

The *I am* Enigmas of Jesus
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The United Church of Gainesville
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John 14: 6; Exodus 3:1-5;13-14

Quite often when I am explaining the theology of this church, I find that I am backtracking from Jesus, and I am not alone in this. What's strange about this distancing ourselves from Jesus is that I, and my hunch you as well, have the greatest admiration for his life and teachings. Think of your own favorite stories of Jesus. Inevitably we turn to the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, Jesus feeding the five thousand, Jesus stilling the storm and more. When we do this we all marvel at his compassion and love.

So why are we so hesitant to identify our faith with him? One reason is this very passage, today's scripture.

John 14: 6 *Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to God except through me."*

This is one of the most problematic statements in the gospels for me. My Gettysburg College roommate was a conservative Lutheran pre-ministerial student. My hunch is that some assistant dean in the admissions office was trying to fulfill the mission of making this small college extra friendly and thought that as two students preparing for ministry, we'd make great roommates. In reality, I/we made each other neurotic, both over his dogmatic theology and his aversion to taking showers. He and I almost got into fist fights over this passage. It's a rallying cry of Christian triumphalism, what I call the Nya Na Na Nyah Nah branch of biblical interpretation.

How did these words get into the bible?

Let me explain something about the gospel of John, which is where this sentence appears. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of Jesus' life in a similar, parallel way. They were probably written between the years 70-90 of the Common Era. John is the last of the gospels, written perhaps around 100 CE, and John has different stories altogether.

Realize that when John wrote, he was not addressing the superiority of Christianity over Judaism as they exist in our world. John is simply celebrating a particular, minority faith community, finding a gift which this Jesus movement of Judaism brings to the table of religious faith. He was carving out a faith grounded in a God who is with us and within us.

The difficulty we get into in today's passage is in moving right to the last phrase, "No one comes to God except by me." I can't imagine that Jesus ever said that. It goes against every welcome he ever extended to all the outsiders of his ministry. It has to have been added on later, perhaps even by the early church after John had finished his manuscript. So let's look deeper.

More important than the ending of the sentence, "No one comes to God except by me," is the part we skip over, the beginning, the "I am the way," part.

There are at least seven "I am" statements in John. Jesus says at various times, "I am the bread of life" (6:45) "I am the light of the world" (8:12). "I am the door" (10:9), "I am the good shepherd" (10:11) "I am the resurrection" (11:15) "I am the way..." which is what we're talking about here (14:6), and "I am the vine", (15:1).

These are all metaphors, a way of comparing one thing with another beyond dictionary definitions. These "I am" statements have to be metaphors. If someone says they believe the bible literally, then ask if Jesus is literally a loaf of bread, or a door, or a vine, and if so what kind of vine? Metaphors suggest new dimensions. They never exhaust all possibilities. "Love is a rose" is a metaphor that says something about love, but it doesn't say everything about love, for love is surely also more than a rose. So Jesus is a door and bread, but not only a door and surely more than bread.

The key in these metaphors is the "I am" part of the statement. Remember, gospel writers are trying to get their readers to make a connection, slap their foreheads and say, "Aha!"

Do you remember how God first called Moses in the wilderness? When prompted we all know that it was in a burning bush, quite a metaphor in itself. But listen to the story of the burning bush and notice the name that God gives when Moses demands one.

Exodus 3:1-5; 13-14 *Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place which you are standing is holy ground"...*

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." God said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you."

When the Hebrew name for God is written, it has no vowels. "I am who I am" is written JHWH, which the King James Bible translated as Jehovah. A more accurate translation is Yahweh. In the Hebrew bible, when the name of God is Yahweh, it is translated as Lord.

John wants people to understand that God is not distant, out there, above us. God is within us as the I Am who called Moses, the ground of our being. That great I Am of God is accessible in human form. Jesus is one who shows us that. Jesus embodies God in a way that we all can embody God.

Here's a little name dropping. The last time we were in Scotland, Sandy and I stopped by to visit the wonderful modern theologian/poet of Celtic Christianity, J. Philip Newell at his home in Edinburgh. When I asked what he was working on, he said he was studying other manuscripts attributed to John that didn't make our bible. In these fragments were other "I am" statements.

