**One Love, Many Paths**
Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
August 5, 2018

*One love, one heart*
*Let's get together and feel all right*
*Hear the children crying (One love)*
*Hear the children crying (One heart)*
*Sayin', "Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right."
*Sayin', "Let's get together and feel all right."

—Bob Marley

Reading: John 14:1-7

When I was young, I always had to laugh when I heard the Smothers Brothers do their comedy routine. They would get into these arguments, and as they would carry on, Tommy would finally say, “Oh, yeah? Well, Mom always liked you best!”

To most people, Tommy’s line, “Mom always liked you best,” is laughable because we know it doesn’t work that way. That line was only Tommy’s futile, last-ditch attempt to win the argument, and argument he always lost.

We know most parents do not play favorites and would find it unthinkable. Most understand that love is not a limited resource, which needs to be carefully and equally distributed. Love knows no such bounds.

And if this is true for human parental love, how much more true is it that all God’s children are loved the same by God? Each person is infinitely and boundlessly precious in God’s heart.

But it has been difficult for God’s children, at times, to understand that God’s love is universal. And the story has always been that God is always more inclusive and more loving than God’s children think. Carl Sandburg was once asked, “What is the ugliest word in the English language?” After much thought he said, “Exclusive.”

The message of Jesus was a love that includes all. Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). And in his second letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote that “God, in Christ, was reconciling the world—the entire cosmos—to God’s self.” God offers love, acceptance and life to everyone. Jesus declares that God loves and gives life to the entire cosmos.

And yet, the followers of Jesus have often turned the words of Jesus upside down. Instead of proclaiming with Jesus the message of God’s inclusive love, the church often proclaimed exclusion, from the very beginning.

Recently, we’ve seen a rise in Christian nationalism—a claim that Christianity is the one, true faith, and that the United States is exclusively a Christian nation. And we have seen example after example in the news of the ugliness, bigotry, hatred and violence that emerges from this perspective. Just this past week, there was a march of White supremacists marching with Nazi flags, using the name “patriot
prayer.” Annie Lamott once said, “You know you have created God in your own image when God hates all the people you do.”

One of the most abused passages in the Bible is the one I chose today: “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Some have pointed out that Jesus wasn’t talking about religion, and he certainly wouldn’t have been talking about Christianity. He was, after all, a Jew. Jesus had found a pathway to God within his own tradition of Judaism, a pathway of love, compassion and self-emptying, and this path exists within all religions and beyond. And so they reinterpret this text to say, “No one comes to the Father except through love,” which is good. I agree with this statement.

The problem, though, is that this isn’t exactly what the text says. The problem is not just with the interpretation, it seems to me, but also with the text itself! The exclusivism goes back to the very beginning, the first followers.

As you know, Jesus himself never wrote anything down. What we have are things that other people said that he said, written long after he died. Scholars today can say, with different degrees of confidence, which things Jesus actually said and which things were actually statements of other people that Jesus was portrayed as saying. Now, just because we say that a statement was made up doesn’t always mean that it was wrong. Many of the made-up statement were entirely in line with what the real Jesus would have said. However, sometimes the made-up statement deviated from Jesus—like our passage today. “No one comes to the Father except through me,” reflects the concern of an emerging church to legitimize itself. I don’t believe that Jesus would have said it like this; it is not consistent with the words we can more positively attribute to the historical Jesus.

We must remember that these words were written for a persecuted religious community that was struggling for survival in the first two centuries C.E. And later in the 4th century the institutional church would use these very words to consolidate exclusive power and control as the church and state merged under Constantine, claiming to be the only gateway to God. Jesus, it seems to me, no doubt embodied “the way, the truth and the life.” However, he would never claim, I believe, to be the only embodiment of this way.

So these words of John mark the beginning of an exclusive Christianity. To borrow a phrase from Robert Funk, these words mark a time when the early communities began turning the religion of Jesus into a religion about Jesus. Jesus certainly did not want to become an object or worship, and most certainly he did not want to become a means of dividing people between the worthy and the unworthy. “No one comes to the Father except through me” has been used throughout the centuries to perpetuate religious imperialism and bigotry.

Rather, the more historically accurate words of Jesus, such as, “whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40) stand in a dramatic tension with these words from John. Notice that he did not say, “whoever is not for us is against us” as some others have. Rather, it is a circle of inclusion, “whoever is not against us is for us.” It assumes a peaceful coexistence, a respect and an acceptance of others with different beliefs and views.

