

Who then can be saved?

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Is Jesus the only way? Is Jesus the one gate of eternal life? Will all be saved? How are Christians to relate to people of other traditions?

As a college chaplain and director of religious life at a research university, I recognize these questions as the cerebral fiber of dorm-room conversations and as very real responses to the “I’ve-never-met-a-Muslim-before,” encounters of modern life. Many Christians ponder these questions as they live near or work with a person of a different faith. This Sunday’s Gospel lesson about Jesus being the shepherd of the sheep and the gate through which the sheep pass into eternal life is a perfect opportunity. Here are some suggestions about how one might handle these tricky questions:

*Preach the church’s faith:* While individual Christians have many theologies of salvation, and honest searching and questioning is a good thing, the faith of the church is to say that in Jesus Christ God has opened a way into the eternal heart of God and to everlasting life with others around the heavenly banquet. Beyond that, the waters get a bit choppy. Does this mean all people, of any creed or no creed, will be received into heaven through the saving work of Jesus? Or only those who have been baptized? Or only those who have asked Jesus into their hearts? Or only those who have lived a good life?

A sermon on this topic could acknowledge the church’s historic confession that Jesus is the way and then reflect on the different ways that statement has been interpreted. The preacher could then offer his or her take on what this means for the life of faith, while counseling the congregation to move into these mysteries with humility and gentleness, taking every theological stand carefully, always being open to the movement of grace and the honest searching and praying of others.

*Preach respect and engagement with people of other traditions:* Saying Jesus is the way inevitably begs the question, “What about people of other religious traditions?” The straightforward answer is, “Relate to them in Christ-like ways.” The arrogance of triumphalism in Christians’ relation to other traditions over the centuries is well documented. The so-called war on terror and the language of “Islamic-fascism” and “the Christian West” suggest that our geo-politics is riddled with religious tensions. Christians are called to love the friend, stranger and enemy regardless of religious affiliation. When Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well, he did so with a gentle presence and with careful listening. Jesus seems more concerned with his own sheep than the sheep of others, and as his sheep we have a responsibility to know our shepherd’s voice and reflect his spirit when we mingle with other flocks. That is not to say we don’t talk about matters of truth and consequence with people who hear other voices, but we do so as those who are called to be peace-makers and to exhibit the fruits of patience, kindness, and self-control. We listen, we love, we look for glimmers of truth in other traditions, for the revelation of God in the stranger, and only then do we tell our story.

*Preach grace and discipleship:* The first priority of the Christian is his or her own discipleship. While it can be a good and loving thing to be concerned about the salvation of others, our biggest eschatological concern should be our own faith. Paul asked us to work out our salvation “in fear and trembling.” At times it is appropriate to ask people of other faiths to follow Jesus, but it is always appropriate to ask ourselves if we are indeed following in the way, the truth and the life. The more the church is fully the church, the more it faithfully embodies the grace of God in Christ and offers a community of love and forgiveness to the world, the sharper the contrasts with the world will become and the more sheep may join the fold.

Finally, we can remind the congregation during this Eastertide that there is deep grace and mystery in the questions of life, death and eternal life. In the end we may be surprised by some of those seated around the heavenly banquet, if indeed we have a seat there ourselves.