

## WAY. TRUTH. LIFE

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John 14:1-14

One of the great mysteries that has plagued Christians since the time of Christ is the question of salvation. Who, exactly, is saved? Who is privileged to drink from God's cup of salvation? I am not just talking about the people in this room—the good, upright, church-going Christians. I'm not talking about all the others who gather in faith at the communion table. I am talking about everybody, the entire world, all humans that have ever lived. Who among these are saved?

There are some who will assert that only a very few will be saved—the good, the faithful, the followers of Christ, those who meet certain requirements. In other words, people just like those who make this assertion.

Christians who call themselves Jehovah's Witnesses have an actual number: 144,000. Their doctrine states that only 144,000 believers will be saved.

Then, there are those at the other end of the spectrum. These believe that all people—despite their faith or background—will ultimately be reconciled to God because of God's divine mercy and love. We call this belief *universalism*. And I will admit that I lean in that direction. I believe that God is gracious and merciful and that every person has the opportunity to receive God's salvation. God does not desire to cut any of us off from him. Think of the many Old Testament stories in which people—entire nations even—turned from God. Yet, God works tirelessly to bring them back to God's realm. That is what God does. God is love.

We will come back to this in a moment. But first, we need to look at our scripture reading for today. The reading is for today is from the 14th chapter of John's gospel. Chapters 13 through 17 comprise what is known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse—five chapters of Jesus' final words to his disciples.

The Farewell Discourse is a series of dialogues between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus speaks and the disciples pose honest and heartfelt questions which reveal their fears and trepidation.

This Farewell Discourse takes place around the table of the Last Supper. Chapter 13 begins with Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Then Jesus tells of the betrayal by Judas, the betrayal by Peter, and ultimately, the betrayal by all people. Jesus commands his disciples to love one another and he tells them how his life is going to end. The disciples are understandably anxious and confused over his words when he says to them, *I am with you only a little longer... where I am going, you cannot come*. Put yourself in their shoes. They have followed him relentlessly for

three years. They gave up their old lives. They have witnessed his greatness. And now he tells them that they are parting ways. That can't be right.

In our reading for today which is found in the heart of this Farewell Discourse, Jesus has just told Peter that Peter will soon deny knowing him. Then Jesus tells the group, *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.* And then Jesus talks about where he will be going. He tells them that he is going to his Father's house. He says:

*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.  
If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?  
You know where I am going.*

But the disciple Thomas speaks up and says, *Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*

And then, to answer Thomas, Jesus says, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

And this, you will recognize as the verse that many people have used across the centuries to establish their exclusive relationship with God. The only way to God, the only way to salvation, is through Jesus. After all, Jesus says, *No one comes to the father except through me.* This makes Jesus the gatekeeper of heaven. It also makes life easier for Christians. We can rest assured that our salvation is secure because we know Jesus. We are on the right path.

And that should give us comfort. We desire salvation and we have the key. We have Christ. We are better than the rest. God loves us.

But what happens if we continue reading in this passage? What happens when we come to those words where Jesus says, *If you know me, you will know my Father also. You know him and you have seen him.*

To this another disciple speaks up. This time it is Philip who says, *Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.*

Jesus responds saying, *Philip, how long have you been with me? And still, you don't get it? If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. Don't you understand that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.*

Now, as I understand this passage, Jesus is indeed saying that the way to the Father is through him because the disciples know Jesus.

If you know Jesus, then, in fact, he is the only way to God. For us, here, as Christians, we know Christ. Christ is for us the way to God, the only way.

But what about the rest of the world? What about those who don't know Christ as we do? Are they then excluded? Are they banished to suffer in the fiery pits?

## LIMBO

Medieval theologians struggled with the dilemma of what to do about those figures in the Old Testament who were clearly towers of faith, who lived in relationship to God. People like Moses, Joshua, Elijah, David. Are they doomed to hell? It doesn't seem right. They hadn't done anything wrong. They just had the misfortune to be born before Jesus. They possibly couldn't know Jesus.

So, faced with this predicament, these theologians developed the idea of Limbo. They placed Limbo between heaven and hell. Those in Limbo don't suffer, but they don't achieve salvation, either.

I believe that it is extraordinarily arrogant for anyone to determine what God is or is not able to do. Who are we to dictate God's plan of salvation? Who are we to say who is in and who is out? Who has to go where?

So, what do we do?

I suggest that we go back to the earlier part of this reading where Jesus tells the disciples about his Father's house. *In my Father's house there are many rooms.* God's house, of course, is God's kingdom. And in God's kingdom are many places for us to dwell, for all to dwell.

Jesus speaks these words as words of comfort. They are words of comfort to us, too. God's house is large; it is large enough for many, maybe large enough for all creation. After all, if God created us, why would God exclude us?

## SUDANESE

This reminds me of a story. Many years ago, I was working very closely with Christians from the Sudan who had come to Middle Tennessee to escape the fighting in their country. They were Presbyterian and desired to form a Presbyterian church, but they lacked a place to worship. I approached a congregation in Nashville with the proposal that they share their space with the Sudanese—two congregations in one building. There was a church meeting to discuss this proposition. It failed. I recall one lady coming up to me and telling me, "A church is like your home, and you don't just invite anyone into your home." That church no longer exists.

Eventually, we were able to help settle the Sudanese congregation in a building in Gallatin.

As a side note, just yesterday, at the meeting of our Presbytery, I spoke with my Sudanese friends who were there. They reported that the church was growing and growing. They currently have 50 children in the church. And they invited me to come worship with them any time.

If we view our church as model of God's kingdom, what sort of house are we building here? Does our house exclude those we determine to be unworthy? Or do we include all as a reflection of God's expansive love?

I started off with the question, "Who is saved?" I don't know. But I hope that we, as a church, will treat all people as if they are saved.

As I mentioned to the children, we don't have a portrait of God, but Jesus tells us to look at him. The same is with the kingdom. We don't have a photo of the kingdom, but I would hope that the church would serve as a model. If someone wants to know what the kingdom looks like, I hope we can say, just look at the church. It's something like that. It is where all are welcomed.