



No One Comes to the Father but Through Me

TEXT
John 14:1-7

February 5, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In preparing for this series, a number of you emailed me lifting up the theological question: Is Christianity the only way to God? What about people of other faith traditions? What about members of my family who find no interest in Christianity? What about my friend Abdul? Or my friend Moshe? Are they all cut off from God?

Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” We read this text at memorial services as a word of comfort. But these words can sound like bad news for those who do not believe in Jesus.

But I do not think that’s what it means.

There is a tradition in the Christian Church that treats Christian faith as the great determiner of who is in and who is out with God. For them, the purpose of the church is to persuade others to become like us. For just as we have professed faith in Jesus Christ, they too must profess faith in Jesus Christ — not that faith might bring comfort and hope and teach love and compassion, but because this is the only way to become right with God.

No one comes to the Father except through Jesus.

Some of you emailed, noting that such a theological affirmation fails to notice the importance of the accident of birth. There will be children born in Indonesia today, the largest Muslim country in the world. We have to be honest that the chance of such a child professing faith in Jesus is much less than a child who happens to be born in a hospital named St. Luke’s or St. Francis or Presbyterian. Does that seem just?

Such a theological affirmation also reduces the importance of life in this world. I mean, this world only serves as the audition ground for the life to come. Does that sound right?

And it raises questions about the nature of God. If God condemns what will no doubt be the majority of the human family over time, how is this loving?

“No one comes to the Father except through me.” It sounds like Christians are in and everyone else is out. It sounds like Jesus is telling his followers that Muslims are excluded, the Hindus are cut off, the Native American spiritualists are lost — and for that matter, your cousin Eddie, who says he doesn’t believe in God, is facing eternal consequences for his spiritual apathy.

I don’t think that is what these words mean.

This was about a debate within Judaism about the significance of Jesus. It was an affirmation that in Jesus we see God’s love that does not let go of us; a love that prepares a place for us with God. You don’t have to be afraid, because the love of God has come to you.

It says we come to the Father through Jesus, not through *belief* in Jesus. That’s different. My belief does not save me; Jesus saves me. Here is what I mean: Jesus reveals that God loves the whole world. Jesus reveals the love of God that extends to all of creation and shows God’s desire to redeem all. Jesus died to draw the entire world to himself.

Jesus shows that you are loved with a love that will not let you go. And there are no limits to that love.

But the text does speak of belief. Belief is very important. Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. Believe in God, believe also in me!” Yes, our belief in God matters. Our belief comforts us, guides us, challenges us, grounds us, calls us, but our belief does not save us.

Yet, when I trust that the grace of God claims me, two things happen. The first, I don’t worry about my salvation anymore. God has taken care of that. *Do*

not let your hearts be troubled. You do not need to worry about your salvation. I have prepared a place for you with God. Believe that, Jesus says.

The second, if Jesus reveals that God's love extends to all people, then that shapes how we see others — particularly others who do not share our faith in Jesus.

What I am saying is that this passage is not about creating those who are in and those who are out. Creating those who are in and those who are out is not actually a Christian teaching. The need to determine who is in and who is out is a common human tendency.

When I was a kid, my neighbor was Danny Martin. Our backyards met at the chain-link fence. There was a tree in his yard that grew into our yard, and in that tree, over the chain-link fence, there was a tree house. At the entrance to the tree house, which was just some boards nailed into the trunk, there was a sign that communicated the only rule for the tree house. It read: "No Girls Allowed."

We both had sisters. I had one, he had two. We considered girls in general and sisters in particular to be a creation flaw. "No Girls Allowed." Then Helen Walters moved in down the street. One afternoon, she stopped her bike in Danny's driveway and said, "Cool tree house! Could I see it?"

As I started to cite the rule, Danny said, "Sure."

He was a year older than me. When I asked him, "Why did you let her climb up into the tree

house?" he said, "I don't know." Life is simpler when we know who is in and who is out.

We do this all the time. I was having lunch with a friend, and somehow we got on the conversation of extended family. He said, "Yeah, my brother's wife, she's crazy."

"Really?" I asked.

"Oh yeah. We just can't figure her out. Of course, she's from the South, and you know how those folks can be."

I said, "Yeah, I do."

Of course, it reminded me of years ago when Carol and I told our dear friends in Florida we were moving here. They said, "Tom, we are happy for you, but why would you move to Kansas?"

We all have a list of "those people" we know how they are. We talk about those flaky people out West, or those elitists from the East. Or in Kansas, we talk about those backward people in Missouri, and in Missouri, we talk about those crazy people in Kansas. This is just one more example of "No Girls Allowed." It's not our most mature practice, and it is not a Christian perspective.

