

Pentecost 11—B

John 6:24-35

Is Jesus Christ Really the Only Way?

You know, we live in an age of toleration where everybody's views are now as good as everybody else's; where nobody's prejudices and personal tastes and opinions are allowed to be put on somebody else. No shaming, no guilt, no nothing. Everybody's ideas are as good as anybody else's and that idea of tolerance extends to the field of religion as well. Is Christianity essentially any better than any other religion? Is Jesus really the only way? I've gone back into the archives to bring you the answer to that question.

Would you say you're a tolerant or intolerant person? If you think about our nation's history, we've got some pretty sad stories of intolerance; like one group of people thinking that they are better than another group of people. Just think, for instance, of the kidnapping and importation of Africans who were forced to come to America and become slaves; with generation upon generation of slavery based not on war and conquest, but based on ancestry, based on a racial group. That's a pretty embarrassing and shameful form of intolerance in our nation's history. And even after the American Civil War, even after emancipation, there still are plenty of stories, miserable stories of racial intolerance. Or, think of the ordeal that the Cherokee nation was put through with their Trail of Tears, when they were displaced from their ancestral lands in America's south and forced to move westward to reservations. Or, think of during World War II, and the forced internment of Japanese Americans. Even though their sons were drafted into the Armed Forces and were serving their country, even though these Japanese Americans were being taxed, at the same time they were interned and forcibly put into detention camps for the duration of the war. That same thing was not done to German Americans, even though Germany was the enemy in Europe. So the interment of Asians during World War II is kind of an embarrassing part of our American national history; a sad record of intolerance.

But our age today is one of tolerance. In our culture we work to be tolerant of everything. Nobody's ideas or opinions about anything are any better than anybody else's. And I think it's a backlash from an era when we were very intolerant of people not like us. Now tolerance is the politically correct thing to do. And that also involves food. Nobody can say: "Well, my preferences in food and dining and cuisine are better than yours." Some people like their food really bland and don't like hot, spicy food like spicy Thai. They think: "Oh, it burns my tongue! I don't like your stuff." And the spicy eaters look at the bland eaters thinking: "You are so boring! I don't want to eat your chow." Or, people who have a favorite movie think they're no better than anybody else because they like a certain movie. Just because somebody else doesn't like it and has different preferences, we allow people to have varying opinions about movies. Same with TV shows—you're not necessarily better than anybody else because you favor watching this TV show and somebody else likes that one. This is simply a matter of one's own personal opinion, right? Like which restaurants you happen to favor.

One area our culture has not pushed tolerance, however, is in the area of politics. In reality, political opinions are nothing more than that and we shouldn't think we're necessarily better than anybody else who happens to disagree with us in politics. We could use more tolerance in this area.

In matters of personal behavior, morality and religion we live today in a country where everybody's religious views are thought to be just as good as anybody else's. There is no absolutely right religion in popular talk today around college campuses. Everything is relative and everybody, there's pressure put on everybody to be politically correct and to allow everybody's views perceived as having equal worth. It doesn't matter what you believe, it doesn't matter what your preferences are in marriage or human sexuality. There is really no right or wrong anymore, there is nothing that's better or worse. Everything is relative, everything's a matter of personal preference and we all need to be tolerant of each other.

Well, have you ever experienced that struggle? Have you ever attempted to testify to the convictions of your faith? Not just: "Well, these are my opinions." "This is my faith!" Have you ever attempted to lay out a message on someone: "This is absolute truth. These are things you ought to know. These are things you ought to believe. This is the way. Other ways are not the way." If you have ever run into a buzz saw when you

uttered those things, you know what I'm talking about because in our culture today, it's all relativism. There is no central authority. There are no absolute standards of right and wrong. Everything is a matter of opinion. Everything is just shades of gray and there is no such thing as right or wrong anymore. It's just: "Well, that's my truth." There is no such thing as truth or lies, it's just "my truth." And everybody's allowed to walk around in a little self-constructed bubble where you can be king or queen or god in your own little bubble. Nobody else can tell you you're wrong, but then you're expected to show good taste and not ever say to somebody else: "What you said is wrong."

Christianity, in its purest form and sense, meaning drawn from the words of God himself, is both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. It is inclusive when you think about grace, for the arms of Jesus wide on the cross were wide enough to hug the whole world, which includes you and me and everyone else. Grace was poured out on everybody. A "not guilty" verdict was announced on the world. The Scripture says: "*God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting their sins against them*" (2 Corinthians 5:19). The blood of Jesus from the cross washed everybody. That's called grace. It's all his doing, a hundred percent. It's universal. It is unconditional and it is free. The Bible also says simultaneously: "*It is by grace through faith*" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you don't know about it and believe it, that grace essentially does you no good.

