you who regularly give of yourselves, to further the Lord's work on the North Shore and around the world.

Thank you for financially supporting the work that God is doing in and through our church; it is your generosity that enables us to continue the way that we are. Historically, it has been your generous giving during the months of October, November, and December that carry us through the entire ministry year. And so I am thankful for your giving and would like to encourage you to continue in generosity in the months ahead.

We do have a month end financial report if you would like to pick one up at the info desk at the conclusion of the service.

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This morning I'm going to continue along the tracks that Dave and Shane have been laying over the last three weeks. In our day and time, here on the North Shore, how do we *reach the heart of our city?*

I want to begin by telling you a story that took place on a plane. Are any of you here frequent flyers (multiple times a month)? I'm not a

frequent flyer but I can imagine that the excitement of boarding a plane wears off rather quickly.

**Illustration:** Some years ago I was out in the Vancouver area and I was boarding a plane to return to my home in Calgary. With my ticket in hand, I walked towards the back of the plane, praying that my row would be empty. I was dead tired, my mind was mush, I was a little grouchy, and the last thing I wanted was to sit beside someone who was starved for conversation. When I got to my row, I saw that someone was already occupying the window seat.

It was still a simple matter really; I could ignore the person. I could sit down and burry my face in a book, or I could close my eyes and have the next hour and fifteen minutes to myself. But just after takeoff, I made a rookie mistake. Instead of closing my eyes, I turned to this guy and said "hello". My initial "hello" sparked a conversation that did not end until we parted ways from the baggage carousal in Calgary.

I asked this fellow about his work and he told me that he was a freelance writer for magazines, newspapers, and the like. At one point I asked him about his educational background and he began to tell me about his Masters degree. I asked him about his Master's thesis, and that's where the conversation began to get interesting.

His thesis was research based and focussed on the effects of pornography on individuals and relationships. I probed further and asked him about his conclusions. He told me that his research indicated that pornography enhanced the lives of people, led to healthier and more satisfying relationships, strengthened marriages, etc. When he finished sharing his conclusions, I responded by saying,

*"That's interesting, because everything I've ever read seems to suggest the opposite."*

At that point, he asked me what I had studied in school. Honestly...*I wasn't sure I wanted to tell him.* What I really wanted was a nice, long, nap, but I had already blown that by saying "hello". So...I took a deep breath and I told him that while had been studying the effects of pornography, I had been studying theology (which is the study of God). I thought that my response might end our conversation, but it did not. In fact, our conversation went to a whole new level.

My fellow traveler told me in no uncertain terms that he did not like Christianity one bit. And when I asked him why, he offered one primary reason: intolerance. Christians had the audacity to suggest that there was only one way to God.

It's interesting isn't it? The reactions you get from some people when you tell them that you are a follower of Jesus? A man I'd never met went from amiable to angry when I revealed that I was following Jesus. His entire tone changed; a man I had never met was instantly "offended" by my presence. Perhaps you've had similar conversations.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Dave said that here on the North Shore we need to see ourselves as 'translators.' Like the Smith's and the Harada's in the Philippines, the Shareski's in Germany, or Kim Close working in Papua New Guinea, we need to talk about the Christian Story in the language of our day.

Two weeks ago Dave asked the question: *how do we talk about sin in a world that believes it's good?* This week, the question for translation is as follows: *how do we talk about Jesus being the only way to God in a world that does not believe in just one way?*

My acquaintance on the plane was incensed over this very issue. When I named myself a Christian, he labelled me with the wide brush of intolerance. And if you haven't already heard, intolerance is an unforgivable offense in our Western culture.

I remember my former Sr. Pastor saying, "Our culture is OK with someone who holds a strong belief as long as they state it vaguely or without conviction - in other words, keeps it to themselves. Our culture is also OK with people who have vague beliefs and yet state these strongly--the vagueness of such beliefs don't really offend anyone. What our culture will not tolerate are strong beliefs strongly stated- this is where people become uncomfortable with the conversation."<sup>1</sup>

A few weeks ago I said that we live in a society that insists that every perspective is equally good, helpful, and valid. "Tolerance" used to mean allowing others the freedom to believe differently than we do, and where we differ, *we agree to disagree*. I could sign up for this definition but the definition has changed drastically. Now, if you don't *affirm and embrace* the thoughts, opinions, and choices of the people around you, you will be labelled "intolerant."

