

IF JESUS IS THE WAY, IS HE THE ONLY WAY?¹
John 14: 1-6; John 10: 16
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
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We lost one of the great voices of the church this week at the death of Peter Gomes, the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard, and preacher to the university. With a twinkle in his eye he would sometimes reverse his title and call himself the “Moral Professor of Christian Plumbing.”

His preaching helped give generations of students at Harvard a firm foundation in Christian faith, stemming from his own American Baptist roots. Many of you heard him in various places, including his annual sermon at Ocean Park, which packed out the Temple each summer. He had a wonderful wit about him that endeared him to everyone. Just one story: a few years ago he was preparing to give the invocation and benediction at the inauguration of Larry Summers as President of Harvard. The University Marshall insisted on rehearsing to make sure that he would stay within the allotted time frame. At the rehearsal, the University Marshall said, “It is very important to the President that your words take no more than 90 seconds.” Gomes looked at him, and without missing a beat, said, “You may tell the President that when I am praying I am not addressing him.”

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, March 6, 2011.

I

Today's question: If Jesus is the Way, is he the only way? There are many who would say that the answer is very simple: Jesus said, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.*²

Period. But I have paired that text with another intriguing statement of Jesus: *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.*³ I place those two texts side by side because they represent the dilemma. Is the gospel exclusive?

Clearly, this question cannot be resolved to everyone's satisfaction in a sermon. So if what is on my mind and heart in attempting to answer this question does not appeal to you, then after the service you can tell me what you think.

I would like to start by stepping back and looking at the broad sweep of history. First, many scientists estimate that there has been human life on planet earth for perhaps 1,500,000 years. So that means that most of human history has been pre-history, a history without writing, without the name of a people or a religion, without a political or religious leader.

² John 14: 6.

³ John 10: 16.

Second, it is only for about 200,000 years, since the early Stone Age, that there have been *homo sapiens*, as we proudly call ourselves. *Homo sapiens* were aware of themselves; they invented tools and weapons, and learned to control fire. They learned to bury their dead and offer sacrifices. They produced cave paintings and carved statues. Religion came into being.

Third, it is only for about 10,000 years that alongside the hunters and gatherers there came to be settled communities and agriculture and cattle-breeders who established permanent cities. They struggled with property rights and social relations, and they cultivated the landscape. They built the oldest city we are aware of: Jericho, whose city wall is possible to date to the year 6,800 BCE through carbon dating.

Fourth, for only about 5,000 years has there been what anthropologists call “high cultures.” The first of those high cultures developed along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and it is to them that humanity owes the invention of the wheel, the chariot, the oldest system of calculation, and above all the invention of writing. It is to this culture that we get the account of a great flood, doubtless stemming from some catastrophic flood that inundated the whole area and formed the basis for the biblical account.⁴

⁴ See Hans Kung, *Judaism, Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 3-5.

About the same time another “high culture” developed along the Nile valley. They, too, created a written script, and they learned to grow crops with the aid of irrigation from the Nile. They developed extensive systems of social organization and eventually produced extraordinary monuments like the great pyramids.

It was on the narrow land bridge between these two high cultures that the Jewish faith developed, and from that faith came Jesus of Nazareth, whose followers came to be called Christians. That 2,000-year period when Christianity developed and flourished up until today represents a snap of the finger when compared to the many thousands of years human life has existed on earth. And if God is truly the God of the universe, then who is to say that there are not other planets in other galaxies where religion has developed among other people?

For any of us to claim final, exclusive truth, is to my mind quite arrogant. That is saying that in all the 1,500,000 years that human beings have inhabited this world, the final truth comes only in this finger-snap of time from this tiny land bridge between two great early cultures. I think we are much safer to identify with the humility of the Apostle Paul when he said, *For*

*now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, but then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*⁵

II

Having said that, I want to go a step further and say that I don't even think that Jesus meant an absolute, exclusivist gospel when he said, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.* Just take it at its face value: if Jesus were literally standing before us and said that, what would we think he was saying?

I am the way.... Would you think that he was asking you to subscribe to a list of doctrines about him?

I am the way.... Would you think that he was asking you to believe in miracles, or a certain theory of the atonement?

I am the way.... Clearly he is talking about a way of living that he himself embodies. If we want to know the way to live life to its fullest, the way to find what he called *abundant life*,⁶ the way to face opposition with calm assurance, the way to make a difference in our world, the way to meet our inevitable death with confidence in God's love and mercy...then his way, his whole life, is our example and our joy to follow.

⁵ I Corinthians 13: 12.

⁶ John 10: 10.

We Christians can embrace this verse with our whole hearts! He is the way, the truth, and the life for us, and his life is our way to God!

III

But to live his way of life, his love, his sacrifice, his care for others, is not just the exclusive prerogative of Christians. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg quotes a Hindu professor who read this verse and said, “This verse is absolutely true—Jesus is the only way. And that way—of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being—is known in all of the religions of the world.”⁷

The way of Jesus was never intended to be a list of intellectual beliefs about Jesus, or even the saying of the word ‘Jesus’. That would virtually amount to salvation by syllables. Rather, the way of Jesus is the path of transformation by following his way of living, which fulfilled the ancient word of the prophet Micah: *...what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*⁸

IV

There is a memorable story that comes from the life of our former pastor, Gordon Torgersen. He said that when he was young, he and three

⁷ Marcus Borg, “Jesus: ‘the Way, the Truth, the Life’” www.beliefnet.com.

⁸ Micah 6: 8.

friends traveled all the way up to the border of the United States, between Minnesota and Canada, to the Lakes Region for a canoe trip. When they arrived, and before they set out in their canoes, they bought a map from a man they met along the way. The man wasn't an authority; he wasn't a ranger. He was just a man they happened to meet, and he only charged fifty cents for the map, which was much cheaper than the maps they could buy from a ranger.

For days they paddled in their canoes, enjoying the beautiful scenery and the wildlife. But after a few days, they realized what had happened. They were completely lost! The map they had purchased for fifty cents was not correct! They had followed poor instructions. Their food supply was beginning to run out. Some of the boys began to lose their tempers. One of them broke down crying because he was sure they would never find their way back home. The lakes and the forest that they had loved now no longer seemed beautiful. Instead, they were terrifying. Then it began to rain, and they were soaked and cold and afraid.

They paddled and paddled, for days. Then, late one afternoon, they almost went wild with delight. They hadn't seen anybody for days, but now they saw a canoe coming towards them. It had two people in it. It was a forest ranger and a friend. When the ranger came within shouting distance, he told the boys that they had been reported missing, and that he had come to find

them. He turned his canoe around, and the boys followed the ranger, until they arrived at his cabin, where the ranger prepared pancakes for them, and they got a good night's sleep. They rightly called the ranger their "savior." He was their savior, because when they were lost, he found them, and was able to lead them home.

Maybe we are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, "Is Jesus the only way?" Perhaps we should be asking, "Am I within shouting distance of the Jesus today? Do I hear him calling my name? Regardless of all the people who have lived in ancient history, is he calling my name?" And if so, he is calling out, *Follow me! For I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*