There is no Last Supper, per se, in John. But Newell believes that there were but many holy meals. And rather than sitting at the table and solemnly saying, "This is my body... This is my blood..." Newell and Elaine Pagels have found in the Gnostic "Acts of John" Jesus saying, "I am the door, to you who knock," without acting like he was the only door. Jesus said, "I am the mirror, to you who see me..." Jesus said, "I am the dance," and then led his friends in a traditional Hebrew round dance where they would dance their way around a table and share the bread and wine of what we call communion. (Elaine Pagels, Beyond Belief, p. 124)

I actually led this kind of communion on the Friday night candlelight communion of a UCG men's fishing trip in 2003. It started a little clumsily, men with their arms on each others shoulders, taking two steps left, crossing the right foot, then two steps to the right, crossing the left foot, but by the end of the evening we had a communion with the energy of a Zorba the Greek or perhaps "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" with a deep sense of the presence of Jesus.

See how words of Jesus flow when we loosen up around them?

So what of the Jesus who said, "I am the way...?" Remember, John is a mystical, metaphorical gospel, not a literal one. The way is a road, a path, a journey. In Greek the way is *Hodos*, a feminine noun, linked to *Sophia*, the Goddess of wisdom.

The I am, the way, the divine essence of Jesus is not a destination; it is a journey. Jesus is a way, not a confession of faith.

So John is not trying to limit God to a narrow way found only through Jesus. John's constant theme is that the Logos, the Word, the creative power of God is embodied in Jesus, who in turn shows us how the holy is embodied in each of us.

Isn't it interesting how quickly organized religions work against the best impulses of our holy figures when we take the path they offer and turn it into a finished doctrine? My despair is how Christians appropriate the name of Jesus as a means of battle. My hope is recovering the I am of Jesus that is a door, a mirror, a dance, bread, a way of welcome for all, a path that shines in every darkness for everyone of every faith, in their own faith.

What do I believe Jesus is? My favorite description was that of Bishop John A.T. Robinson, who said that Jesus was one who wore the human face of God. By wearing the human face of God, Jesus shows us that God's human face is one each of us also wears.

Rather than abandon Jesus to those who smugly want to use him to close the door to all who are different from them, listen instead to the words of John

Shelby Spong, a radical debunker of narrow minded doctrine. These words were in last Friday's Lenten devotion.

I see Jesus as one who was constantly dismantling the barriers that separate people from one another. I see Jesus inviting his followers to join with him, to walk without fear beyond those security boundaries that always prohibit, block or deny our access to a deeper humanity. Jesus is a boundary-breaker who enables me to envision the possibility of my own humanity breaking through my human barriers to reach the divinity that his life reveals.

What human life needs is not a divine rescue. What we need is rather a life so open, so free, so whole, and so loving, that when we experience that life, we are called into the reality of love. Such a life becomes our doorway into the infinite and inexhaustible power of love. I call that love God. I see it in Jesus of Nazareth... Jesus becomes that doorway into the holy for me, but there will be other doorways for other people. The God who is the Ground of being cannot be bound even by our own religious claims." (Melodies of Grace, 2009, Sandy Reimer ed. p. 32)

That's the Jesus whom I embrace. And that is the Christianity I can name for myself.

So what about that college roommate of mine and those debates that were as much about the emotional roller coaster of living away from home with a stranger at age 18 as they were about biblical theology? I promised myself in those encounters that I would never limit the truth or love of God or Jesus to one faith, one confession, or one people. I have been turned away from communion in certain Protestant and Catholic churches, but I promised I would never turn anyone away from God's table. I promised myself that if no church accepted me with that faith, then I would not minister in a church.

This church has been a resurrection of inclusive life and faith for me. I thank you for that. But do me a favor. Don't ever let someone take away your sense of Jesus with this passage from John. In the final moment, what is most important is to claim your own "I am." Don't let narrow minded people take away your own claim to Christianity.

There is a story told by the St. Anthony, desert mystic of the fourth century. He said that when we approach the gates of heaven we will not be asked if we were St. Anthony, or St. Mary, or St. Paul. We will be asked if we were truly ourselves.

On this Palm Sunday, when Jesus began to walk the final week of his life, he uncovered his own I am. The question for us in this week is whether we have touched our own I Am, the God within who opens us to every other I Am around us.