

Distinct, But Not Exclusive

John 14:1-11

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Prayer: *Your Word, O God, is a source of refuge and guidance. Lead us as we engage your Word with our minds and hearts. Amen*

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

We often hear these words at funerals, spoken to comfort the bereaved. But when Jesus first spoke them, they were not addressed to mourners gathered around a casket. They were spoken to disciples whose world was beginning to fall apart.

Jesus has just told them that **he is leaving**. Their future feels uncertain. Their hearts are troubled. And he gives them both comfort and promise:

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you... and I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

These words carried even deeper meaning for the community that first received John's Gospel. By the time it was written—sixty years later—Jewish Christians in Ephesus were experiencing painful rejection. They had been expelled from the synagogue—the only **spiritual home they had ever known**. That isolation troubled their hearts.

Picture this small church in Ephesus gathered for worship. As they listen to the Gospel of John, they hear Thomas ask the very question they've been weighing: *"Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* They see themselves in Thomas—uncertain and looking for a path forward. Then, they hear Jesus' answer:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (v.6a). The word in Greek for "way" is *hodos*. It means a **"way of life."** A **lifestyle**. A **relationship**. But Thomas hears it as a road—as if Jesus is giving directions to a destination. But Jesus is not talking about a geographical place.

Like so many of Jesus' "I am" sayings, he uses a symbol here to identify himself. He says, "I am the **Way**." Jesus draws from the well of Jewish wisdom, where "the way" is not a route on a map but a **path for your life**.

In Proverbs, the way is the **path of wisdom** (2:6a, 8, 20). In Psalms, the way is a **life lived according to God's will** (e.g., Ps. 119:1, 3, 5, 27, 33).

But Jesus does something different here. He does not merely point toward the way. He says, "*I am the way*." Jesus becomes both the path to God and the embodiment of life with God.¹

And then comes the part of this passage that has caused so much pain. So misunderstood: "*No one comes to the Father except through me*."

For many today, these words sound like a "**Keep Out**" sign. A litmus test. A way of dividing humanity into insiders and outsiders. "Who's in" and "who's out." Unless you check a specific **dogmatic box**, you are barred from the divine. Others used it as the rallying cry of *Christian triumphalism*—claiming they have a **corner on God** and that everyone else is simply wrong.

But what if these words were **never meant** to exclude others? What if they were meant to help a frightened community **name their experience of God?**

John's Gospel begins with these words: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (1:14)

That is the heart of this passage. The early Christians were making a **joyful confession**: "We have gained access to God through Jesus! He is our way to God!" They're not making a sweeping claim of exclusion; they're affirming that Jesus is God's **decisive revelation in the world**.

And it wasn't an easy declaration. That conviction put them at odds with their old faith—forcing them to leave the only home they'd ever known to build a new one. But in their new spiritual home, they experience **healing** through Jesus. **Liberation** through Jesus. **Wholeness and light** through

¹ Gail O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 742.

Jesus. And from that experience comes their joyful declaration: “*He is the way.*”

And it is also the “**language of love**” as New Testament scholar Marcus Borg calls it.² It’s the language lovers use for one another. When someone says to their beloved, “You’re the most beautiful person in the world,” they are not making a factual statement or a scientific claim. Others may be equally beautiful, if not more so. But that’s not the point. They’re expressing **devotion. Commitment. Loyalty. Love.** Expressed in **absolute terms.**

That’s what John’s community is doing here. They are saying, “This is how we have gained access to God. This is who we are in Jesus.

And maybe that’s where it begins for us, too. Not by drawing boundaries, but by sharing how we have encountered God in Jesus. Who he is to us, while recognizing the validity of other faith traditions.

Notice the specific language Jesus uses. He doesn’t say, “No one comes to **God** except through me.” He says, “No one comes to the **Father** except through me.”

This isn’t a broad philosophical statement about God. It’s much more personal. It is specific. It’s an affirmation of a community’s faith in the God they have come to know through the **Incarnation**—the Word made flesh in the person of Jesus.

So, when Jesus says “no one,” he really means “**none of you.**” He is defining God **specifically for his disciples**, just as the author of John is defining God for his own community.

This is what theologians call the “**scandal of particularity.**” It’s the claim that the God of the whole universe chose to be known through **one particular life**—Jesus of Nazareth. But it can become a problem. Using John 14:6-7 to judge other religions is a **theological distortion**, as one Bible scholar asserts.³ Why? Because the Gospel of John wasn’t written to rank the merits of world religions. Instead, these verses were written to celebrate a specific community’s experience of Jesus. The goal wasn’t to

² Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power and How They Can Be Restored* (HarperOne, 2011), 172.

³ Gail O’Day, 745.

exclude; it was to define. By embracing this specific identity, Christians can engage in **interfaith dialogue** with clarity rather than using scripture as a weapon.

In our passage, Philip still doesn't understand. He says: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (v. 9).

And Jesus responds: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

There it is. If you want to know what God is like—**look at Jesus**. Look at how he welcomes outsiders. Look at how he washes feet. Look at how he forgives enemies. Look at how he loves. That is what God looks like.

The British educator Sir Ken Robinson, in his famous 2006 *TED Talk*, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?"⁴ tells the story about a six-year-old girl who is busy drawing in class. Her teacher notices her focus and asks,

"What are you drawing?"

The girl answers, "I'm drawing a picture of God."

The teacher says, "But nobody knows what God looks like."

The girl says, "**They will in a minute.**"

What **absolute confidence**! That's the same confidence those early Christians had as they confessed Jesus as God's **embodiment**. And that's **also our confession today** as members of the church of Christ. In Jesus, we see what God looks like. In him, we experience God's **indwelling**.

Yet, this clarity of vision was never intended to build a wall; it was never meant to divide or to exclude others.

And that matters deeply today. Because our world is increasingly divided by religion, ideology, and fear. And Christians have too often used faith as a weapon instead of a witness.

But John 14 invites us into something better. We can be deeply rooted in Jesus without being hostile toward others. We can **celebrate the uniqueness of Jesus** and the particular way we have encountered God without claiming **ownership of God**.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY>

One of the **8 points of Progressive Christianity** states: *Jesus' teachings are one way, not the only way, to experience the Sacred and that other traditions may also reveal the divine.*

So, when we declare, "Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and Life, we can say with joy: "This is how we experience God. This is our Christian identity. But we recognize that other faith traditions are as valid as ours.

And so, when someone greets you, "*Namaste,*" you may respond using the same word—"Namaste." *The divine in me recognizes and bows to the divine in you.*"

Or when someone else says, "*As-Salaamu Alaykum,*" (*Peace be upon you*), you may answer, *Wa Alaykum As-Salaam* (*And upon you be peace*).

Or this greeting, we are probably more familiar with, *Shalom*, to which we simply respond, "*Shalom.*" *Peace.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.