Now you might say: "Make up your mind. Which is it, grace or faith?" And the answer is "Yes." But Jesus himself has no use for tolerance when it comes to what your faith is in. He is extremely tolerant of all of our stupidity, our many sins, the abuse we've given to others, the hurt and harm we've done to other people, he's very tolerant of our own moral failures, of the things we've done we shouldn't have, and all the times we failed to do the right thing and choked. He's very tolerant of that and patiently forgives us day after day. But what he is intolerant of is you trying to build a bridge between sinful you and a holy God through any way else but him because everything else is the emperor's new bridge. It's an illusion and it won't hold you as you try to cross. There is only one bridge. And I'd like to hop through this discussion that Jesus had in John 6, probably on the road, and then also in the synagogue in Capernaum. If you'd like to turn to it with me, I just want to hop through it with you. It bears some further study and I really had trouble figuring out how to boil it down super small and I just can't. I have to hop through the whole thing with you. So please do read it later today or this week.

It's in John 6 and it starts at verse 24. This is right on the heels of bread and fish for 5,000 men plus their wives and children. Probably 10,000 or more human beings ate until they were full and the fragments and leftovers were far more than what they started with. Then Jesus does this miracle boat maneuver with his disciples in the dark where he walks on the water and climbs in the boat, gets them all home safely, whisks their boat away at warp nine and gets to shore so that the storm won't bother them and now come the questions.

And the first one is: "How did you get here so fast?" Like: "Is this another one of your cool miracles?" And Jesus now, in answer to each question or challenge, points people to him because Christianity is inclusive when it comes to grace, but it is exclusive when it comes to faith. Only those who trust in Christ can cross over to be acceptable to God, to be forgiven, to become spiritually alive again, to go from corpse to live and then who can become immortal in that joy of heaven. "*When did you get here?*" (25) they asked. Jesus said: "*You are not looking for me not because you saw the miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled*" (26). You don't want to work anymore, do you? You want me to give you free food so that you don't have to work so hard. You don't want to earn your daily bread. You want me to give it to you every day, don't you? You want me to do this all the time. "*Do not continue to work for food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you*" (27). Only I can give you something that will keep you alive forever. It's exclusive.

They said: "Well, what do we have to do?" And poor Jesus thinks: "They don't get it, do they?" It's not about you! You can't do anything. You cannot build the bridge you need to travel on. "*What should we do?*" Jesus said, "*This is the work of God*" (28-29). You want to know what to do? Don't do anything! Believe in what I am doing. I am not at all surprised by their second question: "*What should we do to carry out the works of God?*" (28) You know, people always want to think: "I can make my own destiny happen. It's really up to me. I can do this. What are the rules? Just tell me the rules so I know what I'm supposed to do." And Jesus just tried to help them get it. You can't do anything! You cannot heal your own sickness. You cannot bring

your own spiritual deadness back to life. You cannot achieve your holiness and perfection that God demands. Instead, let me give it to you. He said: “The work of God—do you really want to do what God wants?” *“This is the work of God: that you believe in the one he sent”* (29).

Now this business about faith and believing involves a little different use of the way we use the terms because when I say: “Well, I believe it’s going to rain today,” that means I kind of think it will but I might be wrong. If I ask one of my kids: “What did you get on that English test?” They might say: “Well, I believe I got a B+, Dad” but in reality, they might have gotten a C-. If we say: “I have faith that my team is going to win the World Series,” that’s nothing but a blind guess. That could be totally wrong. That’s just a hunch. Or to say: “Well, I believe that they’re going to do well.” You don’t really know that. But when Jesus says: “Believe in me,” he doesn’t mean guessing, he doesn’t mean wild hunches or blind guesses. There’s nothing blind at all. Believing means you accept his description of his own identity. You accept what the Bible says about him as true and you embrace it and claim it as true for you.

Let me give you an example. At Christmastime, even people who aren’t Christians or people who have not particularly even read the Bible can see manger scenes on some people’s front lawns. Even if they have never read the Bible much or don’t know much about anything, they kind of know the story about a baby in the manger named Jesus and that woman kneeling next to him is his mom, Mary. The guy hovering in the background, kind of semi-detached from the scene, that’s the step-father, Joseph. So you may know the facts, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that you believe them to be true. Some people may even believe that those things really happened, but they’re so despairing of their own lives they don’t think that what he did has any connection to them. True faith means you believe that those things happened and that is indeed your Savior in the manger, brought to you through the wonderful assistance of Joseph and Mary, the woman who gave him birth. And that is your salvation lying there in the manger. That’s faith, Biblical faith.