Perhaps you've already been labelled. Perhaps you've already been branded. Perhaps you've bristled at the double standard. As a

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Young

follower of Jesus, you're labelled "intolerant" for disagreeing with others, but others are not labelled intolerant for disagreeing with you. If it were about winning a philosophical argument, we would have a rock-solid case. But then it's not about winning arguments, is it? It's about winning people, it's about being ambassadors of Jesus in His world.

Before I move on from this accusation of narrow-mindedness, let me ask a question that many people within the broader Christian Church are asking these days: *is the way of Jesus really so narrow?* Let me walk you through four different Scriptures, each of which comes from the mouth of Jesus Himself.

In John 3:16, Jesus said, "*God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.*"

In Luke 9:23, Jesus said, "*If anyone would come after me, they must take up their cross daily and follow me.*"

At the heart of Jesus' invitation are the words *whosoever*, and *anyone*. Jesus carefully chose these words to make it clear who He has invited into relationship: *anyone* who wants to follow, *whosoever* chooses to believe. Two different words with one meaning. Kyle Idleman writes, "*Anyone means everyone.*"<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was radically inclusive; His invitation is open to everyone. It doesn't matter where you've been, what you've done, how you've lived...Jesus has an invitation with your name on it. *Come with me,*

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<sup>2</sup> Kyle Idleman, *Not A Fan*, 116-117.

He says, *come and find life with God the Father*. You may protest, saying: *But you don't know what I've done, who I've been, who I am...if You knew Jesus, I'd be scratched off the invite list.*

And Jesus says in return, *I know everything about you, your entire life is in my hands, it always has been...I know you and that's why I love you.* Have you ever tried wining an argument with Jesus? No matter how hard you try, you will never convince Jesus that you are unlovable. Never. Jesus is radically inclusive; He has an invitation, and it has your name on it.

Our third Scripture is found in Matthew 7:13-14. Jesus said, "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*"

At another time, in another place, Jesus gives further insight through a similar analogy. In John 14:6, Jesus said, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

Now, if you find yourself reacting positively to the first set of Scriptures and negatively to the second set, congratulations are in order: it means you have understood them correctly. Jesus is both radically inclusive and incredibly exclusive. Everyone is invited to join God's family but Jesus is the solitary gate, door, and way by which we enter into relationship with the Father.

We live in a “the customer is always right, even when they’re wrong” culture. In such a culture, a culture of entitlement, a culture where authority is rejected like the plague, Jesus’ words are hard to swallow. But just because they’re hard to swallow, doesn’t make Him wrong.

I want to take a few minutes to explore this exclusive claim of Jesus. He said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”*

D.A. Carson writes, “Jesus is the way to God, precisely because he is the truth of God and the life of God.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus is the **truth** because, as Hebrews says, He is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being”.<sup>4</sup> If someone were to ask, “What is God like?,” the answer is, “Look at Jesus.” Jesus is the truth because He said and did exclusively what the Father told Him to say and do.

Jesus is the **life** because He has life in Himself (John 5:26), because He is the One who is the Resurrection and the Life; He gives life to all who choose Him.

Ever since Jesus first uttered the words recorded in John 14:6, people have wrestled with them. Some have believed, and others have

sneered...it will always be this way. But each one here must face them, must consider them, and then make a choice. Is Jesus the Way? Does He speak what is True? Does He hold Life in His hands?

Thomas a Kempis, a monk from the 14th century once wrote the following lines in the 1st person, speaking as though He were Jesus:

“Follow...me. I am the way and the truth and the life. Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living. I am the way which [you] must follow; the truth which [you] must believe; the life for which [you] must hope. I am the inviolable (absolute) way; the infallible truth, the never-ending life. I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated.”<sup>5</sup>

Living at this time and place in history, when I read these words I moved by their beauty, but I understand how people might be “irritated” by their narrowness. Any paragraph with the word “must” in it will be sure to set people’s teeth on edge.

We live at a time when any exclusive truth claim is seen as naive, pathetic, suspect, or arrogant. But friends, when we make the claim that Jesus is the only way to God, we are not speaking arrogantly.

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<sup>3</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According To John*, 491.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 1:3, NIV.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 56. 1.

