

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
April 25 & 26, 2015  
Dave Stark  
Is There More than One Way to God?  
Acts 17:16-34**

I'm so glad to be here this morning! It's been 20 years since LifeKeys was launched from here. Hundreds of thousands of copies have been sold. I've had a chance to do it here and in Canada and my coauthors Jane Kise and Sandra Hirsch, have done it all over the world. It's been translated into Korean and Finnish, and I think Indonesian is the third language, so it's had a worldwide impact so far. We've had a great time with it. It's just good to be here today on our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but it's also the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of something else. About 20 years ago I preached this same sermon at CPC. Now, I was over 35 then, which means now I'm a little west of 50. John Crosby was encouraging to me, telling me that on the internet this week it said that the 60s are the new midlife. I don't know what you and I are going to look like in our 120s, John! I just want to say that in passing.

Actually, the reason I bring that up is that this question has changed a lot in 20 years. We've gone through the largest communications revolution in the history of the world. What that means is that now I can get online and be in 12 countries instantaneously. I'm exposed every day to worldviews, major religions, philosophies, all kinds of things around me at the click of a mouse. Many of us have friends in Peru or in China. The first global generations in the history of the world are alive today and with that perspective, the question here is, there are many ways to God, right? It's harder today than it was then because it's all over the place in terms of our bombardment. We need to grapple with this question today. I think a lot of people are actually much closer to what we just heard sung in the Indigo Girls song. Here are a couple of stanzas.

I'm trying to tell you something about my life  
Maybe give me insight between black and white  
The best thing you've ever done for me  
Is to help me take my life less seriously, it's only life after all  
Well darkness has a hunger that's insatiable  
And lightness has a call that's hard to hear  
I wrap my fear around me like a blanket  
I sailed my ship of safety till I sank it, I'm crawling on your shore.

I went to the doctor, I went to the mountains  
I looked to the children, I drank from the fountain . . . .

We go to the bible, we go through the workout  
We read up on revival and we stand up for the lookout  
There's more than one answer to these questions  
Pointing me in a crooked line

The less I seek my source for some definitive  
The closer I am to fine

For so many people today, that's exactly where they are and this question isn't just hard for them. It's hard for Christians and non-Christians alike. How do we tackle this reality and how do we even begin to say anything in the wake of that? I'm so glad we're still asking hard questions here. This is not a simple question and I'm not going to give you a simple answer, but we are going to try to make inroads in it because it's my belief that it's that important to all of us today. The first thing I want to say about this question is this. God wants everyone in heaven. It's really important to say that upfront. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter it says,

<sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance [2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:9].

"The reason I'm waiting around to come back is that I don't want anyone to miss heaven." I want to say something that's really important to me and that's this. If you've ever in your life been told by Christians or others that you're not in the tribe, you've been judged. You've been voted off the island. Worse somehow, that judgment has made you seem *left*. I just want to tell you, that's not God and on behalf of the church, I want to apologize to you because I can't tell you how many people I know who are outside the church today because of that misuse of the Word of God. So the first thing I want to say is that God wants everyone to be in heaven.

The second thing I want to say is this, you don't need to unfriend anybody. You don't. God wants us to love *all* the world. Many of us are connected in our social networks and all kinds of different ways to people everywhere. I think one of the great products of this revolution is the sense of global community for everyone today. In fact, as you're acting globally, you may have discovered that a lot of ideas are in common across the philosophies, across the worldviews. There's a lot of commonality. Christian theologians have always called that *general revelation* or another term in Presbyterianism is *common grace*. It's the reality that the Holy Spirit has revealed parts of God all over the world everywhere to everyone and those common grounds are Spirit-driven. These are good things.

The apostles as modeled in Acts 17 by Paul did not shy away from that. In fact, they built bridges to try to make connections with people who disagreed with them, specifically in Athens. Paul is there. The Holy Spirit leads him to look around the city and he notices all the spiritual things happening. There is an altar to the unknown god. He uses that as his beachhead. Because he's a trained stoic philosopher, he begins to talk to them publicly about God, our God, and he uses stoic philosophy to attract them. When they go to another place called the *Areopagus*, he starts to speak this way. "People of God, I can see that you are very religious." In other words, he doesn't destroy their spiritual hunger. He says, "That's a good thing. I'm spiritual also. Let me tell you about God, this unknown God." The first four lines of the Athens hill speech are straight out of stoicism. It would have been a complete connect because in those parts of stoicism, Christianity combines. He quotes their holy books. He's not afraid to say, "These are in common." The connections and the overlap are real and in a theological sense, God did 'em.

Let me say this by the way of the third point. To have great crossover between the faiths and the worldviews is wonderful, but that is different from a total match-up. A total match-up would mean that all these traditions thousands and thousands of years old are all saying the same thing.