In our nation, we could use some maturity and perspective. All of us are caught up in this national conversation. It's political, it's cultural, it's moral; it's a spiritual conversation. And it is lacking some of this maturity and perspective.

Maybe it shouldn't surprise us. Let me tell you something about Christian faith in my life. I never live up to it. Christian faith is always bigger than I am. Every week I need our prayer

of confession, for I have not yet become the person God wants me to be. That is true for me and for you. But it is not only true for us as individuals; it is also true for us as communities. It's true for the church. It's true for *this* church. It's true for nations, and it's true for *our* nation. So of course, our trust in Jesus Christ will at times cause us to see the nation as lacking some maturity and perspective. And this is never more the case than when we are afraid.

We are worried about who is in and who is out, who is welcome and who is not, who is righteous and who is evil. There are marches in the streets. I read that in more than 600 cities, there have been public protests. In the nation's capital, senators are not showing up for hearings, and senators are refusing to speak to one another.

There have been reckless and condescending statements about Syrians and Mexicans, Muslims and women. We who were at one time a nation of immigrants now appear to be suspicious of some folks — not because of the "content of their character," but because of their nationality or perhaps for their religion. We can't quite figure ourselves out. We seem to be struggling to discern our values. But we seem to think if we can just identify those who don't belong, that will save us.

That may be an American conviction, but it is not Christian.

Sometimes we need a word to remind us of our higher values. This is particularly true when we are afraid.

You probably didn't know it, but this past Monday was Fred Korematsu day. You have probably not heard of Fred Korematsu; Rodger can tell you about him. Mr. Korematsu was a Japanese American and a Presbyterian Elder in the First Presbyterian Church of Oakland, California.¹ On Feb 19, 1942, there was a Presidential Executive Order that declared Fred Korematsu — and all Japanese citizens — were a threat to national security. As a nation, we were afraid, much like we are today.

Mr. Korematsu fought this Executive Order all the way to the Supreme Court. He insisted that being of Japanese heritage was not a justified reason to place him in a prison camp. He lost his case before the Supreme Court. But he is remembered because even in a season of fear, he reminded us of our higher values. That is something he learned in church.

If I understand this text, it does not say that God favors some and rejects others, but exactly the opposite. Jesus is the reason we know God loves all people. The love of God extends to all people.

The human tendency is to divide between good and bad, righteous and evil, like me and not like me. But that is not God's way. To God, we are all family. And Jesus has prepared a place for all with God. The challenge, the unending challenge, is for Christian people to remember and to live like we are all God's family. This is so difficult for everyone, but it is so important.

In February of 1997, President Bill Clinton entered the

House Chamber to give the State of the Union Address. His cabinet was led into the room by Madeleine Albright. She said, "For the first time, a woman led the cabinet down the aisle between the applauding Congressmen and Senators. . . . It should have been a moment of unmitigated joy. It wasn't."²

You may remember that she had learned something her parents had never told her: She was Jewish. She also learned that 12 members of her family had perished during the Holocaust.

In July of that same year, Secretary Albright traveled to the Czech Republic. While there, she visited the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague. She described it this way: "Entering, you observe what appears to be fine wallpaper covering the wall, but as you get closer, you can see that the pattern is actually made up of neat black writing listing the 77,297 Czechoslovak Jews who died in the Holocaust."³ The Jewish officials accompanying me pointed out the names of Arnost and Olga Korbel." They were her grandparents.

She wrote, "I had not foreseen that I would start visualizing my grandparents in striped concentration camp uniforms, seeing their hollow faces staring back at me. . . . I thought about how they must have suffered, their struggle to survive, the torture of their last hours."

She then said, "A year earlier I had visited the Synagogue. . . . It looked the same now as it had then. It was I who had changed."⁴

What would happen if we realized that the names out there

are names of our family? We live in a culture where it is easy to create those who are in and those who are out. When our salvation comes, and it is surely coming, when we see the truth that is the truth, we will discover that there is a wall in the heart of God that bears the names of all people, and we will discover that all along we were family.

Jesus has prepared a place with God for you and for all. Jesus reveals God's desire to save the whole world, whom God loves. Not to save a few or a percentage, but the whole.

Believe that in your heart, and you will not be troubled. Believe that and maybe we will remember that we are all family. And maybe, just maybe, we will not be quite so afraid.

¹I learned about Mr. Fred Korematsu from my friend, Rev. Chandler Stokes, who served as his pastor in Oakland.

²Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary* (2003), p. 235

³I recommend that you Google the Pinkas Synagogue and see images of these walls.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 246

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.