It's not as though we are the way, He is. We did not create the way, He did. We aren't on the way because we are any better or worse than any other human being. We simply bear witness to what Jesus has made known. But friends let us do so with gentleness and respect.<sup>6</sup>

Gary Burge writes that what we are doing as followers of Jesus is standing and affirming that something ultimate, something unrepeatable, something unparalleled in the history of the world happened in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

There have been many wise men and women throughout the history of the world. There have been many counsellors and many leaders worth listening to, or following. But there has only ever been one man, the God-man Jesus, who was qualified to offer His life as a sacrifice for the sin and brokenness of the world. This is why Jesus stands alone and apart from all the others.

Jesus is both radically inclusive and incredibly exclusive. Everyone is invited to join God's family but Jesus is the way by which we enter...there is no other way.

I began this message talking about the need to translate the gospel into words that people around us can understand. But what I didn't say, what I trust you will never hear me say, is that we need to translate the gospel into words that cause no offense.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>7</sup> Gary M. Burge, *NIV Application Commentary: John*, 407.

<sup>8</sup> New Living Translation.

I struggled this week to pull this message together; I struggled in my "translating" work. I was looking for a way to make the exclusivity of Jesus and His claims, palatable to those who don't like hearing that there is only one way to God.

After a long day of thinking, praying, and writing, I was driving to a meeting on Wednesday night, reflecting on how difficult it had been to pull this message together. And then it struck me. I was looking for a way to say something very unpopular in our culture without it sounding unpopular. I was looking for a way to put a spin on Jesus. But friends, Jesus will not be spun.

Acts 4:12 says, "*There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.*"<sup>8</sup>

So...what are we left with? In Jesus, we have the best news in the world, but many people have closed their ears; they cannot get past the exclusivity of His claims. We have great news about life, purpose, meaning, healing, and wholeness, but so many ears have been barred shut before we even open our mouths. *What are we to do?*

Let me offer two suggestions this morning.

**1. Pray:** First, we pray. In fact, the action of prayer is the central action in the universe. To pray is to recognize God's presence, to orient ourselves to Him, to welcome Him. God is not a thing, He is

Person; to pray is to participate in relationship with our Creator.

And I use this word "Creator" intentionally. This One God who created the universe, continues to create to this very day. And we will need to pray, asking our Creator to create new eyes and new ears in those we seek to reach.

2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*" Clearly, it is not a physical blindness that the apostle Paul is referring to; he speaks of a spiritual blindness.

Many of the values and philosophies of our day, when ingested, lead to blindness. When the current philosophies of truth and tolerance in our culture are swallowed wholesale, there is no longer any room for anyone to say anything exclusive. Eyes have been blinded, ears have been deafened, and the words of Jesus are rejected before they are even considered.

We need to pray. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, but shouting louder will not make deaf ears hear. We need to pray that God will heal deaf ears; only the Creator can do such a thing.

We need to pray that God will open eyes. But alongside our praying, we need to give ourselves to something else. As I said before, the blindness Paul talked about is a spiritual blindness, not a physical one. And more often than not, when it comes to "seeing" Jesus, a person's physical sight can lead to spiritual sight.

What am I getting at? The second suggestion I want to offer you this

morning is wrapped up in the word "incarnation".

**2. Incarnation.** This is a word I've used many times. I'm convinced "incarnation" is **the** word the Western church is going to need to understand and practice as the kingdom of God advances. Incarnation is a descriptive, theological, word that expresses what took place in the coming of Jesus. John 1:14 tells that in Jesus, God took on our flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood so that people could see the life, the love, and the glory of God firsthand, up close.

When Jesus returned to the Father's side, He did not remove His incarnate presence from the world, He multiplied it. We are His dwelling place, He lives in us, we are His incarnate presence. People still need to see the reality of God with their physical eyes; our lives (and our words) are God's strategy.

Over the last two hundred years, the church has expended a lot of energy trying to convince people that Jesus is the Way, the Truth. And it makes sense, where people are convinced that objective, unchanging truth can be known, we can readily present Jesus as being **the** Way, and **the** Truth. *But how do we talk about Jesus with people who no longer believe in objective, unchanging truth?*

**Illus:** Maybe we need to reshape our conversation. Maybe, if people saw that Jesus is **the** Life, that He's real, they would come to see that He is also the way and the truth. Exclusive truth claims offend people; they come across as arrogant and manipulative. But when you see the truth in action, it becomes so much harder to dismiss.

