

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Prepared to Answer*
Service Theme: “*Aren’t There Many Paths to God?*”
Sermon Theme: *The Inclusive Exclusivity of Christ*
October 15, 2023—John 14:1-11

No doubt about it, Jesus is counter-cultural. In fact, sometimes, the Bible records Jesus saying things that are so counter-cultural, even some Christians squirm uncomfortably in their seats and hope their non-Christian friends don’t hear. This is one of those texts.

You know that terms like “tolerance,” “equality,” and “inclusivity” are big buzzwords in today’s culture. There’s a strong emphasis on affirming the feelings, lifestyles, and beliefs of all people as valid and valuable, so that everyone feels heard and included.

But here comes Jesus, making an unmistakably exclusive statement. ***“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*** Not “a” way/truth/life out of many possible options, but THE one and only way/truth/life. Jesus draws a clear line in the sand. “If you don’t have me, you don’t have God.” Period.

That clearly contradicts the question of the skeptic and the culture we’re wrestling with this morning: ***“Aren’t there many paths to God?”*** Many people today believe that every religion or belief system is valid and valuable, and all that matters is that you believe in something strongly enough. That’s one reason many people are offended by or have sworn off Christianity. In their minds, if Jesus claims to be the only way, truth, and life, then Christianity is too exclusive and intolerant of other beliefs.

So, how should Christians answer? Should we squirm uncomfortably in our seats and hope our non-Christian friends don’t hear? Should we dismiss Jesus’ words to a bygone era before people understood the importance of inclusivity? Should we keep our personal beliefs

private, to avoid offending anyone? Or even better, can we answer by pointing to the beautiful **Inclusive Exclusivity of Christ?**

Have you ever heard the secular parable of the blind men and the elephant? In it, a group of blind men come across an elephant, and each one feels a different part of the animal. One feels the trunk and says, “This creature is like a snake.” Another wraps his arms around the elephant’s leg and says, “This creature is like a tree.” Another holds the elephant’s tail and says, “This creature is like a rope.” The point of the parable is that everyone has only a limited understanding of the whole picture, and so our beliefs are shaped by our perspectives. Applied to religion, the point is that all religions have a limited perspective about God, so none can see the whole picture. Therefore, these many different religions are all valid paths that ultimately lead to God.

That sounds really nice, doesn’t it? Everyone gets to be right, and no one can tell anyone they’re wrong. And if there are many valid paths to God, then you don’t have to worry about your brother who’s Buddhist, or your wife who’s Wiccan, or your aunt who’s agnostic, because all their beliefs are valid. So everyone can believe whatever they want, and we can all get along!

But as nice as that sounds, is it even remotely possible when the teachings of those different religions are all so contradictory? When one says you have to do enough good works to save yourself, another says you have to perform certain rituals to save yourself, and another says you can’t save yourself so you’re saved by faith alone? When one says there are hundreds of gods, another says there’s only one God, and another says there’s one God who dwells in three persons? When one says the goal is to escape this physical world, another says this physical world is all there is, and another says the goal is to dwell eternally in the physical world made new? When the answers to the questions aren’t just different, but completely contradictory, how can they all possibly be right?

This teaching that “there are many paths to God” is an attempt to bypass what are called “exclusive truth claims”—that is, beliefs that

claim, “This is the only right way.” The fear is that exclusive truth claims lead people to feel superior to and look down on those with different beliefs, if not showing animosity or brutality to them. And that certainly has happened, and still does happen, even from Christians.

But really it’s impossible to eradicate exclusive truth claims, because all statements of belief ultimately claim exclusive truth. If you stand for anything, you also stand opposed to different things. Even the person who claims, “There are many paths to God,” is declaring that anyone who claims there’s only one way to God is wrong!

Consider the parable of the blind men and the elephant. It’s told by a narrator who can see the whole picture, and therefore can claim that the blind men only perceive a small portion of the elephant. Even the parable meant to communicate that people can only see a small portion of the truth claims to see the whole truth! Everyone is exclusive in their beliefs about God and religion, just in different ways! Therefore, it’s no more narrow or intolerant for Christians to claim that Jesus is the only way to God than it is to claim that there are many different paths to God!