They are all leading to the same place. More than common ground, they are just different ways to God. But if I had in front of me today a practicing Jew, a practicing Muslim, a practicing Buddhist, a practicing Daoist, or whomever you want to mention, they would have as hard a time with that as Christians do. They would struggle with that equally as we do and so we've got to dive into this question deeper. Exactly what is this question about?

I want to suggest this to begin with. Let's talk about, what is the uniqueness of Christianity anyway? I'm actually going to put aside the major thing, which is the historical life and death and resurrection of Jesus. I'm going to put that aside for a moment because the scholars have looked at all the faiths and philosophies that way. There is only one thing that really is specific to Christianity that is different from the other faiths or other philosophies, and that is that we have the sense of a personal God, a God who is not just a life force or being mindful or centered. A personal God means having a personal relationship like a mother to a daughter or a father to a son. I want to talk about why that is so important in terms of what Christianity brings to our lives.

There are four things, four positive sides of a very negative thing called Judgment Day and I want to talk about those four things. The first thing is that because He cares about *all* His children, a personal God doesn't go silent against injustice. He doesn't go silent against the wickedness and all the things around the world where people, institutions or countries hurt or kill other people, where they lessen their potential, where events happen that alter their entire lives permanently. I don't know if you've had that happen or friends around you have when a person's decision or an institution's decision, a set of choices, has basically thrown their lives off completely. It will never be the same, and in this life, it will never be better. It will be worse or constrained or even reduced completely. In those situations, unfortunately Taylor Swift does not help us because you can't just *Shake It Off*.

Let me tell you how this came home to me as a father. Actually, John didn't know this before I preached today, but when I was an associate pastor here, my sons were 10 and 8 and we had a big dog, a yellow lab named Bailey. I love big dogs, but Bailey would sometimes escape from our yard. Bailey loved to go down and talk to neighbors nearby. He'd go bark at them and be in their lawns. My problem was that one time when Bailey got out, he went to see a neighbor who really does not like his lawn disturbed. My sons ran out to try to get Bailey. I was just getting my clothes on and as I was exiting the door to go find Bailey, my sons had already found him down the street at the neighbor's. This man was yelling, swearing at my sons at the top of his lungs, threatening them. So I get Bailey and the boys in the house and I am really angry. I go out of the house and I walk down to the neighbor's and I go up to this guy and the last thing I remember is him saying is, "Don't come any closer." It was at that point that it dawned on me that my résumé as an associate pastor would not be benefited if I was arrested for assault and battery. That dawned on me.

We have a personal God and when His children are treated in this way, it isn't just shoved under the rug. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit has a lot of ministries to bind up the broken heart, to set the captive free, to encourage, to heal, to reconcile all the great things in this life to help us cope with that, but it doesn't get swept under the rug. You see, if it is swept under the rug, God has no word for the abused, for the cheated, for the terrorized, for the marginalized, for the maimed, for the destroyed and I'm here to tell you, there *is* a word in eternity. Judgment will review it all and finally God will say *no!* He will say *no* to all of it. There is a word for all of those things and in eternity, it will be reviewed and it will be judged.

The flip side of this is a lot more fun and that is when we do good things, when we do helpful, holy things, when we are about loving the world, the Book of Acts is just like a fragrant offering before God. You see, all of that is recorded also. That is so important because life is not just a series of events and then you die. When you get up in the morning, it matters. You matter. Life matters. Every decision matters. The more that astronomers study the universe, the more impersonal it seems. It was interesting this week to learn about the largest thing they have ever been able to measure and see. It's called a supervoid. It extends 1.8 billion light-years across. They found this old thing and they can't figure out why it's so empty. I'm really glad that the largest thing we see in the universe, the void, is swallowed up by the biggest thing there is which is a personal God. That means, every day when you get up, it matters. What you do matters and life matters. What a gift that is to us! And if that wasn't enough, this personal God decided to include us in the redemption of the world. What the authors have been trying to say to people everywhere is that you've been created uniquely. You've been given talents and gifts and passions and personality types and that is not just for you. It's so you can do things in the world. As Ephesians says,

<sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do [Ephesians 2:10].

The second thing is that it didn't have to be that way. God didn't have to make this as part of the deal, but He did. And if that wasn't big enough, He gave us a guidance counselor called the Holy Spirit to help us figure it out. And more than that, He's going to reward us when we get to heaven. There are going to be treasures in heaven and rewards because you matter. You get to be engaged with this whole thing because that's the kind of God we have.

Third, a personal God includes His children in the process of redemption and if that isn't enough, this personal God actually has a home. It's a mansion and when we go to heaven, there's a room for you in that mansion. He's actually going to come Himself, Jesus, so the Scripture says. What does your room in heaven look like? It's your room. It's not anybody else's room. It's been designed for you. Jesus never lied. In John 14, He said,

<sup>2</sup> In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you [John 14:2].

