

Easter 5, Year A
John 14:1-14
April 20, 2008
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I was at a memorial service not long ago when our passage for today from St. John's gospel was read. But a funny thing happened during that reading; one line was omitted, and if you think about it for a moment it is not hard to guess which. When Thomas expressed what I imagine was the confusion of the whole group by saying "Lord we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?" the answer we heard from Jesus was: "I am the way, and the truth and the life." Period. Full stop. End of lesson. We never heard the second half of that famous and indeed crucial sentence: *No one comes to the Father except through me*. The reason I suppose is that the sentence has become problematic, and even divisive within Christianity. But, since I am who I am, that is precisely why I want to talk about that very sentence this morning and to share both my concerns and hopes about it.

In an era in which everyone you knew was Christian, everyone part of the same church, no one even thought about this passage much. There was only one way to interpret it, and that was that everyone had to be Christian or face the fires of hell, and that meaning seemed both self evident and satisfactory to the overwhelming majority of people. But in this era, where we have moved into a state of genuine pluralism, where all around us are people of many faiths, and

some of no faith at all, these words are no longer so taken for granted, and in fact give rise to two very different reactions.

On the one hand are those who say that we must continue to read this sentence as saying that no relationship with God is possible outside Christianity. It is not just biblical literalists who believe this. There are many people who well understand that the Bible cannot, should not, be taken in its entirety as literally, historically accurate in every detail who nevertheless hear this passage as a statement from God that Christianity in all its many forms, all its varied understandings of life, is the only way to God.

Others, equally convinced I must say that this is the meaning of the passage, come to a different conclusion; they want to throw it out. For this group believes that when interpreted as it traditionally has been, this sentence creates an insuperable ethical problem. In a world which includes Gandhi and the Dalai Lama how can we believe that such people as this have no hope of salvation simply because they are not Christians? More tragically, do we really want to suggest that these words mean that the Jews who went to the gas chambers during the Holocaust had no relationship with God, and thus no hope of salvation, because of what they were, but the Lutherans and Catholics who gassed them did have a relationship with God because of what they believed? Is that the kind of God we worship? Is that the kind of God we want to worship? Beyond this horrifying example, do we really believe that the little Jewish kid next door, or the Muslim down the street, the kids who play with your children,

who love your cookies and milk and watch your TV are going to hell unless they change religions?

The answer this group gives to all these questions is “No” we don’t believe these things because the Holy Spirit has taught us more than we knew then about God’s love of all people. Just as the levitical instructions regarding who we can enslave and how we should treat our slaves have been superseded by the progress of our spiritual history as guided by God, so too must these words be consigned to that list of passages no longer relevant to the world we live in or the spiritual insights we now possess. So throw it out altogether.

I am not able to go with either of those answers and never have been. With that first group I believe we must take the Bible very seriously and study it very carefully, seeking always to discover what it has to say to us and how it might form our lives, especially when we are dealing with hard passages. With the second group I believe that to interpret these words as they have long been interpreted does create an insuperable ethical problem, and moreover, taints our own faith by rooting our religion not in *the love God has for us* but in the *fear we have of God* who stands ready to consign us to perdition if we don’t get it all right. So for me, I can neither throw this sentence out, nor simply accept what one important and powerful strain of our tradition says it means. I must instead seek a new way of hearing these words that speaks to the modern condition of humanity, and our recent history. So I must consider this passage in a new light.

When Jesus speaks to the disciples he does not say “I will show you the way” or “I will describe the truth” or “I will give you a recipe for life that you must follow exactly.” His *is* – listen to that verb carefully – *is* those things. But what that means is that life with God is not, and cannot be based in the content of our opinions about Jesus, but rather is based upon being transformed by what God did in Jesus. What God in Jesus says is “Here I am” in this expansive love for all people, in this person who tells you that God is for everyone, not just a small group, in this capacity to sacrifice himself for the whole world, who will die in fact for the sake of all. What God has done in Jesus, in other words, is to reconcile not just one collection of special people, but the whole world to Himself, as Paul rightly notes in his second letter to the Corinthians (5:19). Those who live in the way of that reconciliation are following the way, the truth and life which is Christ. Those who discover the true dignity of all people, those who know God loves everyone, those who realize that there is an essential unity of all humanity, all creation really, held together in that love of God are living in the power of what God did in Christ whether they call themselves Christians or not.

In this sense I deeply believe in that statement from today’s gospel that “no one comes to the Father but through me.” I do not read that as saying that everyone has to be Christian or go to hell. I read it as saying that the way to God is the way showed the world by Jesus, and that anyone who walks that way will come to the Father. What you have to give up to walk that path is not one religion in favor of another, but rather what you have to give up is the conviction

that the particularity of your religion, regardless of what it is, is more important to God than the love God bears to all people. We have to be willing to be changed from people whose most important and valued characteristic is how we are different or more enlightened, into people who surrender our whole self understanding to God, that God might give us new hearts to love.

I say this not in spite of, but precisely because I believe Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God's presence. For what that presence conveyed is this embrace of all humanity, is this sacrifice for all, is this unity that transcends differences and which tells us that living life this way is the path to the Father. What makes Christianity so vital to me is not that you have to be one in order to make God love you enough to save you, but that we have this wonderful news that life with God is for all times, and places and cultures. Notice also please that there is nothing relativistic about this. Osama Bin Laden is not, in what we know of his current spiritual configuration, part of God's kingdom. This is not because he is a Muslim, but because he is a nihilistic hater. He leaves himself out of the Kingdom of God not because he refuses to change religions, but because he resists the transforming power of God's love and preaches destruction and hatred.

So it is that I can neither read this passage as it has historically been read, nor can I throw it out. What I do instead is choose to do what people in every generation have done, to struggle with it, to ask it how it speaks to us right now, and to seek by the grace and love of God to respond to it in this time and place as

faithfully as others have responded to it in their times and their places. Whether you agree with my understanding of this passage or not, all I do this morning is to ask you to undertake the same struggle, within the one faith we all share.