You know, so many people have rejected Christianity because all they have known is a Christianity that claims it is the only way. So I’m extremely grateful for groups and churches who share a different understanding of Jesus. The group, Progressive Christianity, for example, states, we “have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus” and “recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God’s realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.” Unfortunately, this still seems to be one of those best kept secrets.
A number of years ago, Marcus Borg, a New Testament scholar, was asked in an interview why conservative churches were growing. He remarked that these churches weren’t growing because they were conservative or because of their biblical literalism but because 1) they take God seriously, and 2) they have enthusiastic worship. Mainline congregations have something to learn from this, he said, because they “have grown uncertain about the reality of God.” Their voice is too tentative.

If Borg is correct—and I think he was on to something—how can we speak with a more certain voice? His answer was to embrace pluralism and proclaim an inclusive Christianity:

*If [the Christian tradition] accepts its place as one among several traditions, I think it can be even more confident of its truthfulness...*

*I think Christianity has a far greater credibility when it accepts its relative status than when it claims a unique and essentially triumphant status.*

I think that we here know this implicitly. We understand that God is present everywhere, in every crack and crevice of creation, including, of course, different religious traditions and where a faith tradition is absent. And when we become more and more explicit that the Sacred Reality is present everywhere—when we embrace plurality and resist those who would have one conquering view, both in the Church and in the world—then we will find more and more vitality. When we become more confident of this truth we will have more life and growth.

Look, as progressive Christians, we’re careful not to claim too much. We acknowledge the limits of our understanding and see we have only a partial grasp of the truth. This humility is a good thing! But it should not stop us from declaring clearly and confidently that God is within all people, believers and nonbelievers, alike. And all people are held in God’s love—Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists.

And so what is an inclusive Christianity? Well, an inclusive Christian community is not merely a community that strives to include all people. That’s physically impossible. An inclusive Christianity points beyond itself. It says, “We are not the whole thing. But we are part of the whole.” We strive to demonstrate in our limited and partial way God’s great impartiality.

Inclusive Christianity is the opposite of what one can call Imperial Christianity. Imperial Christianity seeks to impose one view on all others. It seeks to conquer or convert. It is the Christianity of the Crusades. This mindset seeks to clean the church and drive out all the impurities—all the liberals, progressives and those with different views. It seeks to force its own particular understanding of creation, of birth control and sexuality, of marriage, and of when human life begins, upon the entire nation. An Inclusive Christianity does not fear encounters with other faith traditions, but embraces them. It sees other traditions not as competition but as being complementary.

In his fascinating book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

*Buddhists and Christians alike, in dialogue, want to recognize similarities as well as differences in their traditions. It is good that an orange is and orange and a mango is a mango. The colors, the smells, and the tastes are different, but looking deeply, we see that they are both authentic fruits. Looking more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the rain, the minerals, and the earth in both of them. Only their manifestations are different. Authentic experience makes a religion a true tradition. Religious experience is, above all, human experience. If religions are authentic,
they contain the same elements of stability, joy, peace, understanding, and love. The similarities as well as the differences are there. They differ only in terms of emphasis. Glucose and acid are in all fruits, but their degrees differ. We cannot say that one is real fruit and the other is not.

Dialogue does not mean we want others to abandon their own spiritual roots and embrace our faith. Rather, real dialogue leads us to better understand ourselves as well as others who are different. And this is true, come to think of it, not just between religions, but within them.

An inclusive Christian community is not merely a community that strives to include all people—as important as that is. But an inclusive Christianity is primarily a community that points beyond itself and that accepts its relative status. To be an inclusive Christian community is not that we can contain the whole, but that we are merely part of the whole. It is to see ourselves as a community within the broader community, the community of God. May this be a community that points beyond itself, demonstrating God’s inclusive, universal love for all.

Jesus constantly challenged the dualistic “us vs. them” thinking of tribalism. For him, being a faithful member of his own tribe continually led him to go beyond it.

Make no mistake about it—this is a Christian community. And this table set before us is the table of Jesus. Yet this ritual is open to all people regardless of faith and doctrine, because this community and this table point beyond themselves to the great community in which all become one.

I will end this morning with the words of John Murray, who founded the universalism movement in the 18th century:

Go out into the highways and by-ways.
Give the people something of your new vision.
You may possess a small light,
But uncover it, let it shine.
Use it in order to bring more light and understanding
To the hearts and minds of men and women.
Give them not hell, but hope and courage;
Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.