He said, "I would not have told you this if it was not true." He is saying, "I understand how big it is that there is a place, that there is something after this. This is not the big event. We are actually going to be somewhere else and so consequently, I just want to reinforce that God is going to personally take you to be there. You are going to have a room and we are going to live together forever." Wow! What God has given to us! With all these great things, it is interesting what having a personal God means. Ken Blanchard was talking to Peter Drucker about why he was a Christian and I'll paraphrase what he said. Drucker basically said that if you ever see a deal that's better than everything God has given to us with His grace, take it. It's the greatest deal you've ever seen.

But let's go back to the question. What I want to say is that at the center of Christianity is the receiving of mercy.

<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy [1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:10].

That is the fourth thing, the receiving of mercy. I don't believe that Judgment Day is a true or false exam. I don't think it's that at all. I think it's this heart move of receiving grace, of receiving mercy. In other words, there are lots of people in the world who have never heard of Jesus and they never will. They have been steeped in other traditions, other philosophies. I don't think that's held against them in judgment because I think what judgment is going to be about is the heart. It is going to be about receiving mercy. My hunch is, and there is some Biblical evidence for this, that a lot of people in the world have received mercy that we don't know about. They've actually admitted that they needed God and they've actually reached out for grace. They've reached out to say, "Lord, I want to love You. I want to receive Your grace." I happen to believe that they will be in heaven with us, but I will tell you one thing. I don't know. And by the way, nobody knows. It's not our job to judge.

Here's what I want to say overall. I believe that we are in a culture situation where there is a large river in the culture and there are two banks that we have to avoid. The first bank is the bank of judgment and that is not God. God does not want us to judge. Unfortunately, my generation has been very bad at this, but that is not God. The younger generations, in my opinion, have an opposite problem and that's the problem of over-tolerance where the world just becomes a large mash-up. There really isn't a Gospel. There really isn't anything unique that we are saying. It is all part of one big reality. That is also not God. There is no Gospel there. There is no proclamation there. It's just a big mess of ideas from which we stay confused.

What's interesting is that the poles are twins of each other. Why? Because when you judge people, you can just write them off. You don't have to get involved with them at all. Oh, forget them! But with over-tolerance, you don't have to get involved either. You never really talk about what you believe or what might be unique or why Jesus. Once again, you're not involved on that pole either. They are just different ways of not engaging in the world.

Let me suggest an alternative and the alternative is this. The world would like to put tolerance in between those two poles, but let me ask you something. Have you ever been tolerated? You know how tolerance goes. Yeah, he's a nice guy. He doesn't know what he's doing. He's completely wrong about C., D., and F. but whatever. Have you ever been loved? Love requires engagement. Love requires sacrifice. Love is full of grace and truth. Love means I've got to engage myself in this world and that, in my opinion, is where we need to be. Not judgmental, but not overly tolerant either. We need to be a people who live the Great Commandment, especially to love our neighbor as ourselves so we can talk about the incredible news that comes in Jesus Christ our Lord. Maybe the biggest reason why I trust the Gospel is this, Jesus died for it. God came from perfection and because He loved us so much, He took the price on Himself that you and I might benefit in these unbelievable ways.

As we move toward the table that represents that, I just want to ask you a couple of things. Some of you have never started this personal relationship with God. You've never actually received mercy from God. You've never said, "Lord, I know I can't even live up to my own standards, let alone the glory of God, let alone my potential. I know I'm broken, but I'm so glad that You did something about that and I just want to receive Your grace this morning. I just want to open my heart to You, to Your mercy, to all that You would give to me." If you haven't done that, do that with me today when I pray. I'll pray for you and just say, "God, I want to know You that way. I want to know a personal God who has accepted me, who has forgiven everything I have ever done or will do."

Some of you today need to restart this relationship. You forgot how much there is in Jesus. You have kind of become a distant relative. This is a great time to say, "Lord, I want to reboot this thing. I really want to start with You again today in a way that we really are personally involved with each other's lives." I'm going to pray and why don't you just express to yourself something like that. Let's take time and pray together now.

Lord, I am just overwhelmed by the goodness of You. I am so grateful that You have come and that You have engaged us as a mother would a child, as a father would a son. By the Spirit, You live right inside of us because of Your mercy. Lord, I pray for those who may be just starting out in that relationship today. I pray that as they ask for Your Holy Spirit to come inside of them and that You would be real to them. I pray that Your love and acceptance through Your grace today, Lord, would begin now in the receiving of the elements this morning. Father, there are others of us who have gotten out of touch with what a wonderful thing it is to know You personally. God, I pray You would help them restart their faith today, that You would take their desire and their commitment and bring Your grace anew. Let it be fresh this morning as You promised in the Scriptures. Lord Jesus, we also thank You for the immeasurable value of what You did for us on the cross. To Christ, we pray. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*