Therefore, the goal isn’t to get rid of exclusive truth claims. That’s impossible. Rather, the goal is to identify what exclusive truth claim are actually true! Which means there’s nothing arrogant or intolerant about pointing to Jesus’ words, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,”** and humbly inviting the skeptic to explore the truth of that exclusive truth claim with us! In fact, if what Jesus says is true, the only loving and compassionate thing to do is to point people to that exclusive truth!

When a math teacher grades her students’ multiplication tests, she doesn’t mark some answers wrong because she hates those particular students, but because she wants to help them see and learn the objectively true answers! Would a good teacher give every student an A+ regardless of their answers, because they claim, “My truth is just different than yours”? Isn’t that just setting them up for failure? If the sign on the expressway says, “One Way,” and you drive your car down

it in the opposite direction because “your truth is different,” what do you expect will happen? So the question is, “How do we know that Jesus’ exclusive truth claims are really the truth?” And how do we communicate that exclusive truth to a world bent on inclusivity?

Look again at Jesus’ words to his disciples in our sermon text from John 14. **“My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? You know the way to the place where I am going.”** On the surface, that sounds like something any of the world religion founders might have taught their followers. Basically, “Let me show you the way to God, so you can get there like me.” Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, Joseph Smith, and L. Ron Hubbard would all instruct their followers, “These are the things you have to do to get to God.

But that’s not what Jesus is saying at all. After Thomas asks Jesus, **“Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”** Jesus doesn’t say, “Here’s what you have to do,” or “Let me show you the way.” He says, **“I am the way.”** Jesus doesn’t tell us what we have to do to get to God, or set an example for us to follow. He points to himself as the one and only way we can be with God forever! As Peter, who heard these words of Jesus firsthand said, **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”**

It’s no coincidence that Jesus spoke these exclusive words to his disciples on Holy Thursday, the night before he suffered the punishments of Hell and died to pay for the sins of the world on the cross. Jesus told his disciples that he is the only way to God, right before he showed them why and how he is the only way! Only through Jesus’ holiness can God see sinners like us as holy. Only through the forgiveness that Jesus won for filthy sinners like us can we come to a holy God. Only through Jesus, the Son of God, can sinners like us, who are by nature enemies of God, become God’s children! As Jesus assured his disciples, **“Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”** Only through Jesus can we come to God, because Jesus is God.

Another common visual for the teaching that there are many paths to God is that God is on top of a mountain, and people are trying to get up to him. There are different ways to get to the top—maybe one person follows the switchback trail, another free climbs to scale the side, another rides a horse, and another takes a helicopter. Many different ways to get up to God, right?

But that's what makes Jesus completely different from every other "path." Out of all the world religions, only Christianity says that it's not up to you to climb up to God. Rather, God came down to us! As Jesus promises, ***"If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*** Jesus is God come down to us. He doesn't tell us the way to get to the top, but cradles us in his loving arms, wraps his nail-pierced hands around us, and brings us to God! Jesus is the one and only way, because he is the truth—the complete contrast to all the other lies and falsehood; and because he is the life—the complete contrast to everything else that will only bring about eternal death.

Yes, Jesus makes the exclusive truth claim that he is the only way to God, like every belief system makes exclusive truth claims. But only in Christ do we find a beautiful inclusive exclusivity. Who was that cross for? Who did Jesus come to save? ***"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son."*** Every other belief system requires people to fit into certain criteria—your culture, your race, your social standing, your actions and rituals. And there are always people who are unable to fit those criteria. But in the exclusive claim of Jesus, the only way to God, is the inclusive truth that Jesus died for all people—regardless of age, race, gender, social standing, culture, or past. That Jesus is ***"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."*** Jesus is the only way, truth, and life. But he is the only way, truth, and life that is for all people! Because through Christ, we're not saved because we fit into particular categories or criteria. We're saved entirely by grace alone, apart from ourselves. Jesus' salvation is for all people, and all that is required is faith that trusts in God's promises in Jesus. As I said earlier, Jesus might be counter-cultural. But he's the

Savior of every culture. His truth claim is exclusive, but his love is inclusive of the whole world.

As I said earlier, exclusive truth claims can cause feelings of superiority, and mistreatment or hatred of those with different beliefs. But what better exclusive truth claim to counter that than one based on a Savior who died for his enemies, asking for their forgiveness. As Christians who know the exclusive truth of salvation through Christ alone, our goal is not to win an argument, or to pridefully tell everyone we're better. But in God's love, to lead people to the way, the truth, and the life—the beautiful inclusive exclusivity of Christ.