**There Is One God: Christianity**

**John 14:1-6**

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"God is a metaphor for a mystery that absolutely transcends all human categories of thought, including being and non-being. It's so simple!" (Joseph Campbell)

Such a definition may be simple to the brilliant mind of comparative religion genesis such as Joseph Campbell but to average folks like you and me, concepts of "God" are anything but simple.

Let's be honest for all too many of us our religious education ended when we left Sunday School. Our concepts of the divine have been shaped by culture and family tradition as much as anything. As educated and well-informed as most of us are, in general, North Americans know very little about other religions and frankly very little about our own.

Sixty percent of American can't name more than 5 of the Ten Commandments and 82% think that the verse "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible; often attributed to Benjamin Franklin it was originally found in Ancient Greek and illustrated in two of Aesop's fables. (USA Today, 7/24/09)

We are kind of like little Jason. After the christening of his baby brother in church, Jason sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, 'That preacher said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, and I wanted to stay with you guys.'

Our worship planning team was inspired to design this "There Is One God" series as an opportunity for us to learn about, and wrestle with, the concepts of God as we look at the three great monotheistic religions of the world; Islam, Judaism and Christianity. We have a lot to learn about these other religions in and of themselves but also as a way to learn more about our own.

We will look at what we have in common and what separates us. This series is not a debate about "whose religion is the best" nor an apology for our own convictions. I want a "rainbow coalition" of religions in which we can listen and learn from each other in respect and appreciation. Let's celebrate our differences and learn from each other because the other might help up see our own.

That "rainbow", like race and culture, has distinct color, history and personality. To suggest that "there is one God" is not to suggest that "all religions are the same". All religions are not the same. To homogenize all religions into one generalization only makes a bland, grey mess and human religious behavior and history is anything but bland.

I had the privilege of a year's study in South India during my undergraduate education at the University of the Pacific. My field study in cultural anthropology was on the worship practices of a local Islamic mosque. My art appreciation course introduced me to the extraordinary history of Hinduism and Buddhism. Such study and exposure didn't take away a thing from my own Christian faith, in fact it made it stronger. We have so much to learn from other cultures and faiths without apologizing for our own.\*

The three great monotheisms....Islam, Judaism and Christianity...have some significant things in common. We come from the same story. We are children of Abraham, the ancient patriarch who responding to God's call moved his family from the security of wealth and home to a new land. God made a covenant with Abraham that his family would be a prolific as the stars and a blessing to all the nations forever (Genesis 12:1-9, 15:1-6, 17:1-8,18-21).

The three great monotheisms each have a Holy Book, many parts of which we share. We understand our Scriptures as a divine revelation to humanity.

Each faith contains the Ten Commandments handed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. We share a deep commitment to ethical behavior which cannot be separated from spirituality but is spiritual expression in and of itself.

What separates us....the Christian, Hebrew and Islamic children of Abraham....along with deep cultural differences and a long history of animosity, is the person and mission of Jesus.

The three great monotheisms see their Holy Book/s as revelation and can see their interpretative traditions as revelation too. But for Christianity, Jesus is the final and ultimate revelation of God's nature and will. That is blasphemy for Islam and Judaism, both of which honor and acknowledge Jesus as God's prophet but not as God; equal with or incarnation of God. For both Islam and Judaism such a notion that God would be fully revealed in the life of one human being is idolatry.

In the next two weeks we will be exploring our commonalities and differences with local guest leaders from the Muslim and Hebrew faiths, especially this thing about Jesus. But before we launch into that we have to admit that there is great diversity of understanding about Jesus even within Christianity itself.

There are an estimated 40,000 distinct Christian denominations, sects and movements. Under the umbrella of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy there are 2.2 billion people in the world confessing Christianity as their religion. One book, one Lord Jesus and a huge diversity of expression and understanding of just what it means to be a Christian. It has been so since the beginning.

It began Easter morning when Peter and John each have their own unique experience of the reality of the empty tomb (John 20:3-10). It began when the women rush back to the male disciples to tell them the news of the resurrection and are dismissed with skepticism (Luke 24:1-12). It began that Easter afternoon when the Risen Jesus enters the upper room where the male disciples are hiding but it will take a week for disciple Thomas to believe until he has physical proof for his faith (John 20:19-29).