I want you to suppose with me that a friend of mine came with the following story, "Mark, I just started on this new fitness regime, the

P90X, and in the last 90 days I've lost 30 pounds and shaved 5 inches from my waste...it's the best! Don't waste your time on anything else! You've got to try it!" Does it sound a little bit exclusive? Yeah. Is it offensive? Not really...especially if you can see evidence right in front of you.

The majority of people used to ask, "Is it true?" Many more people today are beginning to ask, "Is it real?" Jesus is both.

**Illus:** Three weeks ago, Naomi and I went to my 20 year grad reunion...where has the time gone? I got a Facebook message in the early Summer, calling for the Guildford Park graduating class of 1991 to gather. I replied that Naomi and I would both attend and I began to wonder how many of my old friends would be coming.

Soon after I graduated from high school, I moved away to go to College, and then found a job at a church in Calgary. By the time Naomi and I moved back to the Vancouver I had been gone for 15 years, I'd completely lost touch with anyone from high school.

Part way through the Summer, I got another Facebook message indicating that our reunion would be taking place at the River Rock Casino. I'm quite certain I groaned when I got the message...the River Rock Casino? I don't frequent Casinos but I had visions of slot machines, loud music, and drunk people...not my idea of a good time.

The day before the reunion, Naomi asked me, "Do we really want to go?" We already had a baby-sitter all lined up...we could skip the reunion and go out for dinner, just the two us...it would be a nice,

quiet, enjoyable evening. Or, we could go to the River Rock Casino. To be honest, I didn't really want to go.

But on the morning of, I was walking through my neighbourhood, praying, and the Lord began to speak to me. "*Mark, I know you want to be my witness in this world, but you've got to be willing to put yourself out there with people who need Me.*" I'm quite certain I groaned inwardly, but Naomi and I went.

And it was just as I imagined: slot machines, loud music, and drunk people. But the people...I enjoyed being with people I hadn't seen in 20 years. Every person I talked to, is someone that God loves. Every person I listened to is a person who is always on God's mind. The River Rock Casino will never make my Top Ten for a pastor's night out, but...I felt God's heart the entire time we were there.

At one point I saw a friend, Mike, that I hadn't seen in more than 15 years and I went over to say "hello". I don't remember exactly when we became friends, I think grade 1 or 2, but I do remember how we became friends. My mom tells the story of me coming home from school and telling her that there was a new boy in school who getting picked on, and didn't have any friends. And My mom said, "*Mark, maybe you should be his friend.*"

That was the beginning of our friendship. I made sure Mike didn't get picked last for sports, I invited him to my birthday parties, we played road hockey in my driveway, and he was regularly in our home.

When I saw him at the River Rock, I went over to talk with him and he caught me up in a bear hug...he's 6'3", a real hulk of guy. And

because it was so loud, he half whispered, half yelled the following in my ear, "*Mark, I have to be honest, I've had a lot to drink tonight, so I'm a little bit drunk, but I love you!*" I smiled, in part because I didn't need him to tell me he had had a few too many.

But he was insistent. "*No, Mark, I really love you. I remember when I didn't have any friends, and you were my friend. I remember all the birthday parties you invited me to. I remember how your parents invited me in and treated me like part of the family. I remember how you quit soccer in grade 9 because you didn't want miss out on church...God was too important to you...I've always respected you for that.*" And on he went.

Mike had never said any of this to me before. But 20 years later, with a few drinks to loosen his lips, Mike was talking about something very real that he had seen encountered in me all those years ago. What had he seen? What had he experienced? It was Jesus...living in me. People need to see the reality of God with their physical eyes; our lives (and our words) are a part of God's strategy.

Most people could care less about our doctrine, our music, and our programs. I'm not saying that these are unimportant, I'm just saying that for the average person on the North Shore, they don't care about any of it. What they want to know is if any of it is real. Is Jesus really real? Does He still live? And does He have any power?

They may not have much time for organized religion but they are looking for power...the kind of power that will meet them in their fears, in their shame, in their drinking problems, in their broken marriages, in their jobs...is Jesus real and does He have any power?

Well...does He? Can He forgive an atrocious past? Can He save someone from self-destruction? Can He love someone like me? Can He heal broken relationships, broken bodies, broken dreams? Can He?

Jesus is the answer, and our lives are the medium. We are His witnesses, His ambassadors; our lives are meant to be on display as centerpieces of His glorious grace. These days, it seems the most powerful witness to the way and the truth and the life of Jesus, is a changed life...my life and yours.

### Pray