The people then said: “If you were as cool as Moses, Moses gave us bread from heaven.” What was that stuff that rained down out of heaven kind of like daily Malt-O-Meal? Manna. It’s the Hebrew word: “Munhu,” means “What is this stuff, what is that?” That’s what manna means: “What is that?” They had miracle “what is that” food for forty years. It was bland, but healthy. There were no obese Israelites, I’ll tell you that. There was no salt or grease in that manna, I’ll tell you that. *“Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness”* (31). Can you keep this bread thing going? Jesus said: *“Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the real bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”* (32-33). And they asked challenge question number four: “Okay, bring it on! We like that stuff.” And Jesus said: “It’s me!” *“I am the bread of life”* (35). In other words if you eat me, you’re immortal. Way better than manna, way better than whatever food is wrapped up in a bag, sitting on your countertop or in your bread box. Way better than anything you’ve sunk your teeth into last week. When you eat of me, which is to say when you believe in what the word of God says about my identity and my work, you become immortal, you live. You become alive instead of dead. You truly become alive.

“I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never be hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty” (35). Verse 40 says: *“For this is the will of my Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life.”* So inclusive, it’s for everybody, black and white and whatever other colors and variations of skin, there may be. Curly hair and straight hair and northern dwellers and southern hemisphere dwellers and Chileans and Haitians and Americans and Canadians and Russians and Mongolians and Kazaks and everybody who looks in will find the doors are opened for everybody. But this is the one bridge, it’s big enough to hold you all, but this is the only bridge. If you try to make your own bridge and in your own vanity think you can do better, you will fall. You’ll fall into the pit beneath.

“Everyone who sees the Son may have eternal life... And I will raise him up” (40). Mohammad cannot raise dead people. Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha cannot raise you from your grave. He’s still dead. He will stay dead. And if it were up to him, you will never stir from your grave. Your cremation urn will stay that way permanently and you will cease to exist, except as a faint memory, getting fainter by the century. Jesus said: “I will come back and raise you up. Your dead body is nothing to me. That’s not a problem. I can raise you this fast.” The Bible says: *“In a twinkling of an eye”* (1 Corinthians 15:52). “That’s how fast I can put you back together and lift you out of your grave. I can do that for you. Believe in me.”

Jesus' audience wasn't really liking what they were hearing. Many still don't. Are there many different paths to God? No, only one that works. Are there many different bridges? No, only one that will hold you up. And Jesus said: "It's me. It is exclusive. There are no other bridges to God but by me. No one comes to the Father but by me." "*I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life*" (John 14:6). They didn't like to hear that, they were grumbling.

Well, I put it to you today, putting this out there right in your face. Do you believe him or not? Is he telling you the truth or not? In your desire, in your zeal, to be accepting and tolerant as an American, do you feel that you can accept and tolerate a whole, wide, variety of religious beliefs as equally true? Or is this the truth? You think about that. I put this out to you—does it show love to somebody else, does it really show love to someone who never had Jesus explained and so developed a different type of religious philosophy? Does it show love to be accepting and tolerant of that person's beliefs? That we are reincarnated and will come back, depending on our karma, depending on how well we've lived? Are you going to ratchet up in reincarnation, or will you be busted down to gerbil level and come back as a gerbil or a newt or a cockroach or something if you live like a scum? Does that show love to someone, to let them continue to think that? I don't think so.

Do you know what does show love? It is to say what Jesus said. You don't have to put this on someone as though they'll think you're intolerant or bigoted or whatever. Just say what Jesus said: His bridge is big enough to hold the world. It's big enough for all. Now come on the bridge, trust this one. This one will not let you down. If you knew there was only one safe bridge to get across this canyon, you would do whatever you could to put cones and markers and try to funnel the traffic to get across the good bridge. I put this out to you—we do not show love to people who are not Christians by babying them along or tolerating it all in our effort to show that we're not biased or bigoted, to let them continue to believe in what is an idol.

So we've come full circle. Do you consider yourself to be a tolerant person or an intolerant person? I hope that you can grow in the grace to live as a tolerant person in a world full of different political opinions, that you enjoy racial diversity, age diversity, and economic diversity. That you don't necessarily project an atmosphere in your day-to-day life where you work or where you study or where you live that you think you're better than other people. But I hope that you never grow weary of looking at Jesus Christ as the only way. In a sense, that does make you and me intolerant, but that makes Jesus intolerant and you and I can well be intolerant of things of which Jesus himself is intolerant. He tolerates no substitutes for himself. He is the only way.

So please join me in renewing our strength and resolve to never flinch in holding forth Jesus Christ as the one way to forgiveness of sins, the one way to be reconciled with the Father, the one way to heaven. Join me in coming to the Lord to be strengthened in our resolve not to be apologetic that he is the only way.

Lord Jesus, You are enough. You are sufficient. We need look nowhere else beside you, for you came from the Father, you paid for our sins to make us all good with the Father again and you have created a place for us in your Father's heavenly mansion. No other way is in existence which will lead to the Father but by you. Help us to be proud of you and believe in you with all our hearts and help us to testify of you and you alone to whomever you give us an opportunity. We pray, Jesus, in your name, Amen.