Within years of its founding the church was in dispute over who should be allowed in, who was going to be the leader and how to worship and how to share Holy Communion (note; Acts 15, Galatians 2, I Corinthians 12). Why do you think the apostle Paul wrote all those letters to his young churches? He had to constantly remind the young Christians to "love one another" (I Corinthians 13, Philippians 2) because they were fighting so much among themselves.

Christian fundamentalists want to go back to a mythical time of the original faith when everyone agreed who Jesus was and how to live a Christian life. Even our own founder John Wesley intended the Methodist movement to be a return to the "original apostolic faith".

Dr. Greg Riley in his book River of God (HarperOne, 2003) suggests that there has never been such a time. Since the beginning of the Christian movement there have been a diversity of just what Jesus' life, death and resurrection mean. Even the ecumenical councils during the fourth century which established the Apostles' and Nicaea Creeds as the essential confessions of the faith and from which came the biblical canon, never expressed more than a majority opinion of the powerful while significant minority communities broke off to do their own thing.

Of those 40,000 distinct Christian communities many if not most are convinced that their's is the one and only way to get it right.

Our New Testament lesson today from John 14 ("I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me") is most often interpreted as an 'exclusive salvation clause'. Combined with a number of other New Testament verses (for example, John 3:16, Romans 10:9) it is the basis for a number of churches to claim that unless one is a member of their church, baptized in their manner of baptism and one conforms to their creeds they are not getting into heaven.

I can see that reasonable people can come to that conclusion but it is not the only way to understand the Scriptures or to organize a church.

Throughout the gospel of John the writer has Jesus clearly saying that "he and the father are one" (John 10:30, 17:21), that Jesus is the incarnation of God (John 1:14). Unlike the other three gospels, in John Jesus doesn't hide his divinity, he makes seven "I am...." declarations along with our text today including "I am the bread of life..." (6:35) and "I am the light of the world..." (8:12).

Wouldn't it be fair to suggest that our text from the gospel of John for today could be understood to mean, "...no one comes to God expect through God..." (Borg)?

The apostle Paul suggests that "Christ died for the ungodly....God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8) Before we believed in the right things, joined the right church or were baptized in the correct manner.

Consider how Jesus related to social outcasts and those of different religions than his own? The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). A Gentile Roman soldier (Luke 7:1-10). A tax collector excommunicated and shunned by his community for corruption and collaboration with the Roman occupations forces (Luke 19:1-10). In each case and more Jesus offered grace and forgiveness to those who were considered profane by his own religion. He didn't ask them to join a church, be baptized in a certain manner or confess a creed. He....simply?....offered them the opportunity to experience God's love for them, something which can turn a life around.

No, there is nothing "simple" about God and religion and there can't be, there shouldn't be. If we are talking about the source of life that binds all living things and time together....if we are talking about a reality experienced in a myriad of ways by all human cultures since the dawn of history....if we are talking about the voice in all languages within us all that lures us to do what is right....there is nothing simple about that. "God things" should be diverse, and different and unique.

Not all religions are the same. The Christians killing Muslims in Central African Republic don't have the same religion that I know. The Muslims killing Muslims and Christians in Pakistan, Egypt or Afghanistan don't represent all billion members of Islam. I can learn from and appreciate any religion without apologizing for my own. But in the end regardless of one's creed, one's true religion is how one lives their life.

"Christianity is a way of being in the world." (Jay Parini, Jesus the Human Face of God, New Harvest, 2013) Our faith may have much more to do with how we live than what happens to us after we die.

Of course, "no one comes to God except through God" but if the teaching and example of Jesus tells us anything it is that the journey with the One God belongs exclusively to no one. Rather it is available to all.

Amen.

\*(Our Presbyterian friends up in Menlo Park had an extraordinary weekend at the end of January during which their Pastor John Ortberg was in dialogue with representatives of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Reformed Christianity and Atheistic Humanism. It was a wonderful conversation and can be found on-line at [mppc.org/thinkagain](http://mppc.org/thinkagain).)