

May 3, 2026

Easter 5A sermon – Pastor Patti Sherk

Gospel of Matthew, the 14th chapter.

14 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going.” 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves. 12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

The lectionary that schedules our lessons is taking us back in time with the Gospel this Sunday, before Easter, back to Maundy Thursday, the night of the Last Supper. This section of John’s Gospel is called Jesus’ Farewell Address because Jesus is preparing his disciples for the time when he will no longer be with them in the flesh. The disciples are troubled and afraid they would lose all he had been for them. But Jesus assures them that even though their relationship is changing, it is not ending. Even though he will no longer be with them in the flesh, they will remain connected. Ultimately, this text is about relationships.

These verses are often chosen for funerals, but the picture Jesus draws here is not just about a future place of welcome, a heavenly home, but one that welcomes us both now and then. We talk a lot about the Already Here and the Not Yet. To have faith is to live simultaneously in two realities: the here and now **and** the hereafter.

This portion of John's Gospel has so much to say - about abiding in this relationship, about prayer. But our focus today is going to be on verse 6 because it has so often been misunderstood and misused.

Because when we take "I am the way, the truth, and the life" out of context, it looks like God's judgment, exclusion and absence. "No one comes to the Father except through me" is claimed to be proof positive that Christians have cornered the market on God and people of any and all other faiths are condemned.

So what **does** this mean about other religions? Does it mean they're not really worshipping God? Do we have to believe that every other religion is the connivance of a demon if we're going to believe that Christianity is right? Do other religions have to be completely wrong?

Let's look at how the apostle Paul handled his encounter with the religion of the people of Athens in Acts 17. He says in his speech to them: "As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." You see, the Athenians were religious, but they remained uncertain and failed to find the rest for which they longed.

Paul tells them that what they worship as unknown is really Jesus. To say that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus doesn't make any explicit claims about what people must **do** to come to the Father through Jesus; it simply says that Jesus is the one they are going through if they reach the Father. If Paul is right, then people can worship Jesus unknowingly and thus reach the Father through him unknowingly. Jesus' claims in John 14 mean that Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or any other faith are right insofar as they depict a Jesus-shaped God and wrong insofar as they diverge from Jesus' revelation. But they don't have to be utterly wrong, just like the Athenians weren't utterly wrong.

We need to understand the context in which Gospel-writer John is living, as a religious minority in the ancient Mediterranean world. This text does not say that "No one comes to God except through me." It says, "No one comes to the Father except through me." This is the specific affirmation of a faith community about the God who is known to them because of the incarnation. The Christian God is not some generic deity.

God is the One whom the disciples come to recognize in the life and death of Jesus. When Jesus says, “no one,” he means “none of you.”

Becoming a Christian costs these Jews. They are now in conflict with the Judaism that was their religious home. They have had to carve out a new religious home, one grounded in the incarnation. You can hear here a determination to hold to this experience and knowledge of God against all opposition and all pressure to believe otherwise. The Gospel of John declares where it stands in this first-century intra-Jewish debate about the character of God and the identity of God’s people.

Just as the rules and practices of the Jews established boundaries that say “This is who we are,” John is saying: “This is who **we** are. We are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus that Christians have access to their God.

Christians belong to Jesus Christ. Jesus does not belong to us. His promises are for us and we **are** to share this good news with all who will receive it. But we don't control it or have the authority to place limitations on it. Where did we get the notion that Jesus' statement that he is the way, truth and life pertains exclusively to Christians?

If we claim that any particular prayer, or act or belief is a requirement for Christian salvation, then what we’re saying is that **we** save ourselves through whatever requirement we have defined. If **Jesus** is really the one who saves us, then it’s his prerogative how he does it. Even if there’s a regular way in which it happens, we must accept that Jesus can work through irregular means if he chooses. Otherwise, we put ourselves in control, not Jesus.

An Anglican priest I knew in Colorado was leading a tour through the countries Paul visited on his missionary journeys. Their tour guide in Turkey was a Muslim man who asked one day to join in their communion service. This pastor knew that her bishop would say that you have to be baptized to receive communion. She gave the man communion. The next day he came to her and asked to be baptized a Christian. She didn’t want to be some gatekeeper standing between God’s grace and another human being, and so she became a means of grace as her invitation to participate revealed a welcoming Christian community.

Earlier in this gospel Jesus has said, "I have other sheep not of this fold." Jesus has the freedom to call whomever he chooses, however he chooses, whenever he chooses, even if they may not know it. This answers that nagging question about the person of another faith tradition who is leading a holy life, who is clearly in contact with the living God but does not confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is possible to be on Christ's way and with his mark upon you without ever having heard of Christ, and for that reason to be on your way to God, though maybe you wouldn't say you even believe in God.

The apostle Paul writes that "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." So God has acted in Jesus Christ on the world's behalf. What God did in Jesus Christ, God did for the world. Jesus, the one who was slain, who has been exalted to heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father, holds the destiny of the world in his hands. This is the victory that supports our faith. The rule of God has already begun. What makes us arrogant enough to believe that the outcome depends upon our choice?

At an interfaith worship service a very unfortunate oversight occurred: The Buddhist reader was assigned our Gospel this morning as his reading (What were the liturgical planners thinking?). When he finished reading the words, Jesus is the Way, he stopped and said, "This is absolutely true". He later explained that he was not telling all the major world religions that they had to believe in Jesus, but that they should all believe in the way that Jesus is; that all religions strive to stay on the path to the sacred, and that we will know we have found the sacred when we find universal, unconditional and all-inclusive love.

We just studied the parable of the Good Samaritan in confirmation class. We heard there that everything can be summed up in: Love God and Love your neighbour. We must not imagine Jesus the Way as constructed of paving stones that can be pried up and used as projectiles against our neighbors. Jesus is describing his power, his ability to overcome both our inability and our pride as they relate to our faith. He is reminding his followers that none of us makes our own way to God. We aren't earning a way to God by our faith or our practice or how strongly we believe in Jesus. We aren't

succeeding in something that people of other faiths are failing at. That's not the point here.

Jesus was talking to people whose families thought they might be crazy for following him. He was talking to people who were risking their livelihoods and lives to call him Saviour. He was talking to people who were worried about the consequences of Jesus' reputation rubbing off on them—Jesus' reputation as someone who disturbed the status quo, who associated with the wrong people, who got lifted on a cross instead of climbing a ladder, whose healing of the man born blind proved that you can't look at someone who is ill and reject them as a sinner, whose death proved that innocence isn't a guarantee against suffering, whose resurrection proved that death isn't the end of the story, whose ascension to God's right hand means that there is nowhere now that scarred and frail human flesh cannot be taken, and even live in the very presence of God, whose whole life proved that nothing is stronger than the God who is Love.

Who is the one who said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Keep going. The footing is sure. The path is solid. You cannot get lost because God won't let you go. Jesus offers assurance that following him is the way to know God, the way to an abundant life, the way to peace and joy, no matter our circumstances. Following Jesus is not crazy, a waste of time, or a dead-end road. Stay on the path and keep going. God gives us a way that is steadfast when all feels like sinking sand, a truth that is certain when all feels slippery, a life that is assured when all is shifting because we have been given a person, Jesus, to be the Way for us. Thanks be to God.